

Although miraculously unexpected to his parents, Zack Ward's arrival has been planned for eons by the remnants of an ancient civilization continually spanning the cosmos. With the boy presenting uncanny abilities, human evolution's next step and purpose are ultimately revealed.

Point-Six Percent

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Even as the world continues to struggle with theories of evolution versus creation, forces outside of Earth persevere, in anonymity, to bring the planet to its eventual future; one that connects and reunites its inhabitants with those of an ancestry only dreamed of in science fiction. Meet Justin Ward, best-selling author. He and his ex-wife Liz share custody of nearly nine-year old Zack whose amazing intelligence is just emerging through a profound deafness he's held since birth. No one realizes just how advanced Zack's brain truly is – no one except Justin's best friend and neighbor, Adam Caster. In fact, Zack and "Uncle" Adam share secrets...inhuman ones.

During a traditional summer with dad and with Adam's secretive guidance, young Zack discovers his true purpose in life. When his super-human abilities begin to surface as a result, Liz's maternal instincts create problems for a conspiracy's plan to bring Earth as an existence, to a new threshold of universal understanding.

With a Central Massachusetts backdrop and set in the immediate future, *Point-Six Percent* examines the nature of human evolution at a stage beyond present man, but with an eye cast to a very ancient past...one that has been waiting out there for the right moment to return.

Book 1 – *Point-Six Percent*

Book 2 – *The Present Future* (coming soon)



# **Point-Six Percent**

**Steve Bantle**

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*To Cheryl, Sunny, and Ty – the family most fathers and husbands would die for; also to Mom, Dad and the many family members who, acting the part of test audience, perused with a critical sense, nearly every word I wrote long before you, my appreciated reader.*

*To Mike, in memorium - you would have enjoyed this story.*



## CHAPTER ONE

There wasn't anything abnormal about Zachary Taylor Ward on the outside. He had all the appearance of a healthy baby boy. He was seven pounds, eight ounces at birth and measured 21 inches long. Aside from the fact that he didn't cry upon his actual arrival, he was perfect – another beautiful baby boy.

Most first-time parents get very nervous over every little thing that seems unnatural to what a baby should be. It was especially true for the type of parents that Liz and Justin were. After all, more than one doctor had told them that having children would just not be possible and for the first eight years of marriage, they were all quite accurate. Justin had sometimes joked in confidences that had he known of the diagnosis when they first met, he wouldn't have wasted any money buying condoms.

So it was quite a surprise to everyone when Liz came home from work one day with the news that she wasn't suffering from a viral infection, as she of a nursing background suspected. She was instead just suffering from what she termed in jest as a 'mild case of pregnancy'. The news hit Justin the way a long shot hits the betting man. First you can't believe it happens and then you walk around saying you knew it would happen. The news also created a rebirth in another way as the two of them realized a recharged interest in their marriage. In a way, Zachary's arrival provided for some wonderful changes, and change was something Justin was always unconsciously on the lookout for.

Still, Zack was initially a model baby; so even though Liz was a top-flight nurse, it took a little longer to notice that he wasn't quite perfect after all – at least not in the way the human condition views perfection. What Liz saw first was that her little angel was just that. He never cried. Many times parents will brag and say that their kid never does this or always does that; things like, "little Bobby never talks back" and "Suzie always goes right to bed". It's a kind of brinkmanship parents force upon one another as if to say they are doing a better job of raising a spoiled brat than their neighbor. Liz and Justin were no doubt more than willing to do their fair share of bragging, but in the case of baby Zack, they didn't have to stretch the truth when they said that he never cried. He would look at his proud parents at times and they both felt as if he



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wanted to burst out with emotion, but from Zack, there would come not so much as an utterance.

He truly *never* cried.

It's one of those things where as a parent, you are often glad when the baby doesn't cry. In this case it was eerie enough to have it checked out, and after a battery of tests, it was determined that young Zack had a severe, if not profound hearing loss.

As he grew, He handled all the physical things like crawling and standing just fine and within the time frames for normal kids. Walking came around his first birthday and he seemed to be a relatively content child. However, the trouble with his hearing had become more obvious and soon Zack was up to his ears in specialists. Several rounds of CAT scans; MRI's, X-Rays, and just plain old probing and poking took place. At one point, a doctor actually fired an air horn in his direction with almost no response; at least not from Zack. Everyone else in the office was frazzled despite the warning. All of that testing merely revealed that Zack was a bit of an anomaly. He had all the hardware to hear just fine, but somewhere between the blast and the brain, his wiring was crossed up badly. It was as if his speakers weren't plugged in to his amplifier.

And thus, Zack Ward became a special case, drawing the attention of dozens of specialists the way a carnival barker might otherwise draw a crowd on the midway at the Eastern States Exposition held in Springfield, Massachusetts every fall. Up and down the coast, doctors took theoretical stabs at his condition. The Wards tried several types of recommended amplifying devices and even considered a cochlear implant when Zack turned two. It was a reality both parents took in stride as they realized nothing in current medicine could help out little Zack.

Now normally the term 'special education' is synonymous with slow learner or a mental deficiency of some type or another. In Zack's case, the term meant completely the opposite. Zack had a high learning efficiency, and it became obvious that he was not just your average bright kid when he first entered kindergarten, three years ago. His mother located a school close to Millbury, where they lived, that had a specialized teacher who could effectively use sign language. This would be a great benefit to Zack, who at five had all the appearance of a normal kid going to school.

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Normal, that is, until the incident.

It was a particularly beautiful spring morning as the children were running around on the playground. Jessica LeVeque was working her way up the monkey bars and away from the other kids who were fighting over dibs on the swings. The monkey bars posed a problem for Mrs. Longley, as they were located around the corner of the building. The swings, slides, and seesaws were on a dirt plot just off the side of the tan brick school. An anonymous donor to the facility years before wanted monkey bars added, but they could not be worked in at the same location, so another lot, separated from the first, but neatly concealed in a courtyard between wings of the building, was utilized and two sets of monkey bars were installed. The only trouble with the location was the fact that concrete was already there and difficult to remove. The plan was to eventually clear out both areas and replace them with a state-of-the-art, wooden-beam playground complete with soft landing areas.

As it stood now, anyone playing on those dome-shaped webs of steel bars crocheted to an apex some four feet above that concrete would be out of sight of the swings. On most days, Mrs. Keebler assisted during playground duty, but not today. Today, Eloise would be by herself, so she instructed the children to stay in one part of the playground. Jessica, however, was one of those kids – an only child – who often got what she wanted and rarely took ‘no’ for an answer. She wanted to play on the monkey bars and that was where she was going, supervised or not.

Zack had been playing tag near the swings when he abruptly stopped and turned his attention to Mrs. Longley who was sitting on a nearby bench. He grabbed her arm to get her attention then quickly explained, in sign language, that Jessica was in trouble.

“Trouble, how?” was the signed reply.

Zack looked deep into her eyes and tried to make her see what he was seeing. After a few moments, he broke off and just ran for the corner of the building waving her on. By the time Eloise Longley’s 61-year old legs got her to the dreaded bars, a small crowd of children had formed around them with Zachary in the center, holding Jessica’s head in his lap. His eyes were closed tight.

He could see white.

It was around the time of his second birthday, that Zack began to notice a cognitive presence of colors in his head. They changed from

black, to red, to green, and all kinds of shades and hues. He had begun to notice that they changed when Mom was happy or sad, or when Daddy was angry or laughing. The colors helped him understand how people were feeling without any kind of communication. His own likes and dislikes could also be influenced by colors. He loved hotdogs...they were a light red, but he wasn't a big fan of spinach and its dark green hues. Most days were filled with bright colors of yellow and orange. These, he decided, were happy colors. And purple, too. He loved purple in almost any shade. Even deep purple had certain happiness to it. Other dark shades like hunter green, navy blue, or black of any kind tended to be sad or determined colors. He would ask, sometimes, "Why is Mommy black today? Mommy feels black."

Again, it would be some time before he would realize that he was one of the only people who could see colors in his head like that. He would also learn that his uniqueness was not limited to colors. But, that was all still to come.

On this occasion, the color was white, and it was one he had associated with both fear and wonder. Eloise noticed the small pool of blood near the girl's head and a streak of it on Zack's fleece vest. She grabbed her right arm and immediately noticed lifelessness in it.

"Oh my God! Somebody call 911!" A mad rush of children, scattering back to the school, accompanied her screams. Among the shouts was a distinct suggestion that Jessica was dead and that she fell off the bars. Mrs. Longley struggled with her rheumatic legs to get up, but Zack grabbed her with his other hand. He caught her gaze again only this time far fiercer than before, and for more than a moment, Eloise Longley felt nothing in her painful legs.

*"Everything is okay now, Mrs. Longley. Jessica is not gone any more. She was going to leave, but I told her she had to come back. So, she did. See, she came right back and now it is okay."* She didn't see his mouth move, but she heard a voice – his voice. She could only guess this for she had never heard him speak aside from the occasional squeal of delight he would occasionally blurt out. But, she heard this; every word as if he had always known how to talk. She could hear him in her mind, and although she could not explain it, it was happening nevertheless.

Almost on cue, Jessica's eyes shot open and her hand jerked out of the grasp of Zack. She bolted upright and gazed around like a bear coming

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out of hibernation. She rubbed the back of her head. Again, without speaking, Zachary could be heard by both of them.

*"It's okay now. You just had a fall and then you got lost. I found her Mrs. Longley. She'll be okay."*

"You're talking, Zack," said the little girl as she examined the bump on her head more closely with her hand. "I'm bleeding. I'm bleeding!" She had finally realized that she was hurt. It hadn't sunk in at all until the fingers with blood on them drove the point home. She started to panic and Zack started crying, too. Eloise Longley also wanted to cry, but the distant sounds of sirens fast approaching snapped her back into the real world. Still she couldn't help but stare at young Zachary Ward for just a few moments and wonder what this child was all about.

It seemed like the paramedics were there in seconds, and within minutes, Jessica was smiling again and telling Mrs. Longley how sorry she was for going off to play on the monkey bars without her permission. The bleeding had stopped almost before they got there and all she said was that her head hurt a little. Her mother pulled into the parking lot a few moments later and they all headed for the hospital as a precaution. The idea that the little girl may have suffered a concussion surfaced almost immediately and the case for it seemed to get stronger when she insisted that Zack told her in her mind that she was okay. She said she remembered being lost in a dream and he helped her get back. Everyone agreed that delusion of any kind could mean internal head injuries.

It was one of the rare times when Jessica did not get her way, despite wanting to stay and play.

The eventual incident report on file at the school only stated that Jessica fell, suffered a cut to her head, lost consciousness briefly, and was sent to the hospital. A follow-up to the report indicated that she was back at school two days later, showing no ill effects of the accident. The hospital records revealed a small abrasion on the back of her head. However, an attached doctor's note suggested that the abrasion appeared to be an old one and may have re-opened when Jessica hit the concrete, causing the bleeding reported by the paramedics. The EMT report also noted the injury to the back of Jessica's skull, only documenting it as a larger wound. They did, however, also indicate that the scar tissue surrounding the wound gave it the appearance of being from a previous incident and probably not related to the actual injury in this case.

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It was puzzling that both Jessica and her mother could remember no previous accidents involving a head injury...ever. Still, she was alive and kicking and that was all that mattered. Eloise Longley finished out the year and retired from all forms of teaching. She almost never spoke about what she witnessed that day or about a few other incidents to follow involving Zack Ward. She only knew that the rheumatism in her legs didn't bother her nearly as much, and she hadn't felt better physically in a long time. There was something else. Eloise Longley felt an uneasy, weird connection to the little deaf kid who may or may not have saved the life of a four-year old girl.

It was after the incident that Zack began to finish other people's sentences. Not out loud, for he didn't speak, but in his mind. It was like a game to him. He could see the words in his head. Entire thoughts were like clear visions and the colors were becoming more vivid. He was also starting to notice different shades of colors and how they represented slightly different moods. Fear, wonder, astonishment, envy – they all began coming in with more definition and separation. Perhaps it was the way Mrs. Longley looked at him the rest of the school year, but it was different...like he had cooties or something. That day with Jessica was not as normal as he thought it was, and that created a new sense of reality as the little boy started to rationalize his existence.

Zack could also tell what kind of mood people were in. He could do it without even looking at them or talking to them. He was just a little over five-years old and already quietly beginning to question who or what he was.

That was three years ago, and for the most part, Zack kept any other 'miracles' from happening in plain sight. However, his first days among public school students did pose some problems. With the help of a new, hi-tech gadget called the EAAR (Electronic Audio Amplifier and Recorder), Zack was able to enter a normal classroom and not need any special services to offset his deafness. The unit, looking no different than the average iPod, was able to take the predominant sounds in an area and turn them into a text message that would crawl across a small screen. Zack could then read the words and understand what was being said. To further its use, the EAAR could single out the teacher through the use of a small, wireless, clip-on microphone.

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The inherent problem with the EAAR was that it was a beat or two behind the normal rhythm of a speaker and therefore was out of sync with the movement of the lips. This meant that Zack had to choose between watching the EAAR during a lesson and watching the speaker. His lip-reading abilities were coming around, but for the most part, he utilized the EAAR when it came to a lesson. Such was the case on the first day of school; the day he was more formally introduced to Richie Baker. From a student standpoint, Richie was both slow and sensitive. As a class bully, he was every younger kid's nightmare. They were in the same class because one was repeating third grade while the other skipped second. It was something Zack handled easily for he was very mature for his age. Richie, on the other hand, wasn't mature enough to handle kindergarten, but he towered above several sixth graders, and he used his considerable size advantage for all it was worth...especially on those third graders in his class. He wasn't fat, but tipped the scales at a sinewy 120 pounds. Most of it mean. Zack's 50-pound, 50-inch frame was laughable when stacked next to Richie Baker's.

The trouble resulted from Richie being very sensitive, coupled with the fact that he wasn't too bright, and that kids who made fun of him in class paid the price. His 'collection' was routinely conducted during recess and in a little alcove off the side of the building. He would grab a kid, push him into the alleyway and slam a couple of forearms into various parts of the victim's body; not just boys, either. Some girls would feel his wrath, and no one squealed for fear of even more punishing retribution in the future.

Where Zack fit in on that first day started innocent enough. Richie had been called upon for an answer in class and responded with a wild, absurd guess that caused a mild, but controlled outburst - not enough to rile Richie the 'revenger'...that is not until the EAAR kicked in, showing Zack what Richie's answer was just after the initial snickering died down.

Zack, unable to control the volume of his squeals, let one loose that then set off the rest of the class a second time and much louder. Richie, in his new embarrassment, slumped back in his seat and glared at his little victim. The recess bell would ring soon enough and the new kid would be taught a different type of lesson.

At recess, Zack joined in at soccer, and did fairly well. His eyesight was pinpoint and his peripheral vision was unparalleled. Part way through the session, he spotted with both his mind and his eye Richie, invitingly waving him over. It was a strange aura that Zack was seeing and his inquisitive nature overcame any apprehension, so he proceeded to comply. When he got to the alcove, he was grabbed and shoved into the alleyway with a swift, practiced motion. There was Richie, starting to talk to Zack, but it was hard for him to understand everything without the EAAR, which was left in the classroom while he played. Zack felt the first thrust of a forearm into his midsection and it doubled him over. Richie grabbed his head and propped him up so he could whack him again a little higher. Zack was a little dazed by the attack, but instinct took over. He reached out and slapped both hands on Richie's chest. The bully lurched backward, nearly falling out of the alcove, as if he were hit by a jackhammer.

"What the hell did you do?" Zack could lip read the boy's frightened half-scream, and he saw the red-black terror in his soul. He grabbed the boy by the wrist and reaffirmed his stare into the trembling bully's fearful eyes. Richie froze and 'heard' the thoughts of the deaf kid. Richie saw the power in Zack and when the latter let the grip go, Richie scrambled off to cower somewhere while Zack paused to feel where the forearm rammed his stomach. He closed his eyes tight and held his hands over the spot. He then took a deep breath and left the alcove to resume playing as if nothing had happened. Richie kept his distance and when he mentioned to others in the class that Zack had special powers, no one laughed directly at him, but certainly no one believed, either.

At the time, it served as a reminder to him to stay out of the limelight and it was then that he decided to find out what the library looked like instead of the playground. But, he was not to tell his mother, for that would have raised the kinds of questions he wasn't supposed to answer yet. It had to be done in secret and without her knowledge. This was what he had been told and he knew it was the right thing to do.

For most of the school year, he would be successful in shielding her from his plan, but as the first days of June reminded kids of the impending summer's vacation, Zack's ever-changing world was about to get another facelift.

## CHAPTER TWO

Half a country away, Justin Ward's eyes opened. It had been another wonderful dream – not unlike his others, and with a lingering vividness that caused the action to just about burn into the brain. There were characters in his dream that he recognized without really knowing and was able to describe them without really ever seeing them. His dream was so real that retelling the story would be a breeze.

He nonchalantly rolled over, grabbed the handy notebook, kept religiously on the nightstand, fished around in the dark for the light, and began scribbling out the dream he had just conjured up. Justin filled several pages of notes, stopping only for a moment to find his glasses, and scared up an outline for what could very well be book number six. He mouthed the words on the pages and smiled during his review of what was written, for he had come to know what a good story line was all about and this was looking like top-shelf material.

At least once a week Justin Ward would roll over with a great idea for a story. Not all of them would be workable. Like everyone else in the world, most of Justin's dreams were just too disjointed for any sense to be made of them. However, there were those nights when much of his trip to REM sleep was easily accountable upon waking.

Justin wasn't the type to worry about dream interpretation although he was open to the suggestion that the human brain was capable of doing a lot more than it did. He didn't spend a lot of time sorting out all the dreams that came his way, but lately, this was becoming the best way for Justin Ward, best-selling author, to get his fantastic ideas. And as an up-and-comer in the science-fiction writing world, he needed the fantastic part of the dreams to keep fresh.

They were not disappointing him this morning.

It wasn't the method he was relying on, but he was starting to fine-tune the mechanism necessary to extrapolate the storylines, and that was allowing him to turn out some decent books for an ungodly amount of money.

At 44 years of age, Justin had not always intended to be an author; in fact, far from it. But fate and fortune seemed to smile on him at the right time, and writing was becoming a great occupation for a man that had been through several lifetimes' worth of careers.



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He had just finished his fifth book, *The Milkyway Merger*, yet another futuristic thriller where the Earth combines with Alien forces to save the Universe. It had the promise of being a best seller and his newest offering was getting the royal treatment at Parsec Books, a sort of small operation that specialized in the science-fiction genre and had made huge strides in the marketplace recently thanks to the unearthing of Justin Ward. He was obviously the favorite there these days, not only for his ability to pen novels that played to an ever-enlarging readership, but also because he could do so with the kind of swiftness that often gives publishers an infectious case of the grins. His particular audience seemed to be young adults and high school kids, but his writing was also now finding its way onto the nightstands of many hopeful people throughout the world who liked the future a lot better than the present and certainly a lot more than the past. They had gravitated to Justin's optimistic message and even he sometimes caught himself wondering in amazement how he came to be the vehicle for such vision.

His story lines, happy endings, and futuristic world insights had been a welcome distraction to people seeking comfort from what had been a trying speed bump in the progress of humanity.

The world was just recovering from yet another international strife and although the threat of reprisal was always there, the Earth seemed to once again be resting peacefully at night in most of its corners. Maybe, in some small way, Justin Ward's books acted as one of a hundred Band-Aids used by the collective psyche of the planet to help the healing process along. Even so, he was quite glad these days that his being perhaps such a driving force also managed to pay quite handsomely.

Justin was himself becoming a bit of a celebrity, too. But as it is with writers, he could spend an entire day walking around any major city and not sign so much as an autograph. He found this type of anonymity refreshing. Some people claim they would just die for the kind of attention a Barry Bonds, Brad Pitt, or a Michael Jackson got in their heydays. Not Justin. He had heard about the damage done to your average media star when the aftershock of falling off the front page arrived; worse when you became the lead story for all the wrong reasons. That was something he was quite willing to do without. Besides, he really liked the solitude of being his own person with his own thoughts,

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and he was already toying with the plot lines for his next lucrative installment, having come fresh off another great night's sleep.

In the past, Justin had wondered why he was dreaming so vividly. For as long as he could remember, heavy sleep had been his way of life. Oh sure, once in a while, he would arise with a real clear image of a dream, but it would be just too weird to sort out into anything that could have been considered a storyline.

At the time, he figured maybe his new lifestyle had something to do with the sudden change. Perhaps it was the removal of the comfort zone that comes from having someone to share the covers with or that extra fifteen pounds of warmth that that someone used to call 'handles'. Justin had been without a steady companion for a while, and the 'handles' got worked off in what had been termed a 'post-divorce depression'. The truth of the matter is that Justin didn't actually feel bad about the split because of where he was in his latest, greatest career. He felt even better about the monetary aspects of that split for he had recently felt there would not have been such success without the break.

It's like songwriters who get complacent and can't write anymore. When they suffered or were alone...that's when they wrote their best stuff. It didn't hurt that he also managed to regain a degree of health by losing some weight. Doing so in the past had always given Justin a positive outlook.

Aside from slimming down and filling his pockets, he was also simply feeling better - about his life, about his work, about himself; maybe for the first time in his existence. Perhaps he didn't sleep as soundly anymore, but he dreamed, now better than ever and it seemed as if every morning supplied him with a reason to get out of bed.

As he began to slip out of the sheets, he paused to consider one thing that hadn't necessarily bothered him, but did definitely intrigue him at this moment. Just one peculiar thing in all of this change...he never had a nightmare. Hadn't had one in a good long time. Not even after a late night go-round with a bottle of something fermented or something off the late night menu at *Pablos'*, or worse yet, both at the same time. Getting out of bed, Justin smiled again, dismissing the peculiarity.

Michael Jackson, he figured, suffered plenty of nightmares to go around. "*Good for him,*" he thought. The ringing of the phone snapped Justin out of his mini-trance.

“Ward here.”

Critics of the famous television show, *Star Trek*, coined the term ‘trekkie’ years ago in describing those fanatics of the program and its subsequent offshoots. These cultists would often dress the part while attending all of the many conventions and go to the extremes of learning, as opposed to memorizing, every nuance of the show’s construction, characters, and mission.

Justin Ward was not a trekkie. He was, however, a self-proclaimed member of a much larger, unorganized band of show worshippers known as ‘trekkers’. They were not devoted enough to put on the costumes of the show’s characters or learn every square inch of the fabled starship, *Enterprise*, and they weren’t the kind who traveled to every major convention. But they, nevertheless, represented the devoutly faithful fan of what Justin had often argued to be probably the greatest form of science fiction ever devised.

When cell-phone technology put out a compact, flip-top model years before, he simply couldn’t resist buying it because it emulated the old communication devices used in the earlier episodes of the show. He then took it that extra step, inching ever so close to ‘trekkie-land’ by answering hails in a manner very Captain Kirk-like. This had since become Justin’s traditional telephone greeting.

“Good morning, sunshine!”

This blared into Justin’s left ear causing him to pull the receiver back a little in avoidance of any further discomfort to his auditory system. Both the shrill voice and overly perky attitude unmistakably belonged to one Cassie Jones – a woman who was Justin’s secretary, but acted more often than not, like his publicist, agent, and mother rolled into one person.

“Did I wake someone up?”

She could have cared less if she did for her job wasn’t necessarily to convenience Justin, just to keep him advised of what was going on in his daily life. She wasn’t hired by Justin, but rather assigned to him as a courtesy by the folks at Parsec Books. Only the really favorable authors got their own secretaries. In part, to build their egos and more importantly, to handle the weekly bags of mail that he now received. Having Cassie handy was not without its merits. It was indeed a puff to his ego to say to people, “I’ll have my secretary set things up.” He loved

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using the line and did so often to head off oncoming sales pitches. Cassie was also quite efficient at what she did and that proved to be a necessary evil where Justin, the divorced, was concerned. Organization of the daily schedule was not a strong suit for a lot of authors and Justin could be fit into that cake mold without much margarine at all.

Essentially, Cassie handled everything in Justin's life from when he was going to promote a book to paying his utilities. (The bills all went to a designated post office box and he would transfer money into a separate 'bill-paying' account whenever Cassie needed to pay something.)

By now, she was starting to babble on about a meeting Friday with the people at *'Good Morning America'* and another appearance with Regis early next week. Then they would send him West to do a few shows out there in promotion of *The Milkyway Merger*, the best of the best so far.

"What time is it," Justin interrupted.

"8-30, don't you have a clock in that great big house of yours?" She did have an annoying talent for sarcasm. Her sharp tongue could be an irritant to Justin at times, but for a full-figured woman, the curves of her body tended to even up things. Right now, she was responding to the fact that she was cut off during what was supposedly good news. Anytime you get to go on the Oprah show it's supposed to be good news.

Truth is, Justin had plenty of clocks and was even looking at one when he asked. He just wanted to retake control of the conversation.

"What day is it?"

"This is Friday. Did we have a rough night?"

Actually, Justin had a relatively easy night. He was in bed before eleven, just watching a little early-season baseball. The Red Sox had started a road trip in traditional fashion, losing 5-2 to the Kansas City Royals. Justin missed the last two innings, which is precisely where the Beantown nine blew a 2-1 lead, a pretty normal evening. It's just that the life of an author has no real concern for days of the week. The writing happens when it happens. More disciplined authors and weekly columnists might be able to make it happen when necessary, but as for Justin, for the most part, it was his good fortune to be able to go when it was time to go and stop when it suited him.

"Are you my secretary?"

"I am your office executive."

“Yeah...and as my secretary you take care of my schedule, right?”

“Yes, that’s what an *office executive* does, but...”

“Then take care of it. Set me up to go wherever and whenever I’m supposed to, miss office executive. Oh, and Cassie, if I’m going to California, book me for a round of golf at a place called Pebble Beach. Ever hear of it? I’ve never played there before. Look ‘em up on the internet...use my credit card for the tee time unless, of course, the company is willing to pick up the tab for a little R & R for me. Either way, that means you have to give me a day off for play in LA.

“A day off?”

“Yep. A day, for play, in sunny L.A. Notice how that all rhymed? God, I’m so talented.”

“Like a monkey in a banana tree.” He frowned and looked into the receiver as if she might actually see his mock pain to her witty retort.

“Oh, Cass? See if I can bring along a friend.” He was ignoring her sharp mind as being equal, or better, to his.

“And who would this friend be?”

Justin had gotten her attention. He knew the mention of a traveling companion would drive her just mildly crazy. He would tease her for a day or two and then casually inform her that he would be going alone - as usual. Once in a while, Caster would make the trip or pass through at intersecting points for a round of golf. By not telling her who, he would leave options open for anything that might happen, mostly those coming out of her imagination.

“Are you seeing someone? Who is she?”

“Cassie Jones, are you prying?”

“No...it’s just that if you wanted, I would *love* to go out to the warm sunshine this time of year and get in a little sight-seeing. Besides, you know that you are allowed to take me as your traveling secretary.”

“Don’t you mean *office executive*?”

“Hmph...can I go? Please?”

“First off, it’s ‘may’ I go and second, we’ve been down this road before. I’ll think about it. Right now, Cass, I’m out the rest of the day, okay? So e-mail me my schedule for next week and I’ll look it over tonight.” He said all this with his eyes closed and in a condescending manner that gave one the impression that if he was nice to her, she

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actually wouldn't call back that day and he could get her off the phone that much quicker.

"You don't always look at your e-mail and you know it, Justin Ward." For a moment, the writer could picture his late mother with that 'don't give me that excuse' tone in her voice, but being a decent chess player, Justin was quick with an anticipated reply.

"I promise I will when I get in. I'll even return-mail you when I'm done looking it over. Oh, look at the time, would you? Gotta run now or I'll be late." This was almost as sing-songy as her original 'good morning'.

"You better call."

"I promise, mother. Ward out." Again, more homage paid to the trekkers of the world, always closing off in Captain Kirk fashion. It had become so natural to him and yet so hokey to the first-time caller. One could almost sense that on the other end of the phone, Cassie Jones was making some kind of snide remark about Justin's manner and perhaps even all writers in general. As he cradled the receiver, a thought crossed his mind: send her flowers from an anonymous gentleman. That would set her burner on medium-high. He chuckled and headed for the bathroom.

One of the assets Justin discovered in being an author was that he was able to call most of his own shots. He, therefore, slept in as often as possible and spent almost as much time on the golf course as he did at the computer, the instrument of his writing. He also carried his laptop with him, especially on longer trips, should a story idea pop into his head unexpectedly and not necessarily after sleeping for eight hours. Calling his own shots also allowed him more quality time with Zack and lately, that was something of real importance to Justin; more so than ever before.

Zack was only five when he became a bargaining chip in the divorce from Liz. It had been as amicable a split as possible. As divorces go, this one topped out at around three on a scale of ten with ten being a full-blown lawyer-fest. Still, Liz got primary custody of Zack and Justin handled his visiting rights with grace until she decided, last year, to head south with husband number two, Peter Madsen, a former colleague and an even former friend. A new arrangement provided for Zack to spend

his summers in New England with Dad while taking his schooling in Florida with Liz the rest of the year. Justin also got him part of Christmas vacation so Zack could get a bonus round of presents. Justin figured that for an eight-year old, that had to be as good as it could get considering the situation. If Mother Nature cooperated, Zack could even get a little snow for his winter visit. It was also a nice tease to the nearly three straight summer months he would get to spend with his special son.

Zack was profoundly deaf.

It was something he and Liz banged heads over on plenty of occasions and turned the idea of child-raising into a constant source of second-guessing. Justin could admit these days, in hindsight, that he was not ready to deal with a handicapped child, but neither was his ex. They haggled over getting specialized treatment, specialized doctors, and specialized services all at premium prices. As if the drain on the income wasn't enough, having Zack also caused a severe cramping of a double-income-no-kid lifestyle they had enjoyed together for nearly ten years.

The shock to the system had stretched the bonds of their marriage to some delicate apexes that were later easily snapped.

Eight-thirty meant he would be late for his tee time if he didn't get going. He'd skip the shower and catch up with personal hygiene after eighteen holes at the club. He was going to spend the morning with his good friend, and neighbor, Adam Caster. Caster, as he liked to be called, was a man whom Justin had made a unique acquaintance with just over twenty years previous. A little twist of fate a few years later brought the two men closer together and Justin's new found talent for writing best sellers made the pair neighbors. Throughout, they bonded a terrific personal and professional relationship. Caster could take full responsibility as the driving force that finally talked Justin into abandoning all conventional forms of occupation and subsequent mediocre income and take a big leap of faith in trying to write books for a living. It was something of a risky proposition, but one that Justin could not thank Caster for enough these days. So when the call came in last night to be at the course, ready with his 'A'- game, he would be there.

Caster had several levels of appeal. For Justin, it was threefold. One, Caster probably knew more about him than anyone else on the planet and

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that included his ex-wife, Liz. Ironically, it was Caster who helped convinced him to ask Liz for her hand in marriage.

Two, they both loved the game of golf. Justin had played at the college level for Division III Buffalo State, while Caster had the ability of any pro golfer on the senior tour. He had a swing right out of an old Bobby Jones newsreel. He had the precision of a Seth Thomas clock, and the rhythm of the Temptations. Justin loved playing with him because Caster was a little better. And that was something that tended to elevate Justin's own game which had steadily improved over the last few years.

Reason three, Caster also shared in Justin's love of good science fiction; but not just science fiction so much as 'credible' fiction. By their standards, that meant a story with everyday believability and a realistic look at the future. *Star Trek* was at the top of each of their lists.

In his high school English teaching days, Justin made it a point to work a unit of science fiction into his yearly curriculum. He would use several short story selections to illustrate how writers in this genre had the task of temporarily suspending normal conventions in a way to create a believable atmosphere, and do so with a mere simple change of time or place. Putting characters on a place like Mars, or in the future, allowed both the reader and writer the opportunity to view things a little differently. He would highlight the unit with examples of how good science fiction can create social commentary by removing the constraints of today's society. Then there would be discussions where students would come up with their own examples of this type of literature. Finally, there would be time for a *Star Trek* episode or two where just such commentary was evident. Episode 67, *Plato's Stepchildren*, was always a favorite – the one where Kirk and Uhuru perform the first ever televised, inter-racial kiss. Not bad for late 1968 (and way ahead of its time). Some southern television stations had refused to broadcast the episode. *Star Trek* wasn't very popular below the Mason-Dixon to begin with, but in this day and age, the kids always got a kick out of watching it in Mr. Ward's class.

The honors class would be allowed to take things to the next level by actually brainstorming a plotline for their own science fiction novel. Justin ended up incorporating this idea into his second book, *Sci-Fi High*. It was what he referred to on an endless string of small market talk shows as a 'novel idea'.



Caster and he had spent many hours discussing all forms of science fiction, but they inevitably filtered down to an unmatched love of futuristic space voyage and coming to grips with other life forms outside our planet. The discussions were theoretical and full of ‘what ifs’, but Caster was pretty sharp for a guy presumably in his fifties. It had dawned on Justin more than once that he really didn’t know how old Caster was, but he did look up to him as a bit of a father figure. Just thinking about not knowing how old Adam Caster was, was enough to make him smile out of nowhere as he checked his hair in the mirror.

This in itself seemed silly, since he was going to wear a hat on the course. But it was a natural thing to stop and see the man in the mirror every morning. He had gotten used to the slimmer version. It went well with the youthful features. He still had plenty of hair with almost no graying and the Van Dyke he put on years ago to hide a double chin was now a fond memory. For a moment, he pondered the idea of growing it again then smiled.

“Maybe this winter,” He muttered to his reflection as he rolled a hand pensively over his chin. He grabbed the keys, his wallet, and his tightly woven straw hat and headed for the door.

The other level of Caster’s appeal was hard to describe as it came from a part of Justin that seemed to always be searching for a place to fit in. Justin Ward had a lot of worldly experience that came from a plethora of jobs held in his 44 years on the Earth. Caster, however, was probably the only person he knew who had done more in life by way of occupation than he had and they often shared their experiences over spirited, but friendly, rounds of golf.

Caster had, on occasion, revealed stints as being everything from a publishing agent to a high-level television network executive. Somewhere at the end of the list was the notion that he was now spending time as a script consultant for a couple of major Hollywood movie houses. Apparently, Adam Caster made a lot of money these days consulting for, and revising, screenplays with a science fiction genre – a specialty of his and something that tied him and Justin in more ways than one. It was science fiction that brought them together over twenty years ago and it was science fiction that has ultimately led to Justin’s newfound wealth and happiness. Golf, ironically enough, was what kept them together in between and has been a major tie that had bound their

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friendship – perhaps even a fourth type of appeal. Justin knew that Adam Caster had been very influential in his recent lucrative success and he would never stop thanking him for it.

The ride to the course was a quick one. Living at Birch Hill was a dream-come-true for Justin. Never being able to afford the surroundings, he could only imagine the lifestyle he had now. His daily routine was rolling out of bed, jumping into his metallic green Maserati and driving a half mile down the protected road of the private community to the course where he could socialize and play as much golf as he could stand. He loved the prestige that surrounded one of the best golf courses on the Eastern seaboard and he liked the status within which he now resided. This was hitting the lottery and he was enjoying it.

His first real job out of high school was managing a pro shop for an exclusive club in Western New York and his two years of duty there exposed him to finer tastes, finer wines and, very refined women. It made the instant wealth he enjoyed at present come as less of a shock, and he had become a veritable chameleon in his new habitat. For the most part, his days now were filled with the spoils of success and the occasional promotional stop or book signing. He loved them at first, only later to learn to take them in stride. Although, often required by the publisher, they did afford Justin the opportunity to play some of the more restricted and privileged golf courses in the world. Many of which he could only have done so before on Zack's *Playstation* video system.

As he pulled out of the driveway there was a hint of dew still on the grounds. It was just after Memorial Day in New England and that meant the weather could change dramatically in a matter of hours.

Gus was manning the gate this morning. The benefit of Birch Hill was security, and Gus was well into his second donut when Justin crept to the barrier. The septegarian reached over his Dunkin Donuts hot hazelnut delight and gingerly pushed a button, coaxing the gate just fast enough so the Maserati didn't even pause. There was a back way into the club that didn't require using Gus or his gate, but Justin liked the pampering.

"Morning, Gus," yelled Justin in passing.

"Little nippy, Mr. Ward," answered the senior citizen as he raised the coffee cup.

Justin hadn't noticed any real change in temperature. It was promising to be a nice spring morning, as the forecast on WTAG was calling for

mostly sunny skies with highs in the mid 60s. Just as well, Justin decided to go with a sweater-vest ensemble. For a long time, clothes were of no real concern. However, leap-frogging the upper middle class put him about a quarter of a century back in time emotionally; to the club where he had not only worked, but also learned how to live in his current tax bracket.

“Clothes make the man,” he thought. “At least they do now.”

Caster was on the putting green when Justin emerged from the locker room and greeted him with a handshake and a tiny smile.

“Got us a couple of pigeons today, Jay,” he said as he nodded over to the driving range. “Hope you brought that wonderful ‘A-game’ of yours with you.”

One thing about Adam Caster, He could be very competitive, and he loved to put his skills to the test. The best way to do that would be to place a lot of money on the table and the winner takes it all. Justin had seen him make a 15-foot birdie putt on the last hole of a match to win more money than Justin had made in five years of teaching. Caster thrived on it and he rarely lost. For one thing, he played to about a minus-1 handicap, meaning he had pro tour talent; definitely another point of interest they shared for Justin was no slouch on the fairways, either, having boasted a lifetime 4 handicap. However, since joining the Birch Hill community, that number had dropped to 2 making him a threat to win any local tournament he may have wished to enter.

Caster would occasionally reel in a pair of upstarts to play against. It was usually a couple of hot shots figuring to pick up a fat payday by hustling some middle-aged wannabees like Caster and company. They were usually young, eager, sly kids who figured Adam was a lot of talk. That was just the way Adam would plan it. Give off that aura – of someone who talked a real good game, but unable to back it up, and then hook them into a big money match. That was the thing about Caster – he could play the part of the drunken braggart, but all along seem to know exactly what he was doing. And not just about golf, either. Justin had often found himself simply no longer believing everything Caster would say because there was never any real way of proving or disproving the things coming out of his mouth.

The two at the driving range looked like they came right off Caster’s chump assembly line. Both were mid 20’s – maybe they had money,

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maybe they didn't, it meant no difference – they would have to be Tiger Woods to have even a shot at the older gents on this course. Designed by the legendary Pete Dye, Birch Hill's 18-hole layout was as much about patience as it was about ability, and there weren't any 20-year olds with enough of the former to last the whole round.

"Hooked them good," mentioned Caster as he casually dropped a pair of twenty-foot putts in preparation. "They think they're playing an overbearing, over-aged, loud-mouthed drunk and his back-slapping sidekick." He half snickered and gave Justin a mechanical wink that let him know he didn't need to have an 'A' or even a 'B' game today to help fill his best friend's pockets and self-esteem. These two young pups were in for a lesson in the human condition and this golf course would be the perfect classroom.

"Listen, let's have dinner tonight. I want your ear on a new project that I think you'll find extremely fascinating," said Caster as he waved over to the upstarts, motioned then to the first tee.

"Project?"

"Uh huh. Just the most earth-shattering thing you ever heard," It was Caster's deadpan voice. "Plan to be at my place around seven." Anticipating a question from Justin, he simply gave him a quick wave-off and, pointing to his head with his customary wry smile, half-whispered while jumping into his golf cart, "Showtime." He rode off to take privilege on a pair of pretty pigeons, leaving Justin to walk the hundred yards to the first tee.

The author knew better than to press the issue about the 'project', and Caster knew that dropping a little mystery on his partner would be just the right distraction for 18 holes of golf. Justin had fallen into the habit of not asking how much they were playing for because the money didn't matter. When the money didn't matter, Justin usually played well. With a little distraction, he wouldn't worry about where the ball was going that day. He would focus on the shot, making it good, and then moving on. Some guys spend all the time between shots trying to figure out what went wrong with the last one. Justin was better when he was slightly pre-occupied and often took to fixing a song on the CD player in the Maserati just so he would have something catchy to hum to himself as he played. Every golfer has their mechanism – this was Justin's. He knew it and so did Adam Caster. There was a song in his head when he got to the

course, but he had forgotten that by the first shot. He was starting to formulate questions for Adam about the mystery project.

The suckers-de-jour were, in reality, a couple of assistant pros from Tatnuck Country Club on the other side of the city. According to Caster, they did indeed meet up in some nightclub and got started in on golf. Caster had an uncanny knack of being able to put away large amounts of scotch and still perform well. Justin had been amazed at the ease in which he once talked himself out of a possible OUI. In fact, by the time he was done with the cop, you'd have thought they had reversed roles for the encounter.

He was a tall, wiry man with a young face and almost no appearance of his age. His jet-black dark hair was kept neatly trimmed as a rule, but could have easily been let down. He had chiseled; male-model features and his clothes fit his frame perfectly. Not tight anywhere, but not necessarily hanging off him anywhere either. Although he admitted to being hopelessly single, he nevertheless was adored by more than a dozen female socialites at the club and countless other women he had made the pleasure of meeting and they, him.

One or two occasionally received the grand tour of the Caster mini-mansion just down the street from Justin's house.

It was easy for the author to imagine him as the classic boy-next-door when he was in high school, no doubt, a few years before his time.

Justin had celebrated a birthday with his friend a few months ago, but all the scotch in the bar that night couldn't get him to acknowledge his actual age. He would only say he was in his fifties. At times, he looked more like early thirties than fifties.

Justin, himself had aged gracefully and at 44, was still taken for ten years younger at times. Like his best friend, he managed to use his own charms to his advantage once or twice when women were concerned, but he wasn't looking for another wife - at least not yet. Together, they were probably the clubs two most eligible bachelors. Both had good looks, good personalities, and very good financial statements.

By the time they made the turn at number ten, the pigeons were starting to scramble for a way to make their money back. The prospect for a big win was at hand and Caster allowed himself to be entertained with options presented by Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle Dee.

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Dum, the cockier of the pair, started the bartering.

“Hey, I admit it, you guys are better than we thought; you should be giving us some shots, here.”

Dee nodded approvingly.

“Well, we shot four-under, 32 as a team. You and your pathetic partner carded a 35. That means we easily won the front side. Now let’s see...my partner, not a golfer, but a writer, had 35 on his own ball, but he’s playing out of his shoes right now. What say you play him straight up on the back nine for...say, double or nothing?”

Justin flashed a quizzical look of amazement at his friend who spoke from the front seat of the golf cart without ever taking his eyes off the scorecard on the wheel. He had never pushed the envelope this far before, and never on the ability of just one of them. Still, the thought of a challenge where he could not lose anything was giving him a new level of confidence.

Dee jumped in this time. “We play our best against his only?”

“That is what I proposed, gentlemen. Isn’t it, Justin?” Again, Caster was making no eye contact with anyone and appeared to be rechecking the scorecard.

“Sounded okay with me, professor.” Justin had developed the habit of calling Caster, ‘professor’, as a way of paying him homage he felt was due. It was also his way of telling his mentor that he was ready for any challenge presented. Caster himself might well have taken the bet on his own for he birdied the last two holes to go out in 34, the lowest score of the foursome. The Tweedles each hacked their way to some number in the low 40s.

“Do we have a bet?” needled Caster.

“Double or nothing with an automatic press?” Dum was looking for more than just his original investment back. Dee just nodded at the idea.

“Sure you young fellas can handle this?” Caster was rubbing his thumb and index finger together in a gesture suggesting they might not have the money for the game.

“We’re covered here.”

“Okay with us. We won the last hole so we, I mean my partner will hit first. By the way, I didn’t ask...is seven okay with you, tonight?” Caster had re-directed the conversation right back to the first hole and

Justin was once again thinking about the project. Like a pro closer in the sales industry, Adam Caster put his protégé in the perfect frame of mind.

“Seven’s great. Do I need to bring anything?”

“Nope, you’ve got everything you need already. Now how about you knocking that thing down the sprinkler heads.” He simply crossed his legs comfortably while referring to Justin’s teed-up Titleist One. As a rule of superstition, Justin only used golf balls with a ‘1’ on them and he preferred the Titleist brand.

In his best Stallone aka *Rocky* voice, Justin replied “Oh...absolutely.” He paused to collect his thoughts before uncoiling a very precise swing. The drive sailed off the tee, altered with a slight draw to the left, took one good hop on impact and came to rest approximately 290 yards from the point of departure, in the left side of the fairway, quite near a sprinkler head.

“It’ll play,” said Caster nonchalantly.

It was like that for the next few holes and the Tweedle twins were done by the 16<sup>th</sup> – Caster offered them one more chance to get even, but they had lost not only the original wager, but a pair of presses as well. The 16<sup>th</sup> hole had the distinct feature of being very near the parking lot and as it did to many a golfer not having a good day, created a sad allure. The notion of not losing another dime was enough to chase the squabs off the grounds. Large bills were quickly handed over and the cart nearly peeled out enroute to the sanctuary of the clubhouse.

Uncharacteristically, Adam Caster laughed. He never really laughed. He smiled when he was happy, but he rarely laughed out loud. Justin had come to find him to be a very precise and controlled individual, without necessarily being anal about things.

“That just never gets old,” he said as he handed Justin a wad of money. “Could do this everyday. Hey, nice shooting. What are you anyway, about three under?”

Actually, it was minus five and Justin had single-handedly whipped a pair of talented kids with room to spare. In fact, he was staring at the prospect of shooting his all-time best score. Back in the pro shop days, he had fired a pair of 70s and a 68, but he was looking at shattering that. In fact, Birch Hill was a par 71 and with a short par 5 followed by an average par 4, he could do more than punch a huge hole in his personal best – he could take out the course record, 64.

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“Get in, I’ll buy you a scotch in the clubhouse,” said Caster, nonchalantly.

“What? I’m five under! I’m on a roll and I’m going to finish so drive this thing over there and let me chase this par five.”

Caster stared at his friend for a moment.

“There is one thing about the human condition that I will never understand. You just won. That means the game is over. You get to leave now.” He was staring blankly at the writer and his words were dispensed with harsh mildness as if addressed by a drill sergeant trying not to hurt a cadet’s feelings. “But no, you are not satisfied until you finish. *What* you are trying to finish, I don’t know seeing as you already accomplished what you set out to do. That is like having the home team bat in the ninth inning even though they are leading just to see how many more runs they can score and whether or not it will be some kind of record.” He was almost scolding now in his manner, but Justin was steadfast.

“Look, I cleaned these guys out for you and golf is not baseball. I am not trying to humiliate the course; I saved that for your suckers. Now you have to ride along and pretend like you want to play or this won’t count as an official round and I would be upset.”

Caster continued staring blankly at his friend, realizing this was one battle he wasn’t going to win.

“Means a lot to you doesn’t it.”

“Wouldn’t it mean a lot to you if you were on the road to an all-time best round, not to mention a possible course record and then had to quit before seeing it through?”

“Wouldn’t faze me a bit. That’s the small stuff that humanity is always trying so hard to deal with. Me, when the job is done it’s time to move on to the next great thing.”

Justin’s eyes were virtually pleading.

“Out of friendship, I’ll tag along as a witness. And because I know this means a lot to you.” His tone was both fatherly and cynical, but Justin was relieved as he dismounted the cart and headed for the tee.

“Oh, I just thought of something you can bring tonight...a bottle of scotch. You know what I like. And bring whatever you’re drinking. You might need it after I’m done.” The timing was once again perfect to get Justin’s mind off the swing and onto the mysterious project. It was the same distraction that had put him at five under par and the drive on 17



was huge and dead straight between the birch trees for which the course and the surrounding community were so named.

“About this project...” Caster stopped him with his hand.

“After dinner. Can’t tell you any more until then so don’t ask.”

Justin just shook his head as the pair headed down the fairway. The perfect drive left Justin a little under 200 yards to the pin with a creek to carry just in front of the green. Many an attempt at eagle here found what long-time golf commentator Peter Alliss would warmly describe in his British accent as a ‘watery grave’. Without even thinking, for the mysterious meeting later with Caster was still on his mind, Justin casually laced into a 4-iron that spun to a stop about eight feet away from glory.

“That’s a useful shot...nicely done. Those boys are lucky they didn’t try a third time,” said Caster in his own perfect British accent, referring to the Tweedles.

“Tricky putt coming back.” In the short while Justin had been at Birch Hill, he had taken it upon himself to study the greens. He knew them like a masseur knows the human body. He was well aware of all the curves, dips, and ridges; every undulation was under his grasp. He knew the way the grass grew and how the grain would affect a long putt. He knew this putt, too, and it was not an easy one.

Caster had laid up in the fairway and flipped a wedge inside of Justin’s offering. He placed his club back in the bag and put a hand on Justin’s shoulder.

“Laddie, see the event happen in you mind and then make it happen.” Although delivered in Scottish brogue, his advice was not hokey and Justin took it to heart as he stood behind the ball, checking the presumed line of the putt. It was a hard-breaking, fast moving, downhill putt that could easily go five to ten feet past the hole. Justin painstakingly pored over the line of the putt, studying the contour from all sides. When he was satisfied with the path he anticipated the ball would take, he then went through his routine. Step to the ball, make one practice swing to get the feel for the distance; then, make the same swing through the ball.

The practice swing felt perfect. Sometimes when it wasn’t quite right, he would take a second one. Never more than two. It was the only place on the course where Justin even considered practice swings. He had often

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called them a waste of time and energy. If you knew your swing, you didn't need a practice swing.

Now he was set. He felt as if he could close his eyes and still make the right swing.

The roll of his Titleist 1 was true as it left the club. It was now out of his hands, but he knew instantly if it didn't go in, it would be a tap-in for birdie. Usually an eight-foot, down hill putt will get to the hole pretty quick. But this one just kept turning, ever so slowly, just rolling over itself with enough energy to get to the next full roll. It snapped down from a point a half an inch from where Justin had intended, but the speed was enough to carry the ball forward on a true, albeit, slightly altered path. In putting, speed is often a great compensator for accuracy, especially when there is a bend in the putt. Justin had hit the ball almost too softly, but by pushing the right-to-left break a little wide, the ball now dove to the target, catching just enough of the right edge of the cup to find the bottom.

"Yeah!" screamed the author of the stroke with a Tiger Woods' fist-pump to accompany it.

"That's nice. You still have one more hurdle, son." Caster hadn't even bothered to finish the hole. He was two under, himself, for the day, but was sticking to his philosophy.

"Seven under. I can't believe that I'm seven under par. I don't shoot seven-under on Zack's video game. I just tied the course record." His eyes were beginning to get that shell-shocked look that comes when something totally unexpected happens. He was indeed having the round of his life. Sure he was a good player by his own right, but today it was like everything was falling into place and for the first time in his life, Justin knew what it must feel like to be a pro golfer.

"So...you're going to turn pro in six years?" Caster's remark took notice of the fact that at 44, Justin could think about playing Senior PGA golf in six years. He had the handicap for it, and at least today, he had the game.

"That'd still be dreaming for me, but if I could play like this just once a week..." He didn't finish the sentence as the words drifted to a place where his thought already were. They moved the cart to the 18<sup>th</sup> hole, a 407-yard par 4, dogleg right that ventured over a portion of the Quinnebaug River. That wasn't what made it the sixth toughest hole on

the course. That was left to the tight fairway and an even tighter second shot to a tiny, thin green. Miss a little left and there were three different sand traps to choose from. Miss right, and you might be up to your ankles in environmentally protected creek marsh. Either way, two straight shots here were better than any one long one.

“Now the record is 64 and you need a three to post a 63. No pressure here, just make two good swings and your home free.” Again, Caster’s words had a therapeutic effect and Justin quickly regained his focus from the 17<sup>th</sup> green.

“Two iron. Maybe even a three. Waddya think?” Justin was looking for guidance, but Caster was not that kind of caddy.

“Pick your favorite club and hit the damn golf ball.”

Justin snatched the two iron from the bag.

“Big help you are.”

“You want me to hit it for you?” This was the type of caddy Caster was – sarcastic in a good-natured way. It had the same effect it always seemed to and it took Justin’s mind off the shot just enough to allow him to hit a nice little draw to the left side of the fairway.

“I could hit that shot better,” retorted Caster.

“Then why don’t you?”

“Hey, I wanted to quit fifteen minutes ago, remember?”

This was the normal give and take between the two and it continued as the cart sped towards the tee shot. Justin could have hit driver, but the risk of a slight push into the river or a pull into very heavy rough was not an option. Playing the second shot off the short grass was the only way to come into the treacherous 18<sup>th</sup>. It took him most of last year to understand that.

“Still about, what...180 in?”

“178 to the center.” The advice was delivered deadpan and without even surveying the situation. Adam had been playing here for quite a while. This was his home away from the glitter and glitz of Hollywood and the West Coast where he made his living. He spent roughly half his summer here and according to him, had done so for at least the last 25 years. His advice on distances was trusted to the foot if not the inch.

“178? Sure?”

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“If you didn’t want to listen, why did you ask?” The quick reply came with a sigh. It was the kind of sigh that a father gives his son when he asks the same question for a third time.

“Okay, okay. Big seven iron should get me home.” He grabbed the club and advanced toward his ball. Out of earshot, Caster had one last piece of advice.

“Watch the north wind.” He sung this under his breath in that ‘I-told-you-so’ tone as Justin started his back swing. The ball was well struck and lofted towards the green. Dead center. Then wavered left, ever so slightly, hitting the left edge of the green, bouncing high and away and finally coming to rest in the middle bunker.

“Damn. Thought that was perfect. Didn’t think I pulled it at all.”

“You didn’t. The wind got it.”

“What wind? I checked the wind. There wasn’t any. Hasn’t really been any all day.”

“Say Einstein, where do you suppose the wind usually is? It’s not at your feet, is it? No. Its up in the air... flicking a little grass is nice if you’re in a field, but see those really big trees there on both sides of us? This is a well-protected alley. Of course there isn’t any wind down here.” He points to the ground all the while sitting in the cart. “It’s up there.” He swings an arm towards the tops of the trees that are swaying ever so gently in what could best be described as little wisps of wind. “And that is where your ball was just after you hit it. Up there.”

“Damn.”

“Not over, yet. Time to earn the honor. C’mon, get in.”

They rode in silence, around the green to the other side where his ball was found to be half buried in the soft sand.

“Fried an egg.” Justin was commenting on the appearance of his ball in the middle of the bunker. The shot would not be easy to get close considering the flag was left center of the green. He would have to blast out using a bigger swing than normal. It was not a shot he practiced very often, but knew how to make so he grabbed a wedge and entered the hazard with the proper stroke in his mind.

He dug in with his feet and closed his eyes, trying to picture the swing. It came to him right away – quiet the legs and drive through the sand with a quick downward thrust.

*Steve Bantle*

*Grip it tight and follow through. Imagine hitting the ball ten feet past the target.*

He opened his eyes, focused on a spot a half an inch behind the ball, took a cleansing breath and made a good full swing. The Titleist lofted in a cloud of dusty sand toward the pin. It was called an ‘explosion’ shot for a reason. It was never more obvious now to Justin why they did so. The crater left by the impact of the club looked like the remnants of a sortie mission. The location of the ball was not immediately known as it arrived on the green in conjunction with a shovel full of sand that stopped moving on impact, allowing the ball to emerge. The worst-case scenario was to have the ball remain in the hazard or to have it transcend the target green altogether. The best-case scenario, aside from having it actually go in the hole, would be to have the shot end up inside the leather, the distance of the grip on a person’s putter.

Justin’s third shot was neither as the ball rolled to a stop about 17 feet away from a course record. All he had to do was make the putt.

“Could be worse.” He thought.

“Yeah, you still have a chance, Tiger. Easier putt than the last one.” Caster knew what Justin was thinking. It was something Justin had recognized as a reason for their friendship. Caster and he seemed to think a lot alike.

The author went through the putting process again as he did on number seventeen, and every other hole before that, studying every blade of grass this time. He paced around to all sides of the shot and looked at it from several different angles. It was a pretty straight putt, but he wanted to make sure.

Caster was playing the part of the impatient by-stander.

“Are you going to actually hit the ball before the sun goes down?”

Justin looked him off as he made one last quick tour of the other side of the hole.

“There’s a foursome of ladies two holes back, should I wave ‘em up?”

Justin was trying to ignore him.

“Look, you knew how the putt would break before you even pulled yourself out of the sand. Why are you walking around, giving yourself every opportunity to second and third guess? Are you playing to some invisible crowd that I don’t see? Is there a telecast going on here? Step up and knock the damn ball in the hole, already.”

*Point-Six Percent*

It may have sounded unconcerned, but it had just the opposite effect and Justin knew what his friend was doing. He was making sure nothing was done differently, that the rhythm of his game was consistent. He was bringing Justin back to Earth.

“Okay, okay. Don’t get pushy.”

“I’m getting hungry.”

“If I make it, you’re buying.”

“Like hell. If it were up to me, we’d be eating already and you wouldn’t be agonizing over a straight-in, uphill putt.”

Justin got quiet as he started the putter for the traditional practice swing. Caster clammed up, too. It was showtime. The practice swing felt good.

“*Now to repeat it,*” he whispered this to himself as he addressed the ball. Up until now, he had been pretty calm, even in the sand trap. Perhaps it was because the difficulty of that shot made him naturally nervous. This putt, however, was causing the half a bagel he considered breakfast to somersault in his stomach and all the while Caster was thinking about eating. He was shaking because he could actually make it. There was a legitimate chance for him to achieve Birch Hill, Hall-of-Fame kudos.

One thing he had learned about competitive sports was that there was psychology involved in success. Never use the word, “don’t” and avoid the negative. He put a positive thought in his mind and tried to repeat the swing through the ball.

“*Whatever you do, get it to the goddam hole.*”

There was adrenaline in his stroke and the ball was moving faster than Justin had hoped. Being a putt with almost no break meant that extra speed wouldn’t hurt as long as the line was true. This one had plenty of gusto and hit the back of the hole, almost hard enough to make it hop to the other side. But fortunately for Justin, on this day, gravity was in his corner and the Titleist nestled into the cup. Justin was stunned when he hit it for he knew he hit it too hard, but his horror turned to sheepish joy when the ball disappeared. He exhaled and stood frozen at the point of impact.

Caster in almost mocking fashion clapped twice, pathetically, and then jabbed at Justin one last time as he looked up and smiled.

“Can we eat now?”

Caster was right, Justin was buying, but he was too excited to eat. He refigured the scores twice and checked the math a third time before Caster grabbed the card, signed it, and proclaimed an end to the proceedings. Justin practically flew down the stairs to the pro shop to deliver the news and after some congratulatory handshakes, headed back up to the Grille room to not eat. He did drink a little in celebration and that was of some comfort to Caster who never missed an opportunity to partake in a glass or two, or many, of Chivas Regal.

“Let’s celebrate,” gleaned Justin. He had that lottery-winning feeling going like when that first big advance from Parsec Books came through.

“Hey, I’ve got plans for you tonight at seven, remember? Besides, you’ll probably hack your way to an eighty tomorrow.”

“Don’t know if I can play tomorrow. Gotta see Regis, I think...or somebody with a show, somewhere.” The alcohol was starting to take effect and with it came a slight case of euphoria.

“You’re not going to be any use to me if you don’t go get a little nap. It’s almost three o’clock now. Can you get home alright?”

“You are spoiling the celebration.” Justin was trying to be funny, but his tongue was starting to get in the way and he knew it. The look on Caster’s face was enough.

“Adam...thanks for sticking it out with me.”

“Oh please, you’d have finished without me anyway and I would have signed anything you said you did on the last two holes so don’t thank me. You did all the work.”

“You kept me centered, though.” He was half leaning on his friend. “Hey! I know...when I join the Senior Tour, you can caddy for me!”

“Go home.” Caster wasn’t even looking at him.

“I’m going.” The writer patted his friend on the back and headed for the door.

“Seven o’clock!” shouted Caster. “Leave the phone on the hook.

## CHAPTER THREE

Liz Madsen had just stepped through the side door off the garage when the phone in the kitchen beckoned an answer. It was 3:47 according to the clock on the stove and she had just finished off another shift at Central Florida Regional Hospital. Being an administrator for such a large facility meant this call could very well put her back in her Jeep Tracker, back on the road to the office, and ultimately back to work for another couple of hours. She was suddenly looking forward to a little vacation.

“Hello.” Her voice sounded tired.

“Umm, Hi. Liz?” The voice was familiar and a little taken aback by the tone on the other end.

“Justin?”

“Yeah. Did I catch you at a bad time? I figured I would wait until almost four to call.”

“No, I just got in and actually I’m glad its not the hospital calling me back in with some problem they can’t possibly handle on their own.”

“You sound tired. Maybe I should call back later.”

“No. I’m fine. I just have these stretches where I can’t get enough done before I have to just get up and get on the beach.”

“What is it today...85-90 degrees in your backyard?”

“Something like that.” She had begun to notice the slight slurring of words on the other end of the receiver.

“Have you been drinking?” She had initially been glad to hear his voice if for no other reason than to not be the hospital calling. Now her tone had shifted to a certain leeriness that one associates with a door-to-door salesman.

“Now Mr. Ward, what can I do for you before I go soak my head in a beachful of sunshine?”

He had always loved the sound of her voice. Perhaps it was because he could immediately associate it with those dark brown eyes and those long legs that seemed to hold her torso at just the right height and in just the right way to make him hold his breath for just a moment. Perhaps it was the whiskey still coursing through his blood.

Either way he had wondered on more than one occasion over the last twenty months whether he was a fool to let her go. He had done just



that...let her go. She wanted no part of the society digs that Justin had so longed for. It was true about money bringing out the real spirit of people. When you strip away the constraints of expense, you tend to get right to the very cores of what people are all about. Liz was all about a life of solitude and the sea while Justin's idea of communing with nature involved using a four iron to dig through the weeds in search of a wayward tee shot. They had indeed found their own versions of paradise, but they also realized it could not be shared with the other.

"Jay? Did you hear me? What do you need?"

He was startled back to her voice on the other end.

"Hmm? Oh, sorry...thinking about something."

"Someone I know?" This sounded like good-natured prodding, but deep down, Liz would like to know if Justin had taken up with someone in the old circle of friends. She had found in Peter Madsen a person whom she could share a piece of her personal heaven with. Trouble was Peter was a history teacher and a one-time confidante of Justin's. It wasn't the same as cheating on him because she made nothing of his advances until after the divorce, but she was aware of them just the same. Perhaps Justin was, too.

"No, it's nothing like that," he said with a hint of a laugh in his voice. "It's just good to hear your voice again. It reminds me of some very good times."

"You *have* been drinking, haven't you?" Now her tone was somewhere between mother-hen and mockingly comical. She really wasn't in the mood to deal with idle chitchat from an ex-husband. She had a sucky day at work and the beach was waiting.

"A little. I had a really good day on the golf course today." He wanted to tell her about breaking the course record, about seriously thinking ahead to his fiftieth birthday when he could consider yet another career...perhaps playing golf. He knew she could care less about it. Not so much the changing career idea, for Liz had been through that a half dozen times, but the golf. The one thing that truly separated the two was his love of the game and her loathing of it.

It was one of the components that worked the mechanism that led to their demise as husband and wife. Justin realized this and tried to steer the conversation on in another direction.

"So, how is everything in Ormond Beach?"

*Point-Six Percent*

It was like a conversation between old high school friends who talk every now and then if for no other reason than to reminisce a little about good old days. And with those kinds of conversations often comes an uncomfortable pause, just like the one now facing the former Mr. and Mrs. Ward.

“Look, Jay, we don’t want to run up a huge phone bill over this, do we?” She was trying to put him down easy for she knew where a conversation like this could lead. She also figured that since he had been drinking a little there was no other woman. If anything, Justin had never been unfaithful which is why he always seemed to call her when he was feeling a little melancholy.

“It would have been on my nickel.”

“Suppose so...but you know me, Jay, I’m not one to spend a lot of time in the past. Been celebrating something?” She had known Justin Ward even before he went by that name. She knew his moods and she was sensing that he wanted to share something with her.

The sound of her voice in his ear again, meanwhile, was about as intoxicating as the Seagram’s in his glass less than an hour before. He found himself drifting back his senior year at Buffalo State College; the time he first met Elizabeth Ann Riordan.

She was a freshman at nearby Daemen College and they crossed paths in a little west side establishment known as Regan’s Backstreet Bar. To call the place an establishment was to give it way too much credit. It barely had a wooden floor and certainly looked a lot better dimly lit than in daylight. In his heyday, Justin had seen it both ways, and certainly not always sober.

She had come with a couple of friends and he, as always, was hanging out with a bunch of his fraternity brothers. It was odd for Daemen girls to travel across town to the bars at Buff State even though they were better by far. In fact, the University of Buffalo was just down the road from Daemen and there was certainly a bigger lifestyle to enjoy sticking closer to campus. UB was a dozen times bigger than Buff State and as far as girls might be concerned, the campus makeup at Buff State was not in their favor. Being a one-time teacher’s college in the fifties, the now home of the Bengals still found the men outnumbered by co-eds nearly 4:1. The Buff State girls often went to UB bars just to settle the odds.

Still, she and her friends had made their way to Regan's little dive and it seemed to be destiny at work. By the end of the evening Justin and Elizabeth had each shed not only their familial ties for the evening and most of their inhibitions, but all of their clothing as well. What happened that evening did not turn out to be a one-night stand; Justin was never that kind of guy. Lucky for him, Liz (as he would always call her after that night) felt the same way and it became a wonderful relationship. They had lived together for a year. She went into the nursing program at Daemen while Justin went to work at WBNY Radio doing overnight news. He stopped his debauchery and settled down to life with Liz.

He was remembering that first night, seeing her sitting on what had been a pool table hours before. As was the custom at Regan's, the pool table would remain open until around midnight when a piece of three-quarter inch plywood would be placed over it for both protection and for sitting. This coincided with the approximate time that the place would start to fill up, which always happened quickly after midnight. As was the case then, the bars in Buffalo still stay open until four a.m. and that seemed to be a major drawing card for student enrollment. It was as much a party town as New York City and a lot of the kids from Long Island took it as just far enough away from Mom and Dad and just close enough to get home easily for the holidays.

Now here she was, sitting in the bright neon ray of a stained glass pool table light in a crowded dive, taking Justin's breath away...

"Jay? Earth to Astronaut Ward. Hey, you feeling okay, today, Captain Kirk? What have you been up to?"

"Oh, sorry. Nothing, really." He could have fallen asleep with that memory, but now he was again zapped back to the present. "Look, I was just calling about Zack. I just wanted to know if the plans had been finalized." This was his original justification for calling her and she was relieved to be talking about their son.

"Well...he's out of school on June...third. How does, say, the eighth sound. We'll fly him out, and you fly him back?"

"That'd be fine. When?"

"We can figure that out later. He needs to be back a week or two before school so I can get him clothes. He's growing fast these days."

"I bet he is. I can't wait to see him again. We had a great time at Christmas."

*Point-Six Percent*

“Yeah, you spoiled the hell out him, too.” She was scolding him, but not too sternly. In a way, she was happy he could spend time with Zack and there was another awkward pause directly suggesting that maybe things should have worked out better. Liz broke the silent tension. “Hey, saw you on the Oprah show a while back. Talk is this book could top the bestseller list. I might have to ask you to sign a few for me. My secretary can’t believe I even know you. I haven’t got the heart to tell her we were ... well, congratulations on the book. Do I get a bonus this month?”

One of the things Justin had really loved about Elizabeth Riordan was her quick, sarcastic wit. He missed that part of her companionship probably most of all. Perhaps that was another reason why he gravitated towards Caster as a friend. They shared some similar qualities along the lines of wittiness. He also admired her ability to keep an eye on the checkbook, even in times where the money wasn’t a question. She confessed that it came from growing up in a large family that featured seven kids, with her coming smack-dab in the middle.

“Maybe.” He knew he could tease her with a little money even though they always managed to have enough.

“I might just surprise Zack with something when he comes up.”

“Just don’t buy him *everything*, okay. It makes things hard down here when he gets whatever he wants from his dad.”

“He never really wants anything,” defended Justin. He didn’t want to get in a fight with her over money. She wasn’t willing to chat about old times so he wasn’t going to talk dollars. He took a shot at changing the subject one more time.

“So you watch Oprah these days?”

“No...just happened to catch your bit. Marla said you were going to be on so I took a peek at it.

“Marla?”

“My secretary, the one who I told you about. Think you could ship me a few copies...signed?”

“Sure. I could spare ten books for my ex-wife.” Another uncomfortable pause ensued.

“Speaking of spare, you looked like you lost that spare tire you were carrying around. They say the cameras don’t lie.”

“Yeah. It was about fifteen or twenty pounds. I feel pretty good, too. How ‘bout you. How do you feel?”

“About the same as always.”

This pause was reserved for her. She had seen him on the Oprah show and he did look good; like he did when he was in college. She knew she wasn't the greatest looking thing on the planet, but there was something about him that she just fell for. Enough to follow him home that night and take on whatever consequences that followed. She wasn't drunk or doped up, just euphoric with passion and she had been willing to dive in, head first with this guy in his cute little blue and white frat jacket, tight blue jeans and blue eyes that wouldn't quit.

*Yeah, it didn't have to be this way, but it was.*

Somewhere along the way, they realized each wanted a very different lifestyle. She wanted the quiet, isolated beach, with no phonies around and no status to maintain. Justin was pretty much the opposite. He relished the limelight and was very good on a stage. He had done his share of community theater and of course the first five years after college toying around with low-paying, high profile radio jobs.

“So...June 8th. Logan or Worcester?”

“It's cheaper to fly into Boston, isn't it?” She was thinking about the money again. It was a reflex she had refined and maintained from the days of being the Chief Financial Officer in the Ward house.

“Hey, money isn't the...” She cut him off, catching herself on the tightwad highway. “I know...the money doesn't matter. So what would be easier for you?”

“Oh, Worcester, any day. It's just down the road and no one knows it even exists. I'll have Cassie see if they have any direct flights and e-mail you the info. Don't buy any tickets. Cassie'll handle it.”

“Cassie?”

“My secretary, remember?”

“Yep. I remember. Anything else?”

“Nope. It was good talking to you again, Liz.”

“Yeah, you, too.” And with that she cradled the receiver. As a rule, Liz hated saying ‘good-bye’. It was something she had seen in a movie or read in a book, and she just liked the idea. ‘Good-bye’ had an air of finality to it. She often left phone chats with a simple ‘later’ or a ‘see ya’, but never a ‘good-bye’. It was too final for her. Part of it also stemmed from those first calls from Justin, when they were just starting out. They would talk for hours and never wanting to say ‘good-bye’. So they

*Point-Six Percent*

promised each other not to ever say those words...even at the end of a phone call. Funny, she thought, as she headed towards the bedroom, how stuff like that creeps into your everyday routine without you ever noticing it.

Justin held the phone for an extra moment, waiting to hear if there was more. The sudden click followed by a dial tone let him know that the conversation was indeed over. He held the receiver over the cradle, laughing to himself as he did.

“Ward out,” he softly mumbled to himself. Then he remembered the line Caster had used earlier as he was leaving the course: *Keep the phone on the hook. Big project. Yeah, yeah, yeah.* He let the phone plop down on the buttons and rolled over in bed. He hadn’t been tired when he got home, but he was sleepy now. As he drifted off, Justin realized that for all the great things he had been able to dream up the last few years, his greatest single accomplishment was perhaps something he had never dreamed of - a course record in a game rooted in futility. And with that thought he closed his eyes for a while.

Once the business attire came off, Liz Madsen became a sun-soaking goddess. She loved the sun and the sand and spent a lot of her time enjoying both in the solitude of evening warmth. She still had a figure to draw that second look; the one that a girl gets from a guy after they have passed each other. She always got the first one, but only the real attractive women get that second look. It’s the one that says ‘okay, like what I see upfront, lets check out the back.’ There are some women who openly detest this somewhat sexist practice. Some feminists even go so far as to acknowledge it with a return glare that just screams, “What are you staring at, pervert.” But Liz was a still a little old-fashioned and she was glad whenever there was a second look, especially on the precipice of her 40s.

Her very tanned body fit rather nicely into a printed one-piece suit with high cut thighs. She had always had a great pair of legs. She knew this, too. Most of her 5’-7” frame still resembled the one in her high school yearbook pictures. A few things change with age, gravity, and childbearing, but for the most part, she still had it. One reason could be attributed to the fact that she played several sports in high school and excelled enough at running track to do a little in college. She had

aspirations of attending a Division One university like Duke, or Florida State, somewhere warm and sunny and near a beach, but there was a lure about Daemen. Something in the way it was presented to her that made it her top choice.

As she thought about it more, it was at some National Honor Society convention in high school that Liz became convinced to attend small, little division three Daemen College. The motivational speaker at the closing ceremonies was a slender, dark-haired man named John Pollex. Liz couldn't remember what he actually did and where he came from, but at this moment he was as clear in her mind as if it were this morning and not twenty years ago in the ballroom of the Statler Hilton in New York City. He was part of some conference she was selected to attend. Liz was Valedictorian material, but she admittedly never really applied herself in high school. However, now she remembers the presence of John Pollex as the guest speaker at the end of the convention. He was powerful and graceful with a message that was both impassioned and convincing. Later, when he sat and talked with a small group of starry-eyed seniors who seemed ready to conquer the world based solely on his words of wisdom, Elizabeth Riordan had to be there.

She had almost forgotten that conference. Now, frozen amongst the clothes on hangers in the large walk-in closet off her bedroom, Liz was remembering that hour almost like it was the management meeting she had earlier today.

For most of her junior year, she had been leaning towards division one. She had the grades, and an SAT score good enough to merit some financial help, but after an hour with John Pollex, she understood the nature of her educational path. It wasn't so much that he was saying inspiring things, but that he seemed to be talking directly to her. His voice got in her head and just wouldn't stop telling her that Daemen was the place to go.

He casually, but precisely explained that some of the best teachers in the world use smaller schools with higher standards and reputations as a backdrop to weave their beliefs and teach the 'good stuff'. There was some merit to this for Liz knew that the larger school professors often push the teaching aspect on to graduate assistants to help shoulder the large class sizes. As Pollex suggested, some teachers move on to the perceived prestige of bigger universities, but there existed a core of great

*Point-Six Percent*

minds, relegated to smaller locales, like Daemen, where they could truly teach and make a difference. He even mentioned the place by name and she knew she had come across a brochure that was somewhere at home in a folder marked 'college'.

She remembered how he didn't preach. He just talked to them - to her. He wasn't lecturing. He was a mentor, talking right at her...almost right through her. One hour with this well-dressed model of worldly intellect was enough to convince Elizabeth Riordan that Daemen was the right spot.

She picked her well-used sun hat off a hook on the wall of the walk-in closet. It was right where she always placed it after every therapeutic session on the beach.

She was remembering that the three and a half hour bus ride back home to the small tourist town of Sturbridge, Massachusetts was filled with almost nothing but thoughts about Daemen College. She had liked the small quiet campus life outlined in the brochure and had it not been for the beckoning of the beaches, she might have made it a priority choice on her own. As it was, Daemen was almost off the list and the brochure was buried somewhere in the back of the folder kept in a two-drawer cabinet at home. Daemen had been completely forgotten until that evening with John Pollex. How easily she remembered his name.

*John Pollex*

She said this in a trance-like state, staring at clothes on hangers, but not really seeing them. Then in a blink, she was on the move, into the adjacent bathroom to run a brush through her shoulder-length, sun-lightened brunette hair.

Daemen College had seemed like the ideal school, a number one choice. John Pollex had told her so. Not right out loud, but he did just the same - keep your focus, stay away from the distractions. Study hard, get your degree, do some good in the world.

*Daemen College.*

She caught herself gazing in the mirror. Besides, the Daemen Warriors had the same blue and white colors as the Duke Blue Devils, her all-time favorite school. So it wasn't all that bad. It wasn't Duke, but maybe that was a good thing. She let out a quick chuckle and headed back into the bedroom.



She believed the words. And of course there was the surprise financial aid she picked up through the college at the last minute that made her choice even more obvious as none of her other schools offered up the kind of financial package Daemen did. So she found herself heading to the north Buffalo winters associated with Amherst, New York to attend a college she had never actually seen and didn't know existed until she had gotten that brochure in the mail.

She chuckled to herself again.

*It's still amazing to think that I actually got a brochure from that dinky little school and a ton of money in financial aid.*

She shook her head in disbelief as another interesting thought entered her head. This one she actually spoke out loud as she stopped to stare in the full-length mirror behind the closet door.

"Fate is a wonderful thing, isn't it? I probably owe all this to John friggin' Pollex. I wonder what old John would think. Did I do good by the world?" She directed the latter part of this statement toward the ceiling of the bedroom. A heavenly gesture and quick stare out of the corner of her eye. The truth was she got pretty much what she wanted, a house on the ocean with a half-mile of beach as her back yard, a terrific son, and an existence that a lot of people longed to retire into. She was fortunate enough to be able to enjoy it now despite still having to work. In all, aside from the failed marriage (which Liz never really considered a terrible failure seeing as how things were extremely mutual between her and Justin and he did buy her the house – the only thing she wanted from him), her life was what she had ultimately desired.

But it was funny considering that meeting Justin, getting to where she is in her career and of course, having Zachary were all the direct result of listening that night to John Pollex, a total stranger who made all the confusion in her head become crystal clear.

"Whatever happened to him?" she said softly to herself. And with that she ended her little daydream, slipped into some water shoes on the floor by the back patio door and grabbed a towel on the railing of the deck.

*Still a few hours of sun.*

She left a post-it note for the boys on the patio door and then glided out onto a long wooded staircase that led straight to her own little personal paradise. In a few hours, the sun would sink into the gulf of Florida on the other side of the peninsula, but during that time, she would

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be alone with her thoughts and maybe somewhere in there, the image of John Pollex would be wiped away with the rest of her past.

The beach was basically deserted. Most of the hardcore tanners were gone by 3 o'clock. The sun's influence on the body was peak between the hours of 10 and 2 and so most bathers would have left by the time Liz's toes sank into the warm grains. This was fine with her. She liked the solitude and the surf and would often just walk up and down, along the edge of the tide. Liz used the time to reflect while the ocean's recurring rumble created a cranial cleansing - washing the day away and making things virginal for tomorrow.

An outside observer might have ventured so far as to call it an addiction. Perhaps it was true to a degree that she was drawn to the warmth and the calm. It's safe to assume that anywhere the mind is free; the soul should somehow follow. Liz Madsen's soul was always welcome on the beach in the late afternoon.

Now as she sauntered among a fresh wash of seashells, she was mentally scrubbing the long, hard day away and thinking about a man she hadn't seen or heard in twenty years.

The rest of her senior year of high school had been a blur of acceptance letters and aid applications as she mulled over several good offers. Every school she applied for came through with acceptance so by February, it was time to make a final decision. Being one of seven children meant that money was tight so any college would have to come via grants, loans, or scholarships. Academically, Liz qualified for a couple of mid-range scholarships and being the first in her large family to even consider higher education, she was finding out just how lower middle class her existence was.

The two schools under the most scrutiny were Duke and Florida State. Both had excellent nursing programs and both had sunshine. State was on the top of the list because it was practically on the ocean and that was a real plus, but neither was willing to pony up any real assistance. Then the Daemen acceptance arrived. It included a letter of scholastic assistance in the full amount of tuition. In other words, Daemen was offering a free ride. Four years for the cost of board and books or roughly two grand a year. The two local scholarships she won covered that and a work-study program at Daemen would provide a little spending money.

She was the first daughter of Joseph and Maggie Riordan and unlike her three older brothers; she had brains...something Liz's mother respected. Maggie herself was no academic slouch, but when she met Joseph, opportunities for women with brains were limited to the secretarial pool. With Joseph gainfully employed as a foreman at the American Optical Company in the next town over, Maggie decided that raising babies and keeping the house was a full-time enough job for her. Joey came first followed by Patrick a little over a year later. Danny was next with Elizabeth coming a year later. After that it was Michael, Mary, and finally Rachel, born a few days before Liz's seventh birthday.

As she watched her footprints disappear in the tide, Liz realized that through the years she hadn't kept up with the family. She had let herself get out of touch and now most were gone. Danny and Pat both died serving their country while Rachel fell victim to a hit-and-run driver walking home from school. Her father's chain smoking no doubt contributed to his early demise from lung cancer and Joey fell off a 30-foot ladder while working a construction job. None of them had married at the times of their deaths. Michael had been the one closest to her in the big family and when he suffered a massive coronary two years ago it was hard for Liz to swallow. She couldn't bring herself to fly across the country to the West Coast for the funeral and her mom's funeral last year was where she found out that Mary, the last remaining sibling, was institutionalized as a result of mental anguish and a bout of early dementia.

*She should call to see how Mary is doing,* she thought. But Mary was the one in the family she knew the least. Only her and Mike had married, but neither had kids so it wasn't like there were any cousins for Zack to associate with. *She wouldn't even know who I was anymore.*

She missed her mother. Zack had only seen his grandmother twice before she died and on one of those occasions the meeting was very brief. It was the night she told Maggie that she was moving ahead with her life and marrying Peter. That news had distressed her so much that Maggie left the room and went to lie down. The slamming of the bedroom door was Liz's signal to gather up Zack and head back home, which at that time was Peter's place in Worcester.

That had been a difficult year for her. Justin was becoming this overnight success and the money was pouring in. Originally, there was a

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lot of joy and celebration in the Ward house. Loans and credit cards were instantly paid off as well as most of Zack's medical bills. She took a little time off work and the three of them went to Disney World for a two-week vacation. It was one of the happiest times.

*What went wrong?*

For one thing, Liz admitted that she was leery of the instant success. Could it continue? Or was it just going to be a one-time lucky shot in the dark. Truth is she did not have the kind of confidence in her husband as other wives might. Part of this was Justin's track record. Just when he would find something he liked doing, something would come along and pull the rug out from underneath. His teaching was the closest thing to stable as he had been and now he was talking about not going back and just writing full time.

*Did he think he was Stephen King?*

One bestseller. It didn't justify throwing a career away. Not only that, but a few weeks later, Justin came home in a new Maserati. No regard for finances, there. He just says "we can afford it, now." He writes all night long, plays golf all day and spends the rest of the time with Zack. This wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but she had been concerned about the drastic change that all the money had created in her husband. She had known the man for almost fifteen years and they had lived a pretty good life. She thought she had him figured out. They were like any other people. Whenever a lottery jackpot soared into the multi-millions, Justin and Liz would fantasize about having all that money. Liz was the down-to-Earth type; just needing enough to pay everything off and then not having to worry about another bill again. Justin was different in some ways. He wanted the new toys and salivated over the exotic tastes. He fantasized about walking into the office of whatever boss he had that year and waving the winning ticket in his face, saying "six numbers, dickhead. Kiss my ass, I'm outta here."

She knew that Justin also dreamed of throwing a large party with all their friends. They would send anyone who couldn't drive plane tickets and rent out a floor of a fancy hotel. No excuse would be accepted. Days off would be arranged and bring the kids – baby-sitting would be taken care of. The alcohol would flow, the food would be fine and plentiful, and everyone would share in his good fortune. To some degree, Liz liked that idea a little even though it required a shameful wasting of money.

*Steve Bantle*

What she didn't know about her loved one, was that he would go even farther with his fantasies once the money boat pulled into port.

*I could have lived that life with him. Why did I leave?*

She knew the reason. Deep down she didn't want to be around when the ship sank. She was sure it would even though it seems to have gotten bigger and better since she bolted.

The last straw for her came a few days after the metallic green Maserati arrived. Justin made a point of taking her for a drive along Burncoat Street on the north side of the city. This was an area of money. A lot of it was old money, too. The kind that had mosses growing on it from the Revolutionary War. Money earned during colonization, over 300 years before. One stretch of road was witness to tall foreboding walls that told commoners they were not wanted. It was financial segregation at its worst and Justin was making a right hand turn straight into it.

The sun was just starting to set as she started back to the house. She had walked for quite a while with her thoughts and was deep into reasons for her divorce from Justin. Liz began to recall that day of the right-hand turn.

"Why are you going in here?"

"This is where we are going to live." She remembered how proud he was to say that. He actually straightened his shoulders when he made the pronouncement.

"Oh no; we're not."

"You haven't even seen the house." They approached a large brick archway with a steel-grated gate that looked like it came straight from a medieval castle. On the side was a small brick guardhouse. Justin showed the man in a rent-a-cop uniform a business card, and the next thing the gate was opening.

"You have got to be kidding me. I will not live behind some kind of castle wall. What's next, a moat and a drawbridge?"

He was right; she didn't even see the house. They were passing what she recognized as a golf course on both sides of the road and the houses they were accompanying were truly magnificent. Most bordered on gaudy in her eyes. She had been in mansions before; once, as a little girl. It was so big she could win a game of hide-and-seek very easily. The other times were the visits to Adam's house in this very same complex

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they were now cruising around. She was in her mid thirties and this place didn't appeal to her. It was just the three of them and they didn't need all that space.

"They are all way too big. I can't live like that."

"We have always done things the way you liked. This is what I like and we can finally afford it. One more book and they'll give me a contract for enough money to buy two of these."

"I'd leave you before I move into one of these."

That was the proverbial line in the sand and she had drawn it without even thinking. His reply was quick and terse. He had almost planned it. It was as if he had anticipated the response and was willing to call her bluff. The trouble was, she wasn't bluffing and he was serious about the house. It was a white Colonial with a large balcony and twelve rooms.

"Twelve rooms – nobody needs twelve rooms." Her whole family could live in this house and not be in anyone's way. "This is silly, Justin. Why can't we think about this? We could live anywhere. There are plenty of golf courses near beaches. That would make us both happy."

"I have to be here, Liz. This is where I write. These are the places in my stories. This is the setting for my work and I want to keep it that way. I can't just pick up and leave the comfort zone that I use to write."

"If you are that good a writer, you can write anywhere."

"Stephen King lives in Bangor, friggin Maine, Liz. He could live anywhere, too, but he chooses to live ten degrees north of cold and he does it because that's where all his stories come from. Have you read any of the stuff I've written? It's all about here."

It was then that both of them realized just how far apart they were on things for Liz hadn't read anything Justin had written. He didn't realize it until that moment. The look in her eyes was telling him that she was not going to answer him if he made it a direct inquiry. Her eyes went into avoidance and the rest of her body language at that moment, followed suit. She had not brought herself to entertain even a notion of becoming part of his new world and he was now seeing it as clear as if it were a San Diego afternoon. It was right there in her eyes.

*You didn't read his work because you didn't want to. And that was okay. You have your own life to live now. It doesn't matter what he writes or where he does it.*

*Steve Bantle*

She stopped and looked out at the sun as it brought an orange-red conclusion to the daylight hours. As the colors flowed across the horizon, the ocean began calming almost in sync with her nerves and the rest of the day washed out with the remaining tide while Elizabeth, with a fresh outlook, headed back up the long staircase to the house.

## CHAPTER FOUR

In the years before Zack, Justin and Liz had managed to beat back a pair of college loans, three major credit card debts and a mortgage. Financially, they were ahead of the curve, but most of the savings was used for Zack, and that tended to cause bouts of friction between the adults.

All along, the Wards had tried to take all the normal steps when raising any child. Zack turned out to be well adjusted and had taken a fondness to watching cartoons just like any kid. Barney the purple dinosaur and Elmo of Sesame Street were his favorites. It wouldn't be until later that the boy would realize it was most likely the characters' colors that attracted him.

Justin and Liz dove headfirst into therapy with their bouncing baby boy. These included family sessions with sign language experts and both took up the challenge of learning to communicate with their pride and joy. Zack was a very fast study and soon enough, sign language became an everyday way of life – around the breakfast table, around the dinner table and around the clock. Liz found it to be a very useful skill in nursing and was responsible for teaching a weekly class to her colleagues at nearby St. Vincent Hospital. She also readily got into causes outside of work that were related to hearing loss and prevention.

Justin, meanwhile, was finding the skill equally helpful. He used sign language as a teaching tool in his freshman English classes. It was one of those neat ways to demonstrate how communication takes many different forms. An ancillary benefit to signing was that he also began to garner an image as 'that cool teacher' who could do sign language.

Schools around the country had entered the practice of throwing boatloads of money into special needs and inclusion projects. Massachusetts was no different in assisting a number of kids who were otherwise lazy or had learned behavioral issues through a lack of quality parenting. Most of them could have handled the normal workload under a more autonomous classroom condition, but without the use of corporal punishment in the public school system, the projects and the money rolled on. Justin was being looked at as a possible project coordinator. It would have meant a step up to administration and with that, a nice little raise, but the thought of not teaching a class was pulling at him. Plus, he



would have to reconsider his options for a Masters degree and a lot of extra schooling on top of what he was already cramming into his schedule through night classes at nearby Worcester State.

All in all, having a deaf son was actually bringing a new awareness into both their lives as well as new opportunity. For Zack, it was just like every other day for your average toddler to face. And Zack seemed as normal as the next.

When the boy was four and a half, The Wards were paid a visit by noted children's ear specialist, Dr. Thomas Villanari. He came from Children's Hospital in Boston where he had been developing a radical new surgery, involving the frontal lobe of the brain. He was convinced that the six-hour operation might just free the 'blockage' in Zack's auditory system. Zack had been keen to observe that Dr. Villanari seemed quite red, almost bright orange-red while he was talking to Mom and Dad Ward. They, on the other hand, were both dark blue, with waves of white streaking through their colors. The white was like the lightning he had seen on stormy nights. They seemed afraid and nervous about what Dr. Villanari was saying. Although unable to hear, Zack did understand that the doctor was trying to do something to help him, but he also easily picked up the words, 'no' from both his parents. His lip-reading skills were starting to come along and of course, he had his inner sense. There would be no surgery. Zack knew this because by the end of the conversation, his parents were feeling closer to orange and without the white lightning streaks while Dr. Villanari was now turning out a darker shade of red. This even manifested itself into a deep brown and was pretty much black by the time he walked out the front door. As time went on, Zack came to realize that Dr. Villanari came very close to making the ultimate discovery about the young boy.

It was around this time that things at home began changing for Zack as well. The split between his parents was nearly complete. It was planned that Justin and Liz would wait until school was over for the year so that any moves made might come easier. The one move that was made was a simple one. Dad found a large house about 15 miles away and went to live there. It was in a real pretty part of the city and there was a big golf course nearby. Zack easily noticed the change in his dad's aura.

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The dark greens had turned to light greens and the best Zack could determine was that he was feeling a sense of relief.

Meanwhile, he and Mom would stay in the house he had always known as home: 105 Idlewood Street in the little town of Millbury. About the only thing big in Millbury was the fact that Ron Darling, former big league pitcher with the World Champion '86 Mets, hailed from there. For a while it looked like Ron Darling would have to make room for the town's newest celebrity, Justin Ward, best-selling author. But somehow Zack figured that without Dad, the little town of Millbury was about to get a lot smaller in size.

That summer without Dad was different for other reasons, too. Justin was actually around quite a bit and he would often swing by to pick up Zack and take him out to the golf course late in the day to play a few holes. Zack was his usual quick study and was developing a nice little swing. Justin had considered having him take personal lessons, but that would have to wait until he could find the right teacher, preferably one who was expert at sign language.

At home, mom was working less so she could be home with Zack. When she did go in, he would either spend the day at Justin's or with the neighbors. Billy Cunningham was a few years older, but he got along well with Zack. He and his two older sisters, Katie and Janie, lived in a split-level ranch on the corner of Idlewood and Crestview. Mr. Cunningham sold some kind of insurance and Mrs. Cunningham took care of the kids. Billy tried to explain to Zack that his mother did work a few times a week waiting on tables, but he only figured out what he was trying to say months later.

The standard communication gap still existed, so as he did every new place he went for an extended time, Zack started to teach the Cunningham's a little sign language. Billy and Katie were eager to learn. Janie was 13-years old, so no one could actually talk to her anyway. She just doodled about boys most of the time and took long walks around the neighborhood. Zack had no trouble picking her emotions out of the many he would naturally feel in a roomful of people. What was strange to him was how quickly they fluctuated in her. At the time, he figured it was something that happened, as you got older. He had noticed the sudden mood swings with his mother on certain occasions as well.

One afternoon, Mrs. C's sister came to visit, Aunt Karen, as he came to find out and she had a little baby with her. This became a new experience for Zack. By the end of the day, the Cunningham's would be witness to a new experience as well, for Zack would inadvertently show off his uniqueness; this time in front of a more attentive audience.

Being completely deaf, Zack had no trouble negotiating the day, but he did notice an air of tension concerning almost everyone else in the room. As is the case in New England, the beautiful weather of the day before had turned cold and raw with a steady drizzle just 24 hours later. Mom was working for the third straight day and Dad was out of town so Zack was spending a third quality day with the Cunningham's. Only this time it was within the confines of the Cunningham's bungalow. (He had not known then that Mom actually paid them to watch him while she was at work. He found out later when Billy confessed to him that they used the money to buy Christmas presents that year.)

They tried playing games down in the girls' room because it was the farthest room from the front of the house, where apparently the two older women were trying to pacify the screaming baby. Zack had sensed despair in Aunt Karen and she looked quite tired upon arrival. The rest of the Cunningham clan seemed restless and concerned and Mrs. C. was trying to calm everyone down. Zack wanted to know what was wrong, but all he could get was that the baby had a 'bad stomach'. He wasn't sure what this meant and kept questioning the kids while they tried getting through a game of *Sorry*.

Janie even tried to play seeing that she couldn't really venture too far away from the house on this weatherworn day. She was very interested in the baby and Zack could sense that easily, too. She even smiled at Zack and told him he was lucky he couldn't hear the screaming. Zack smiled back when he realized that for the first time in his life he had the advantage of complete deafness. Another one of life's little ironies revealing itself for him to see.

Zack pushed on about the infant's ailment. Janie wrote on a piece of paper the word: colic. Zack wasn't sure what this was so he advanced the question again. Janie took the paper and thought for a moment before writing: baby's belly not fully grown yet. It hurts him a lot to eat.

Zack absorbed this, stood up to excuse himself, and headed down the hall to the kitchen where the two women were taking turns handling the

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bundle of pain. He stood and watched for a few minutes as they rocked and cuddled the newborn, all wrapped in a blanket. It was several minutes before they even noticed that he was there, unaffected by the continuous bawling. He didn't even so much as blink at the endless stream of screams. Both women stopped and realized the irony of the situation. It seemed to temporarily ease the tension.

Then Zack made a gesturing nod toward Mrs. C. as if to indicate he wanted to see the baby. Aunt Karen presented the little one in a way that Zack could get a good look at him. He knew it was a boy. The light blue blanket was the way most people would have assumed that to be true. Zack was not most people. He could tell by the aura. He could see the child in a different way. He could see inside the little baby boy's mind.

He raised his hand gently and placed it on the screamer's stomach. He closed his eyes and saw the pain. He 'saw' the wound and he wished the body to finish growing there.

The screaming stopped.

The eyes of the two women went as large as lid covers.

Zack smiled. He knew the screaming stopped because the 'colors' of the child immediately changed from dark to light. The colors of the two women on the other hand went somewhat pale and white. He also realized at that moment that the three Cunningham children who had ventured out to see what Zack was doing were viewing his actions.

They, too, had been stunned by what they thought they saw to be true. Janie broke the silence by asking to hold baby Brett. It was easy to take him now that he was practically sleeping. Karen slumped back into a chair in the kitchen and Mrs. C. was talking to her. She kept looking back at Zack in both fear and amazement. They all looked at him that way and for the rest of the day. Finally Billy wrote to him that it looked pretty freaky because the baby stopped crying when Zack touched him.

All explanations aside, it was another incident and Zack began to realize that although he was doing a good thing, he was scaring people. He wasn't completely sure why, but he was beginning to realize that maybe there was something about him that was different. Good, but different.

That night, he told Liz about the incident. As a nurse, she knew that colic just sometimes comes to an abrupt end so what he was describing was not all that weird. As a mother, she could tell that Zack was nervous

about his experience. She used the situation to segue into another discussion about not having a father around. They had had this communication several times since the separation and Zack had started to grow tired of them. He just wanted things back the way they were, but he knew that would never be. Liz said things might change soon. Although Mommy was 'reddish-pink' at the time, Zack had not been as optimistic.

By the end of that summer, Liz was spending a couple nights on dates with a guy named Peter. No more Cunningham's for Zack. A co-worker of mom's who had some training and was able to sign well enough to communicate was looking after him. Her name was Sara, and she had the longest brown hair that Zack had ever seen. It went almost to her waist when she let it down.

Sara was younger than Mrs. C. and older than Janie. Mom told him that she worked overnights so she was able to come over most days. She would even stay some nights when Mom had a date. Things were more comfortable with Sara because Zack got to stay in his own house during the day. That meant meaningful time with his Playstation, where he was getting quite proficient at sports games. Justin had also bought a video golf game for himself that Zack was beginning to master as well. Like all little boys, he envisioned himself hitting the homerun and making the great shot. He reveled in the imagery of the games and the fact that he could interact with them and not worry about how they felt. Video games presented no auras or emotions.

Another plus at being home was that there were better snacks than at the Cunningham's. Mom knew to get the brownie cakes that were fluffy and not real fudgy. Zack didn't like fudgy ones because they were too sweet.

That first summer went by pretty quickly. Every now and then, Justin would take him overnight and they would go to a baseball game or spend some time on the golf course. It was an interesting few months and by the end, things had taken a definite course.

Mom and the man named Peter were seeing more of each other. In fact, they were going to take a vacation together while Zack was going to spend the week with Justin. Zack could tell that his Dad didn't want to talk much about things involving Mom. The color changes were very distinct when the subject came up. Zack tried to stay off that course

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during that week. Together, they had a great time, including a couple of trips. One to Six Flags New England in Agawam for the day, the other an overnight trip to Boston to explore the Aquarium, the Children's Museum, and to watch the Red Sox beat the Orioles at Fenway Park. They stayed at the *Park 57* – a very fancy hotel with a huge pool. It was right next to the museum and it was the first time Zack ever stayed in a hotel like that.

Adam Caster had joined them for the game and bought Zack a souvenir Red Sox hat and pennant. Zack thought the hat was the best and he wore it practically every day. Zack liked Uncle Adam a lot. He was always happy to see him, but he noticed something different about Caster that night at Fenway Park that he never realized before. Caster presented no real colors, yet Zack just knew he was feeling good. Uncle Adam also seemed to be able to tell what Zack was thinking without asking. It was something they both had in common and that made him fun to be with.

One of the neat things about being in a large crowd, like at the ballpark, was that Zack could experience extreme waves of colored emotion. Most of the time, the experience was minimal because it would affect only one or two people and those people might be experiencing different feelings thereby creating different colors. Over the last two years, he was becoming so used to the colors that he could put them out of his mind like someone in an office could put the radio out of their mind during the course of a day. But at the ballpark, it was 30,000 reds or blues or blacks or bright yellows, or purples...all happening at the same time, given the circumstance of the game. He could almost close his eyes and know what happened just by the way the colors would dance in his head.

Still, he realized that there was something missing. He knew he was different from other people because they had an ability to make sound with their mouths. He knew there was such a thing as music and he could sense its vibrations. It was always better for him to experience it live, because he could sense the mood of the musicians as they played it and how the audience received it. It was this kind of perception that allowed him to seem normal. He wore no hearing apparatus for none had ever worked. But the little blond kid could sense when the audience was happy and he knew when they were appreciative. He could almost pass

for normal in a crowd and that certainly included any night at Fenway Park.

As quickly as the week with Dad came and went, so came the news from Mom that she was going to do something she always wanted to do...live on the beach. She and Peter were looking at buying a house together in a place in Florida called Ormond Beach. Mom tried to sugar coat things by explaining that there was a great school nearby that was just for kids like him. He would have lots of friends that were just like him.

He could tell that moving to Florida would make her happy. Her colors would brighten up every time she got on the subject. Zack wanted to know about where his father fit in. Mom explained that he would stay with her during the school year and he could return in the summer to be with his father. He could also visit at Christmastime if he wanted.

Zack nodded his approval and smiled weakly. He was kind of excited about having friends like him, but he was sad to be moving so far away from his father. He knew Florida was far away; about 1500 miles as he figured, but he also knew it was not too far away to forget the place he called home.

As part of the divorce settlement, Justin had to agree to the move. He didn't want to see Zack leave at all, but he also understood Liz's motivation. She had been given a silver-platter opportunity in administration of the local hospital. It was a big step in her career, plus it was in a location that Justin knew full well agreed with her desires. He would have been a lot less reluctant if Peter Madsen was not involved in any way, but this was her choice. She argued that he was still getting to see Zack the same amount of time as before, just in different segments. Justin didn't put up much of a fight for he didn't hate his ex-wife, he just couldn't convince her to change the way she was deep down just as she couldn't change him. So for Zack's sake, he forked over enough money for Liz to get the house she really wanted...the one on the beach.

He could be aloof at times about her needs, but this time he knew that what made her happy would ultimately make Zack happy. Peter and Justin had taught together. He was in the history room across the hall from Justin on the second floor of Milbury High School. At 35, he was younger than Justin, but at the same time, he had been teaching longer. Justin had used him as a mentor the first year he was there. He wasn't

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sure how Liz met him. He had never suspected her of going behind his back while they were married. She wasn't that kind of person. Then again, people change as he was finding out.

It was just unsettling to have a colleague now dating his ex-wife. It was like having your brother date the girl that just broke up with you.

He made a point of taking Zack one last time before they left so he could talk to him about the change. Justin also wanted to celebrate his son's sixth birthday, albeit about a week early. Zack decided that one more trip to Fenway Park was in order and Justin left a message for Caster to find a couple of choice seats. He would also let him know what the situation was with Liz when he returned the call. Being alone in the world these days meant he leaned a little on Adam Caster when he needed to talk to someone. It was like that for the twelve years after his father died.

Justin was the last remaining member of his family, extended or otherwise. A younger brother was killed in a car accident when Justin was at school, and Mom's health took a downward plunge following that tragedy. Marius Wardychevski, the son of a Polish immigrant was 66-years old when his heart suddenly stopped during a round of golf. The ex-steel worker had managed to breathe toxins for over thirty years in the pouring mill, but found a final peace on the eighth hole somewhere on a small public golf course in Hamburg, New York. Justin always figured it was the way he would want to go, too, someday.

After leaving his request for Adam, who was sure to come through, Justin spent an hour on Playstation getting whipped by his quick-fingered son at some video baseball game. The only consolation came in the fact that Justin was posing as the Yankees in a playful attempt to create an atmosphere of animosity. Of course, Zack chose to be the Red Sox and of course, he was winning big.

With the score 11-2, Justin and the pinstripes were saved by the bell...the front door bell to be exact.

Adam had pretty much fallen into the habit of just walking in after either knocking or ringing, so when Justin turned the corner, Caster was already comfortable with a bottle of scotch in one hand while foraging for a glass at the mini bar in the foyer.

"Hey, Jay. Got your message. How will these do?" he was holding a pair of tickets that Justin immediately recognized. He took them from



Caster who was holding them outstretched while looking away for just the right glass.

“She’s going to live in Florida. Taking Zack here, too.” Justin was somber for he knew the news would draw a reaction from his neighbor. Caster had known them both for a long time. He stopped searching, stood straight up, then wheeled around to face the deliverer of the information.

“She can’t do that. You’re the father, you can stop this.” He wasn’t loud, but firm with his words. Still Justin was ready for his advice.

“Don’t want to. He needs to be with his mother and besides I get him for the whole summer. It’ll be good. I’ll break from writing a little in the summer and spoil the hell out of him.”

Zack detected orange brightness in his father. As usual, there wasn’t any kind of read on Uncle Adam, but he seemed relieved to hear that Zack would be back every summer and Christmas.

“I suppose you’re forking over a bunch of cash to get her a house on the ocean, right?” The author smiled sheepishly and then nodded even more so. “Ever think about getting a butler or some kind of security? I just walked in the place like I owned it.” It was a typical Caster diversion of a subject. He could tangent off an idea and then run in a whole new direction.

“Hey, you’re family, remember? *Uncle Adam?*”

“Hell, even a dog would at least let you know someone was here.”

“Dogs are stupid. Besides, who’s going to look after the dog while I’m out of town all the time?”

“That’s why you need a butler.”

Justin laughed at that one. As quick as he was, Caster was still the fastest draw when it came to the snappy comeback. Zack squealed for he sensed the relief in his dad. Justin had entertained the idea of hiring help, but he valued his new found privacy so much that he feared such an intrusion would mess up his style and right now, he didn’t want to mess with the winning streak he was on in regards to writing. It was that sole reason that kept him from leaping across the table the day Liz said she was leaving for Florida. Being separated by a couple of towns was one thing, but a dozen states apart from his son was another whole matter.

“Maybe I’ll get a cat. They’re lousy watchdogs, but they can keep good company.” He turned his attention to Zack and asked him in sign language what he thought of a cat in the house.

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There was an overwhelming nod of approval. Caster just threw up his hands in puckish fake disgust.

“Cats are morons compared to dogs.”

“You know, I don’t recall seeing any animals in your present care.” Justin turned to head into the kitchen.

“No, but if I had to choose, I’d definitely go with a dog.” Caster took a glance to see if Justin was watching. Once he realized the author was out of eyesight, he looked at Zack and mockingly contorted his face like a dog, silently barking as if he were happy. Zack squealed again with delight the way he did when something funny hit him. Caster had uncharacteristically become a little kid, playing and smiling at the little boy.

“Hey we’re doing the birthday dinner thing. Wanna join us?” Justin shouted from somewhere near the refrigerator.

“Okay; my treat tonight. I just got another script approved.” The uncle had righted himself and instantly returned to the candid man as Justin reentered the room.

“Great. What’s the name of the movie?”

“Either *Computerland* or *Digitown*...I haven’t decided yet which one is going to really stun them at the box office.”

“Hmm...I like *Computerland*.” Justin was putting on his sneakers.

“Yeah...guess that’s why I’m leaning towards *Digitown*. Oh well, it’s not just my call on this one, but I’ll get some say in it. Perhaps we’ll test it under both names.” He was starting to drift into his own world for a moment, realized it and returned quickly to the subject at hand. “So, where are we eating?”

It was a very special evening for Zack. He really did like Uncle Adam. He had no other uncles that he ever met. Liz had only one living brother that Zack met; then he died so Uncle Adam filled that role of secondary adult. The one who could tell you things about your parents that they knew your parents would never reveal.

At sometime during the evening, Dad had excused himself to visit the bathroom and make a phone call. Once Justin had left, Uncle Adam was always ready to talk. He signed very well only he never did it when anybody was around. It was a secret between the two. They had other secrets, also. On this night, Uncle Adam let Zack in on another big one.

Steve Bantle

*You are very special. You have a power that no one else has. Do not use it yet. Wait for me to tell you when. Feel the power inside you grow and know it will be an important power. Do not tell anyone. It's our secret.*

*I may have shown someone. Accident. I did not know.* The boy was worried as he quickly signed his concern.

*Okay. No more. You must believe me and keep it to yourself.* His signing was flawless, not like when he fumbles with signing while around others. *We will talk more about this at Christmas.*

Zack nodded as Caster reached out and held his head in his hands. He looked deep into the child's eyes. He didn't speak. He just gazed.

*I know you can hear me, Zack. I know you see how people feel. This is only the beginning. Remember; do not show people your ability to see you this way. They will be frightened. The time to show them will come.*

"Everything okay?" Justin had returned.

"He is a terrific kid, Jay. I'm going to miss him."

"Hey, make sure to stop over after Christmas. I know Zack'll want to see you. Ready to go, I already paid the check."

"Wait a minute. This was my treat."

"Next time; you get the tip."

"Next time I pick the restaurant, too."

Uncle Adam's words stuck in Zack's head that whole night. By the time they met up again in late December, Zack was starting to sense the growth of his power and ability. His studies improved greatly as he picked up things very quickly at his new school. Mom was right about one thing, having other deaf kids around was fun and it made his learning come much easier.

He was doing second-grade work by the middle of first grade and he was handling fourth-grade work by the end of the year. He recognized that he was not only able to remember every thing he read, but he could practically see the pages of information in his mind. Like he became the book once he read it. Was this the power that Uncle Adam told him about?

If it was, it was fun having it.

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That summer was once again revealing to him as he headed back to New England. Justin had recently finished his fourth book, *Paladins of Peace*, and he was very glad to have his son back. Christmas was too short and most of the presents he gave to Zack had to stay in his room. The room, by the way, was due for a facelift. Zack was no longer a five-year old. He was into soccer and baseball (both were played practically year round in Florida) and he was starting to get interested in golf. This was something Liz would call a 'hereditary defect'. Justin called it fantastic.

So the Ward boys spent the first day deciding what to do with Zack's room. He may have missed his dad during the school year, but he did have something a lot of other kids never would...two rooms he could call his very own. They headed out to Rotmans, the big furniture store in Worcester. The store that actually covered two towns, Zack was told. The front door was in Worcester, but the back door, at the other end of the seven-floor warehouse overlapped into neighboring Auburn; seven floors and two towns. That was a lot of furniture.

Twenty-four hours later, a big truck brought a new wooden loft bed with a set of dressers and desk underneath along with a pair of sports lamps and a Red Sox beanbag chair. At the mall, they had already found similar sheets, blankets and pillow cases and his Christmas present, a Dell Laptop was pulled out of the box and pieced together to be used on another desk adjacent to the bed. The TV, VCR, and Playstation were mounted on the wall so he could watch while he was up in his bed. Justin was handy enough to handle some of the work, but Caster sent his house-hand over to finish the subtler stuff.

By the end of the week, Zack didn't have just a room; he had a place that was a stove and refrigerator away from a fully-furnished apartment. It would make leaving at the end of summer all the harder.

Justin made sure Zack was on a Little League team, one that he helped coach and Zack showed some natural talent, especially hitting the ball. His hand-eye coordination was better than a lot of kids his age and they got to put one of the other Christmas presents to good use all summer long – a pair of Red Sox season tickets; Section 21, behind the backstop on the third base side; same area as Uncle Adam. Great seats, too, because you almost never got wet. Justin even finagled a trip to the 600 Club for one of the games. It was the area above home plate where

the media and the broadcasters sit. It turned out to be yet another ironic experience for Zack. Some people, up there for the first time, were amazed at how little could be heard down on the field. It was like watching the game with the sound turned way down. Even the crowd noise on a big play was minimal at best. It was very different to them and yet, to Zack, it was everyday stuff.

One thing he did notice was that the auras were also a bit diminished. He liked being out in the stands better. When they talked about it after the game, Justin agreed, saying it was too clean up there. Just like a hospital. No peanut shells crunching under his feet and no one hawking soda and ice cream. They both got a kick out of that.

As the summer wore on, Zack got to know his father to be a bit of a celebrity. He even saw him on a rerun of the Oprah show, the first time he was on it. In turn, Justin saw how his son was more intelligent than he had realized. Zack spent his downtime at night, reading in his loft. Justin made sure he was reading the classics, which he found in easy-to-read formats. The once English teacher in him was proud of how well he took to reading.

One more summer passed. During that time, Zack's ability increased exponentially. His IQ test at age five was mid range, 116. He tested again at seven and produced a score of 139. In March, he was rated as a budding genius – 154. With the help of the EAAR, he was now attending regular classes at the nearby elementary school in town.

He was thriving in the environment and without the distraction of hearing; his levels of concentration were honed to a fine peak. Everything that was shown to him was remembered. Everything he was asked to read was precisely stored away. It was easy to him, like a game, and he couldn't wait to get up and go to school again every morning. He missed his alter-life with Dad, but this school thing was good stuff.

There were the awkward moments when he was put upon to interact with classmates. He had become very good at lip reading and as long as they spoke slowly, he could pick up enough words to understand. Sometimes the EAAR would work well enough to break the barrier. Once in a while, he would get called something he either didn't understand or didn't recognize. And of course there was the more recent episode involving Richie Baker.

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Zack had remembered what Uncle Adam told him about not revealing his power to people. He decided that he would stay in for recess from then on and spend time reading what the school library had to offer. The trick was how to do that without telling his Mom. As Uncle Adam had warned, he couldn't tell either parent any of this just yet. The idea came to him quickly, and he was into the books the very next day.

It was an amazing school year, but some secrets were about to be revealed as June approached.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The ringing of the phone was always more stimulating to Justin than the alarm clock. Simply put, a phone will keep ringing until answered...an alarm clock could be made to go away with a single, conditioned, reflexive swipe. It was the only rule he and his ever-efficient secretary, Cassie, had – the phone must never be unplugged (something violated every now and then anyhow).

She was necessarily more reliable, and her ability to wake Justin out of any sound sleep seemed far superior to anything mechanical. He had only met her in person on two occasions. The first was at his inaugural book signing in New York. Justin's publisher, Parsec Books, a small fledgling company specializing in science fiction, was located in the Big Apple and Cassie was naturally in charge of the operation. It turned out that taking charge of anything was a strong suit for this woman. She had everything planned down to the minute and every contingency was considered. Yet, she also had an almost unnatural ease with details without being anal. It was this weird flexibility that Justin immediately recognized - that, plus the fact that she was very thorough and perhaps just a little larger than the average woman of her height.

Over those first few hours, Justin realized that his new secretary was forthright if not a little bit delightful in a pushy kind of way. She might have been a little on the heavy side, but it was in a relatively easy to view package. She was brunette, closer to her early thirties than her late ones, and could likely pass for younger. She could turn on the feminine side of her charm when needed and could play the helpless female when it suited her. But in reality, Cassie could think a lot better than most people, especially on her feet. There was charming intelligence in Cassie Jones and Justin had seen her work it all that day of the signing. She was even able to turn it up on him a little. However, Justin, being a little older and smarter than most, was able to keep his senses about him on what was a pretty hectic day.

Still, he had often wondered what made Cassie Jones tick.

The second meeting with her came as a bit more of a shock to the writer. She decided to book herself as his aide on his first trip through the

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talk show circuit. The fact that Cassie had never seen LA before had not entered her reasoning. She was going to help him get through the ordeal. Since he had been to LA twice before, it turned out that he got her through the experience instead of the other way around. The trip wasn't without its share of high points. Cassie turned out to be a fine conversationalist, even when Justin was trying to sleep.

Most importantly, she was also extremely efficient. Justin was always where he had to be and when he had to be there, and she was very supportive. That was good to have along on the first trip. Justin's experience in the media, having done radio news for almost five years, was small-time at best. This was network television and that can be a scary prospect even for a guy with an ego.

At the outset, he figured his secretary was eventually going to try and end up in his room and possibly, soon after, his bed. However, by the end of the trip, he didn't know what to think. If she had been playing hard to get, it worked. In turn, that was fine with Justin. He wasn't really looking to get anything, but he decided halfway through the initial plane ride that he wouldn't have turned down an opportunity. Cassie's curves more than made up for anything considered overweight. In short, she was a fine-looking robust woman.

One of the other perks to having her on that initial trip was her use, by Justin, as an instrument of deflection. She was there to be put in charge of things that he didn't want to deal with. With her around, he could play the 'let's do lunch' game made popular in LA's corporate circles.

"This is my secretary, Ms. Jones, and she can take care of scheduling that, or looking that offer over," or whatever else he was handed that he didn't want to concern himself with at the time.

Still, he let her know that he was perfectly fine doing things by himself, and that if he ever needed a secretary on the road, he would call her first. The beauty of their relationship was that it occurred mostly over phone lines, and always over 200 miles away. There would be no distractions.

The third ring of the phone brought that distance a lot closer and he fumbled to cease the beckoning by lifting the receiver. At that point, he had two options: actually answer the phone with the customary greeting or slam it back down. It took a nano-second for him to come to the



realization that slamming it would only make the caller try again, thus perpetuating a cyclical course of events. Therefore, he would answer.

“Ward here.” Captain Kirk was sounding very groggy.

“Three rings. I’m impressed. Who is she? Anyone I know?”

“Why is it that women I know think I sleep with women *they* know?”

“We just like to pry. Haven’t you figured that out yet?”

“Guess not. What is it? Didn’t I talk to you once today already?”

“Ah ha. You did, and that is why I am *bothering* you again. You see, Mr. Ward, you did not do what you said you would and here it’s 6-30 and I’m still waiting for you to check your schedule. Anybody else and I would have been out of the office long ago, leaving them to scramble for themselves while I enjoyed some form of nightlife.” Her tone was steadily rising to mild anger. “You, on the other hand, have this power over me and I feel a need to look after you like the lost puppy I suspect you would become if it weren’t for me hounding you as I supposedly am. So get off your ass and check the goddamned schedule. And yes, I’ll hold.” The tone by the end of her dissertation had segued so beautifully from sweet to nasty that even Justin was stunned enough to quickly obey without question.

“Shit. Sorry. Hold on, I’m right on it.” He hopped out of bed and headed down the hall to his office. The computer was already booted up from the morning so he quickly checked his e-mail to find the schedule. He couldn’t help but notice that the leather chair at his computer felt weird on his naked butt. He printed the document within a span of a minute or two and was back in bed, on the phone with Cassie.

“Okay. Sorry, I owe you one. I broke a course record today so that’s why I forgot. Okay, got it right here.”

“Whatever. Now, all the New York shows are set for Monday. You’re flying out of Worcester Sunday afternoon. Your hotel is booked for Sunday night. Monday you’ll do Regis first then down to some local New York morning show. I’d tell you the name, but you’d just forget anyway...it’s in the same building. There’s a couple of radio bits there as well and then you’re heading over to *Good Morning America* for a taping around noon.”

“Whoa. That’s a lot of stuff in one morning.”

“You want to play golf in California?” There was a brief pause while Justin reconsidered his request.

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“Proceed.”

“Monday afternoon you’ll fly out of La Guardia to Chicago for Oprah on Tuesday. It’s an afternoon taping so you’ll stay both nights. Wednesday, you’ll fly out of O’Hare to LA. You’ve got one show on Friday and you’ll tape two others on Saturday. You will have at least one more taping on Friday afternoon...the Early Show for CBS; that’ll be with a West Coast correspondent and then there’s one more, but that one is not confirmed so make no plans. That gives you all day Thursday to play your precious golf. Oh, yeah...I’m still working on that golf thing. Pueblo Beach?”

“Pebble Beach. It’s just the most famous golf course in the world.”

“Whatever. Remember, everything is in your name so remember your passport, it will go smoother at the airports.” There was a nasty efficiency about her dissertation and the natural phone line hum was the only thing assuring her that he was still on the line.

“Justin, did you get all that?”

“When do you breathe?”

“Shut up.”

“Hey, did I ever tell you that you do great work?”

“Normally, flattery might work on me, but not today. You do owe me and I won’t forget.” The tone was playfully determined. “Is there anything else while you still have me in such a giving mood?”

“Could I make it up to you by asking you to come with me?”

“Go with you where?”

“On the trip.”

“For starters, I was planning to escort you through the hectic New York schedule since I live in the same city. But I know you’re just playing one of your little games with me. You don’t think I know what you’re doing when you tell me to make all the reservations with two people in mind because you might bring a friend. Of course I know that you’re going alone. We’ve been down that road before, remember?”

“But, Cassie...”

“No ‘but Cassie’ me. If you’re seriously asking then I’m going home to pack for the rest of the trip. If you’re just playing, then I’m just going home. Take your time deciding...five...four...” She was letting him have it now. It was like fighting with Liz all over again. He was quiet as the thought process rattled around in his sleepy brain. He knew now that he

was backed into a corner. He had been serious when he asked her thirty seconds ago. Now he was wishing that he had just thanked her and went on his way. Instead, he halted the countdown to what was promising to be a very bad lift-off.

“I meant it when I asked. Go home and pack.”

“Good. I’ll have a car for you in New York at the airport. I’ll see you then.” She was once again charming. It was as if Justin had roses for her behind his back and produced them at just the right time to save the day. He was actually happy about it, too, but he’d make sure to get plenty of sleep over the weekend thereby not having to worry about extra little things that came up. Cassie would be there to handle them.

\* \* \* \* \*

He didn’t bother to shave. Justin had considered re-growing the Van Dyke he sported while teaching. It was developed by design so as to scare the freshmen into thinking he was tougher than he really was. He had to admit he could look very mean with the facial hair. It also served the purpose of hiding his double chin. Heredity had been cruel to him in that regard. He was descended from a long line of males with naturally chubby faces. Sure, he was twenty pounds overweight when he started career number five, but even when he was in his weight range, he sported a bit of flab under the chin. Justin’s mother had it as well, only worse. She looked like a turkey when she got older. Justin figured another Van Dyke would make him look classier for television, too. He would eventually be heading out for a secondary road trip at some point and that might give him enough time to groom up a new look.

No shirt and tie for this meeting with Caster, either. Just a golf shirt would suffice. It was starting to warm up during the day as New England stood on the front porch of June, but the nights could still get a little chilly. Even so, a pair of chinos and sneakers would round out the ensemble for the evening. Caster did mention dinner, and that was a good thing because Justin was getting hungry. It wouldn’t matter what the offering was for Justin could and did eat anything.

The evening air was just cool enough to ensure that a jacket would be used for the trip over. On most occasions, Justin walked the couple of hundred yards to Caster’s petite palace. Since they rode carts on the golf

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course, something Justin tried to avoid, he decided that the walk would be necessary. It was closing in on 7 o'clock, and getting there on time would mean stepping things up a bit. The well-lit streets, coupled with a near full moon made things very bright and Justin's mind idly wandered without concentration for his feet knew exactly where to go.

He had made the walk many times in the last three years.

Caster lived in a truly magnificent house. The president of some big chain of clothing stores had owned it at one time. Justin couldn't remember if was JC Penney or Montgomery Ward. It was built at the tail end of WWII and Caster had been living there for as long as anyone in the community could remember.

To say he actually lived there was a little bit misleading. After all, Adam Caster had two other houses, one outside of LA and another in Nevada, somewhere near Las Vegas. Caster spent as much of his summer as he could in Worcester. He had explained that the location was ideal for getting to wherever he had to go. Worcester, New England's second largest city only to Boston, had it's own airport with daily flights. But, he could easily get to Boston, Hartford, or Providence, all with major airports and all only an hour away by car.

He called Worcester the suburban city. It had a lot of the amenities of a city, but without a lot of the big city hassle. It was a clean hub of activity and not too far away from New York. It was just the right place to relax and that was something Caster liked to do...relax. He was a script consultant and many of the industry's greatest moneymaking films came about only after he put his stamp of approval on it. He was considered to be one of the deans of science fiction and most good scripts found their way to his desk before ever going to production. The job made his travel necessary and his free time precious. He and Justin had known each other for about twenty years. They first met at a Star Trek Convention at the old Memorial Auditorium in Buffalo, New York where Adam was promoting another aspect of the show's franchise about to hit the airwaves.

Justin happened to catch him at a booth where several other people, mainly 'trekkies', were trying to get him to look at new costume ideas. Justin purportedly turned out to be the right person at the right time for Adam, who used him as a means of escape.

“Hey, there you are. We have got to talk about some things right away. Would you folks excuse me, I have some urgent business with this gentleman.” Justin remembered how Caster grabbed him by the arm and led him into a side area, cordoned off by an array of curtains.

“Hi, I’m Adam Caster and you just bailed me out of another hour-long session with people dressed like Klingons. I owe you one.” A stunned Justin merely went along with the game.

“No problem. What do you want me to do?”

“Just sit here for about ten minutes and when they leave, I’ll go back out there.”

“Sure. Say, I caught your presentation. I hope a new show works out.”

“Oh, it will. It’s just a matter of when.” He was peeking through the crack in the slight ajar door. “What’s your name?”

“Justin. Justin Ward.”

“Where do I know that name from? I know that name from somewhere.”

“Well, I have a radio...”

“...show here in Buffalo.” The man had cut him off like he knew the words Justin was going to say. “That’s where I’ve heard you before. You’re good. I like it. How long have you been doing it?”

Justin thought back to that very first meeting. It was crazy how this guy from LA had actually heard of him and recognized him and was talking to him at a Star Trek Convention he was only attending because the station came across some free passes. Admittedly, Justin was a fan of the show and would stop channel surfing to catch the tail end of any episode from any of the spin-offs. He was enough of a fan to know which episode it was based on the opening scene, but going to a convention seemed a little out of his league. Still, free passes were an opportunity to check out something new at no cost. Caster admitted that he only picked him out of the small crowd that day because he was the best dressed of the group meaning he was not decked out in some show costume. As Justin recalls it, he was in a shirt and tie for the event and was working the crowd on behalf of his employer, WBNY Radio. The station had a booth at the convention and he was trying to suck up to the Program Director who had been seeking volunteers from the station to pass out wallet-sized advertisements.

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The initial conversation with the man he would come to know as Adam Caster went much longer than the originally prescribed ten minutes, however, and by the end of the day, the two were having dinner, exchanging information, and promising to stay in touch. They did, too. Justin would go on to use Caster several times during the year as a guest on his late-night talk show. Radio was perfect for Adam because he could do the interviews over the phone from anywhere in the country.

Caster, in turn would invite Justin up to Worcester for weekends in the summer. They shared a love of golf and science fiction and Caster had plenty to offer on both fronts. Although they weren't married yet, Liz would come along on the trips every now and then. She had no real interest in any of the topics that bound the two men, but she liked the idea of being near the ocean and being back in New England. Worcester wasn't exactly on the ocean, but Boston wasn't that far away and the ocean beaches were a lot better than the ones off Lake Erie.

It was the first visit to Birch Hill that sold Justin on the idea of someday living there. He remembered how the big houses offered a perfect surrounding to one of the best golf courses he had ever played. Each house was unique and yet they formed a community of likeness. Protected from the outside world and yet, just a stone's throw away.

And then there were the houses.

As he turned up the sidewalk that abutted Caster's driveway, he recalled that first time he visited the house on Cherry Valley Way. The driveway alone was at least two hundred yards from the bottom to the top, tarred, with barely room for two cars. It was easy to remember the way it was back then for the place hadn't changed much since. It flowed into a cul-de-sac at the top with a slate brick landing leading to a pair of the biggest wooden double doors Justin had ever seen on someone's house. He was half expecting Lurch of *Addams Family* fame to answer when he rang the bell. Instead, the door opened in a slow, inviting fashion revealing the rest of the mansion.

It was quite a tour, that first one. Caster showed him room after room on the first floor, each seemingly larger than the one before it. There were game rooms, sitting rooms, two dining rooms, and an office. A security room and a kitchen the size of Justin's first apartment rounded out the bottom floor. The upper tier, accessed by one of two sweeping staircases located on either side of the massive foyer, was strictly for

bedrooms, five of them, each in a colored motif; red, green, purple, gold and the blue, master bedroom. Each had its own bath and each bath was as big as Justin's living room. It was quite a treat.

There was, of course, the built in swimming pool with attached sauna and hot tub. This was part of a glass-enclosed patio off both the sitting and game rooms. There was a bathhouse as well and with it all came a splendid view of the seventh hole at the club. The glass created a nice greenhouse effect and Caster kept the pool heated for use anytime. Even though he only used the house for a quarter of the year, it was kept ready for operation year round by a small house staff. Justin walked through the mansion the first time like he was strolling through the Smithsonian, completely awestruck.

By the third visit, he was used to the luxury. It was Liz's first, however, and she returned him, ever so slightly, back to that first-visit awe in the way she gawked at the furnishings. The return trip to Buffalo was also a bit of an indication of what would eventually drive a wedge in their relationship.

"I could never handle living in a place like that. It's too much. I don't need all that. I'd just like a place on the beach someday and that would be paradise enough for me."

At the time, Justin just took it all in figuring they would never have to worry about making a place like that home.

A few weeks after that third visit, Justin received a phone call from a small station outside of Worcester looking for a program director and someone to revamp the station's marketing. He had come highly recommended and would he be interested. The money was right and with Liz officially becoming a nurse, they could pick up and live anywhere. For Liz, it would be a move back to a place close to that which she called home. She had hoped for the beach, but the opportunity for Justin was too good to pass up. They moved, and in doing so, also came to be a lot closer to Adam Caster.

It was all easy to recall as he wandered past the big wooden doors and into the foyer again. The house was very comfortable to him and he met his host in the sitting room. Caster was already into a glass of something, no doubt scotch, and Justin realized he had forgotten to bring a bottle for his friend as requested.

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“Forgot something, did we?”

“Yeah, actually, I just kinda got out of bed. Sorry.”

“No sweat, Jay. I always have plenty around. Help yourself.” He motioned over to a cabinet along the wall near the fireplace where he indeed always had a substantial stock of liquor. If Caster had one vice that could be seen, it was alcohol. And yet, he never made a public spectacle of himself of being falling-over drunk. In fact, he held his liquor extremely well and once admitted that he thought drinking made his head clearer.

“Dinner’ll be ready in a minute. You up for steak?”

“As a matter of fact, I am.”

“Good. Medium rare, right?”

“Uh huh.” Justin was analyzing the contents of the cabinet and had just centered his focus on the bottle of Seagram’s. It had not been cracked open yet.

“Mind if I christen this bottle?”

“Picked it up earlier today with you in mind, Jay.”

For the record, only three people called him Jay. His grandmother, Rose, was the first and she did so because she loved F. Scott Fitzgerald and took a particular liking to the character of Jay Gatsby. The second person was Liz. She did it because Rose could. Liz figured it was one of those husband and wife things and she only really called him that when she was trying to get his goat or trying to get something from him.

Caster was the third and only other person to ever call him that. Deep down, Justin didn’t mind much because Caster used it only when they were alone. Justin never asked him to stop and Caster never gave him a reason to. If any one else had called him Jay, he probably would have put an end to it immediately. But Adam Caster could likely call him anything he wanted and Justin would have accepted it. Justin never really asked his friend why he called him Jay or what made him even start. He figured it was his West Coast way of being endearing, and being endearing was something Adam Caster rarely did.

The steak was terrific. Done in a jerk marinade and, served with a nice side dish of Cajun au gratin potato. The mixed vegetable featured long string green beans, steamed with mushroom and peppercorn. Justin was a better than fair cook, but he just didn’t do it as often as he used to,



since the divorce. So he thoroughly appreciated the home cooked meal, although Caster didn't do the cooking, Fredrick did.

Fredrick was Caster's chief cook and bottle washer. He also doubled as household maintenance director and head landscaper. And was handy with a wrench as Justin found out when piecing Zack's room together after the big trip to the furniture store. Fredrick wore each hat when called upon and was a top-notch man, Friday. With his thin, mustached, sophisticated appearance he served the meal with a certain European charm, something that any guest of Caster's would have melted over. Dessert was simple, fresh strawberries in a lightly whipped cream and it made for a perfect topper.

"Fredrick has outdone himself tonight wouldn't you say, Jay?"

"Absolutely. Fredrick, this was truly magnificent. Thank you."

Coming through the swinging doors between the kitchen and the less formal of the two dining rooms, Fredrick brought his wide, appealing smile and wit.

"What can I say, Mr. Ward. I watch a lot of Emeril. Bam." He made the familiar gesture, pantomiming a pinch of something being added to a dish in the style of world-renowned TV chef, Emeril Lagasse and backed into the kitchen, ready to no doubt clean up.

"Emeril...that's funny stuff. He uses that sense of humor all the time?"

"Oh, Fredrick is a very valuable commodity. We go back a long way. It would be hard to replace him."

The conversation during dinner hadn't centered on one topic. Instead, it was a business-like array of mini-talks about everything from Justin's course record to what kind of plans were set for Zack and his upcoming arrival. Caster always took an interest in the Ward's only child. He had known how great an event his coming was to his neighbors and his being Uncle Adam was a direct result of that interest. There was also talk of book number five, *The Milkyway Merger*. It was the one doing extremely well on the newsstands and the bookstores and was by far Justin's best work. The author had mentioned how he would be heading out on the road soon to do the talk show thing again.

There had been a time when he was overwhelmed with anticipation of being on these shows. Now it was part of the job. You write it, rewrite it, fix it a few dozen times and revise it a few more times all under the

watchful eye of a publisher who has complete edit control over you in the end.

Then you have to sell it.

The first few attempts are a lot of selling on the part of the writer. After a while, the name can sell the book. That's the cycle. Once the author makes his name in the literary world, the selling isn't as important or as necessary. Then one can test his ability, as a writer by penning something under a nom de plume and see if people will acclaim it enough if the name isn't attached. Justin had even begun to fantasize about writing something totally off the wall, like a children's book or a sports history, under a different name. Maybe even write the forward for it as himself. Wouldn't that be a kick in some publisher's ass. He could praise himself for a book well written by...himself.

Now, however, it was still sell, sell, sell meaning planes and hotels for a week at a time followed by what are easily a hundred phone interviews. The glamour of travel was starting to wear off, but the thought of playing Pebble Beach was enough to keep him focused on the trip.

"Going solo?" Caster had finished his dessert.

"Huh?"

"Your road trip, are you going alone?"

"Why? You up for a trip?" He asked earnestly without any remembrance of his conversation with Cassie just over an hour previous.

"No, just curious. I've things to do out of the office this week." By the office, he meant the one he kept in the mansion. He once showed Justin a room with a dozen televisions and a pair of major satellite hook-ups so he could view several programs simultaneously. It was where he said he could best research trends and appeals. He often said that how the public felt would be a direct factor in how they responded.

"Taking the clubs with you?" This question was presented with the usual deadpan and not nearly in the form of a question as it was in that of a statement of fore knowledge. Of course he was taking his golf clubs with him. Only once in his life had he taken a vacation to a warm climate and not brought along his clubs. It was the first time he and Liz went away. It was to a beach resort in Miami and Justin had only been with her a few months. They went for a week and spent a lot of time on the beach, in the hotel and at the pool. No golf clubs. He wanted to make sure that she understood how much he loved her. Not taking the clubs

was the ultimate sacrifice of love as far as he was concerned. It didn't go unnoticed and the two were married a year and a half later. She told him he could bring the clubs on the honeymoon as a way of preventing an awkward situation of him having to ask. It was also her way of showing him that she really loved him, too.

"Cassie is looking into some courses for me. I might even try to play Pebble Beach." He was feeling pretty good about the trip all of a sudden.

"Pebble Beach? Thought you were in LA for this one?" Justin started to look perplexed. He was not sure what Adam meant by that, but his thoughts were redirected as the host continued. "Well, I might have to ask you to take a rain check on one of those." Justin still had that look of a German shepherd unsure about whether the command 'Sit' was being carried out correctly. Caster saw the confusion.

"Grab your drink and follow me. I'll explain." He leaned his head back and to the side, directing his comments towards the kitchen area and with a little more authority. "Fredrick, we'll be in the study." This was to let the man Friday know where they might be served if the need arose. There was an intercom system in the house at the time Caster bought it. As he explained once, he had it removed and replaced with a hi-tech sensor array that served two purposes. The first was to act as a security system, for it tracked all movements within the house. The second was adopted a few years later, when computer technology was integrated with it allowing the system to track the movement and send out a signal to anyone wearing a little receiver. Fredrick carries just such a device and Caster carries a mini signal processor that has been upgraded now to handle voice commands. Caster calls it a walkie-talkie on computerized steroids, a garage door opener with an identity crisis.

The two headed down the hall, past the foyer and into another large room. This one is decorated in a light jade green with a wainscoting done in hunter green stenciling. The room contains a large sectional couch positioned in front of a fireplace and three cushy, high-backed chairs. There is a large, round, oak coffee table between the hearth and the couch and a grand piano fills out the room nicely in the opposite corner of the door. There is an arched entrance to the adjoining room that happens to be the sitting room they started the evening in. The fireplaces shared the same flue and were on the same wall. Justin no longer got lost moving from one room to the next. He had a pretty good bearing on

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where he was in the house. What a great place to play hide-and-seek, he once thought.

“Need a freshener on the drink?” He was on his second seven and seven, but he was feeling comfortable enough to accept a third. His nod was enough for Caster to pull out the remote and buzz Fredrick in the kitchen to assist with the drinks.

“You walk over?”

“Uh huh.” The scotch drinker nodded his approval.

“Jay, what would say to a movie?”

“A movie? Which one?”

“Yours. Have you ever considered the idea of turning one of your books into a movie?”

He had, but after seeing other authors bastardize their work for the sake of a movie, he wasn’t sure he would even if the situation occurred. For his friend, he would humor him in the conversation.

“Which book?” He took a finishing swallow of the drink he nursed through dinner and crunched the remaining ice cube.

“Your next one.”

Justin almost swallowed the cube, but managed to spit it back into the glass as Fredrick entered the room with a tray and two fresh drinks. Taking the new one in one hand, Justin placed the old glass on the tray for a return trip. Caster did likewise.

“My next book? But I haven’t even thought about another book, yet.”

“Yeah, I know. Speaking of which, sit down and let me tell you what I know. A friend of mine on the West Coast is looking to produce a movie. He has an outline for the film, but the concept is tough to grab. He asked me what I thought and I said I knew someone who could put it in book form first thus making the movie perhaps a little easier to accept.” Justin was beginning to inch towards the edge of his seat. “I want you to write this because right now, Jay, you are the only one in the world who can.” His praise was as sincere as his criticism on the golf course earlier in the day.

Caster was often hard to read, but he could sell sand to Arabs.

“I’m not a big fan of books being turned into movies. It’s usually a lot of crap on the screen. Parts cut, scenes eliminated or changed to fit a director’s whims.” He rose out of his seat and turned away to think. There was a tiny voice in him that was just given the ultimate

challenge...write the book no one else in the world can. "I'm the only one who can write this? There are hundreds of sci-fi writers out there."

"True, but when you hear what this is about, I think you'll *want* to write it. You'll beg me to write it. And I'm serious when I say you are the only one who can do it the right way."

"Okay. I'm all ears." He sat back in his puffy chair and nestled in for some good story telling.

"Tell me about change." Caster had settled back in his chair as well and took a sip of his drink while Justin mentally compiled an answer to the query.

"Change?"

"Yep. Change. How does it come about?"

"Change is the result of a desire to alter the way things are done, I suppose."

"What about change in the way we as a society think?"

"I'm not sure I follow this just yet."

"Patience...you will. Now think about the question." With that, Caster stood and put his hand on Justin's shoulder. "Think." He moved off toward the sofa.

"Change usually happens very slowly in society." Justin was feeling a sense of clarity. "It's not possible to change the way people think overnight."

"Good, now how would you effect a major change in a society? Forget about how long it would take...where would you start?"

"I don't get you. Where would I start?"

"Yes. With what group of people would you start?" Justin closed his eyes and thought about the question as Caster continued prodding his pupil along.

"Think about American slavery. It went on for hundreds of years and then a Civil War supposedly ended it. Black men were given equality, right?"

"Right, but it wasn't until the 1960s that there was anything even close to equality."

"So it took over a hundred years to accomplish the change in thinking and it still isn't complete. There are still good old boys in the Deep South that hate blacks because they are just that...black." Caster was back in

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his chair, waiting for Justin to put the pieces together. Justin took a swig of his drink and reclined back in his chair, thinking.

“Justin, I’m using slavery as an example. Use whatever major change you need to understand where grass roots change over time starts. But if you think slavery, it works better. Try this: can a 50 year-old bigot be taught to love his 50 year-old black neighbor?”

Justin shook his head and snickered at the thought of his own ‘waspy’ father ever allowing that thought to enter his mind. Caster let the idea sink in for a moment before continuing with his sales pitch.

“No, right? But what about their 25-year old sons? Can they at least understand the others’ situation?”

“I suppose. So what you’re saying is that it changes through the generations?”

“You’re almost there, buddy.” Caster finished off the rest of his scotch and pulled out the ‘Fredrick-caller’. “Fredrick, another round here, please.” He deftly slid the device back into his pocket. “So to continue, if the sons can at least exist peacefully what about *their* sons?”

“I suppose they get along fine.”

“In fact, they get to play together and go to school together. They don’t know of anything different except color and that doesn’t matter to little kids.”

“So when they grow, their kids have even less inhibitions toward the other.” Justin’s light bulb was starting to brighten. Caster jumped in with the finish: “And in a hundred years or so, viola, change has happened.”

“Okay, the history lesson is fascinating and all, but where are you leading me here?”

“Jay, my friend. How does this concept grab you?” He was moving closer to the edge of his seat as a way to increase the emphasis. “Take an alien intelligence, arriving on the scene of Earth. They can’t just waltz in and say ‘hello’ because...?” He left the answer to his student who thought for a second and predictably finished.

“...because there would be a worldwide panic and the beliefs of every religion would be turned on collective ears.”

“Very well said. See, this is why you are the only one who can write this.” Caster slid comfortably back into the chair. There was the faint hint of a wry smile on his face.

“But what is the story, exactly?”

“Patience, Jay. I’m getting to it. Now in order to avoid panic, these aliens decide the best way to infiltrate human society is to actually create humans with an altered genetic coding that enables them, at a certain age, to understand their role in society. They are instructed, if you will, by these aliens to know that they are human, but superior and with a purpose.”

Fredrick interrupted with round two of the cocktails as Justin tried to grab the meaning of the words he just heard.

“Jay, would you like a cordial instead?”

“No, this is fine, thanks.”

Fredrick efficiently took the empties and exited nearly as quickly as he entered.

“Okay...let me see if I get this. An alien world visits and creates altered humans with superior ability and the knowledge of the aliens for some purpose. What purpose?”

“To borrow a *Next Generation* phrase I particularly enjoy, for the purpose of ‘first contact’.

“Well, so, these altered humans just form a bridge in society?”

“Not quite. The problem is the fear of the unknown. It’s a factor that has to be completely filtered out of a society before first contact can legitimately happen.”

“Okay...I’m a little lost.” Justin got out of his seat again. He wanted to understand for any story having to do with first contact would have to be well constructed. He was also definitely interested.

“Listen...there is a lot to this. My friend and I have been working this storyline out for many years; before I ever met you. The time for this is good and we feel you are the perfect author.” He got up to meet his friend and put the reassuring hand on Justin’s shoulder. “The idea is that there exists a small group of people on the planet that are part of this altered group. They work in their own circles to promote the idea that little green men are not evil, brain-suckers bent on world domination, but are instead just trying to create the ultimate relationship.

“So, if they are superior, why not just take the place over?”

“Oh, that’s a bit of sticking point for this group. It’s not like that *Highlander* show where a bunch of immortals can sense one another’s presence, but there is one thing about that show that works well with our

story...the altered group cannot reproduce.” Caster grabbed his drink and sat back down, beckoning the author to do the same. “Call it a little conflict, if you will, to spice things up. They can’t produce active sperm with the proper genetic coding to perpetuate the species of altered humans. That way, we defeat the idea that they could just create a master race. Think back to the old Star trek episode with Khan in it. Remember? He was part of a genetically engineered group of warriors?” Justin knew the episode well. The premise was revisited in the second movie.

“So, how does the species survive?”

“Excellent question. It would have to be done another way. The altering DNA has to be passed on to has to surrogate parents. It could happen a myriad of ways, but the way we like best goes something like this: the two parents both become endeared with the altering DNA and then must conceive within a certain time in order to produce the altered child. As the child grows - we’ll call him a *variant*, it’s a word we came up with, since he has a slight variance in his DNA structure – he interacts with humans as a human and begins to subtly remove doubts about aliens through his or her lifetime.” The storyteller stopped to take another sip of his scotch. Justin was practically mesmerized in his chair. “First, the goal is to make society aware of alien existence in general, and then to take the fear of contact away; with me so far?” Justin came out of his daze.

“Okay. So these aliens caused a mutated pregnancy that resulted in a super child.”

“Yep. Way back when at the very beginning.”

“And then the aliens came to see the child at a certain age and filled him in on some things that he probably already suspects.”

“Again, at the very beginning. What changes after the first child?”

“Well, would it be the child doing the reproducing after that?”

“Or children. Could be more than one super child at the start.”

“Okay...the aliens would be able to retreat until the work had been done.”

“Sounds like you have it down.”

Justin pauses to stir the ice in his glass while Caster sips from his.

“But when he, or they starts going off about aliens, won’t that scare people?”



“Ah, but here’s the catch, they don’t do that. Their *job* is to cause more mutations and develop more variants at the start. They aren’t going to tell a sole what they are. They just go about their business bringing other generations of variants to order. They in turn will do the same and when the opportunities present, they softly and quietly get the message out.”

“So it’s really *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* gone genetic.”

“Well, not quite. For one, they are as human as you and I, so knowing who is and who isn’t a variant is not something easily detected. The other point is that these variants would have certain special talents but they cannot replace natural human talents. For example, a variant can’t cook like Fredrick, but he can recognize the *ability in a human* and ‘help’ him to develop it. The variant has a way of exposing hidden talent through physical interaction and even speech.”

“Physical?”

“Yeah, like a handshake.” Justin flashes a quick instinctive look at his free hand. He takes another sip of his drink, before further reflecting.

“A simple handshake and the next thing, some guy’s the next Rembrandt?”

“Well, maybe it’s a little more complicated than that.” Caster was nonchalant in an avoiding way. “Hell, you’re the writer you figure something out.”

“You’re obviously not telling me everything you’ve got going in this weird concoction of yours.”

“You’ve learned to read people pretty well these last few years, haven’t you young Jedi?” Caster had raised his eyebrow and lowered his voice a little in an attempt to sound a bit more like Dearth Vader as he uttered the last part of the line. He took another sip from his glass and continued in a less-humorous tone complete with a seriously extended index finger in Justin’s direction so as to create an immediate emphasis on his words.

“The point is, we have our ideas and we want you to develop yours based on what I’ve already told you. If I could write this stuff as well as you, we wouldn’t be having this pleasant little chat. I’d be hammering on a keyboard.”

“Well, this is a lot. Whose outline did you say this was?”

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“It’s been in the works for a lot of years. The man’s name is John Pollex. He’s a good friend of mine out West. We both realized that the concepts here were way ahead of their time twenty years ago, but now the world might be ready to grab it.” He leaned in for emphasis. “We’re not shooting for the science fiction world with this. We want everyone to get this concept.” The teacher leaned back with a casual ease. “Anyhow, John and I have worked together on several projects and I know you’re going to love talking to him.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. You did say you were heading out West sometime next week?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, let me know what day you’re going to be free and he’ll meet with you to discuss movie rights. You are taking a day off to play golf, right?”

“Yeah...whoa. I don’t know where the story is leading yet and I haven’t committed to anything.”

“Fair enough. But you are intrigued?”

“Oh, I’m definitely interested. I mean the concept is pretty far-fetched, but I suppose it’s rooted in a believable ideal, and hey, that’s what makes good science fiction, right?”

“You bet your ass. Plus, there’s a few million in it for you...just for the movie rights alone.” Caster delivered the amount like it was cab fare while finishing a sip of scotch.

“Dollars?”

“Could be a lot more. There should be a percentage tacked on to that figure as well.” Justin mouthed the word ‘more’ as his brow furrowed with the look of questioning the last statement made by his friend.

“Okay, now I’m really interested. Tell me more about the book. And get me something to take notes with.” He was looking around the immaculate room for any hint of a piece of paper or a writing instrument. Any inhibitions Justin had were gone. The story was promisingly challenging and money was apparently guaranteed. He was once again on the edge of his chair, practically ignoring the drink in his hands, and blurting out questions off the top of his head. “So it’s not an invasion thing. What is it? I mean can’t these variants be detected somehow?”

“No, they can’t through normal testing.” Caster voice was calming. “Do you know that the difference between chimpanzees and humans are scarcely a molecule on a DNA strand? It’s true. Humans are a mere point six percent advanced in terms of DNA than monkeys. We have that much in common genetically and yet the physical differences and abilities are staggeringly different. The variation in the genetic coding of the variants would have to be even slighter than that. Therefore, it’s a case of acclimation.

“Acclimation?”

“Yeah. Let’s figure for the purposes of the story that for whatever reason you can dream up, only so many variants can be produced. Look at modern-day cloning. It takes a lot of tries, or failures, before these scientists can get it right and that’s with much lower forms of life like cats and dogs. Therefore, not all variants produced can be candidates for, well, ‘alien’ use. This concept gives you a place to explain super intelligence or ability without knowledge of the variance or without calling every genius out there a figment of an alien society’s imagination.”

“Wow. That’s pretty good.” Justin was now out of his seat and his creative wheels were grinding out dozens of ideas. I’ve got to start writing this stuff down.”

Caster took another sip. “Relax, Jay. I’ve got extensive notes.” The writer flashed him a look that could only question the encompassment of someone else’s notes. “Twenty years worth.” It was spoken with an exactness that put Justin’s immediate fears to rest. The host continued the line of reasoning. “Using history, much of the first part of this ‘alien’ operation would see the variants unable to do a lot to change the ideals of society because society would still be struggling with its own existence. At the inception, there would have been only a handful of variants and they would have found themselves putting out all kinds of societal fires. Slavery, for example, would have been just another one of those fires.” He rose effortlessly and looked off to no distant point in particular. “For every religion on the Earth, there is another one trying to wipe it off the face of the planet. A handful of special humans can’t stop a war completely.” He stopped to give the information time to sink in. Justin simply stared blankly at the carpeting, deep in thought.

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“Oh, the other thing that bears revisiting is the concept that variants would somehow have to have a special, or particular, time frame for procreation. That way, your *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* thing can’t happen. And, putting some time between those windows of opportunity might also help with any urgencies that might come up in the plot.

“Okay...” Justin sat back down to reflect for a moment while Caster took another sip, still gazing off into space. “I really need to start writing this down.” The wry smile of knowledge was quickly turning the cheek muscles on the older man’s face upward.

“I told you, Jay, I already took the liberty,” as he produced a small, but thick notepad from his inside jacket pocket. Justin reached out and quickly scanned the pages, noticing that most of the book was filled. He nodded with approval before getting another question in his head.

“So these variants, say, have only one good chance to procreate, say every 25 years or so?”

“It could be something like that.”

“So that would wipe out the invasion idea all together.”

“Now you’re in the ballpark.” With that, Caster finally turned his eyes on his guest. “Justin, we’ve spent years on the outline, the history, and even the plot to some degree. Pollex and I have talked our way around the entire theory. All the notes in there will steer you in and out of any question you have. Read the notes and if you do have any questions, I have the solution.” He finishes his drink in one big swig while Justin continued to stare through the writing on the pages of the notebook. “This could be even be a Tolkein-type book; a series. It doesn’t have to be all one book. We’ve been waiting for the right author to come along and we both feel that you’re the guy and this is the time.”

Justin smiled, closed the notepad and put it in his pocket. Caster pulled the little remote out of his pocket and hit a button with his thumb.

“Okay...I’m in. But I still have about a thousand questions.”

“Trust me when I tell you that we have all the answers. But, hold them until I’m finished because what I’ve just explained is really only background for what we think is the real story line. The real fun happens when we as a society begin to realize the turnaround, like slavery, and where it’s starting.”

“Okay, you lost me again.”

“Jay, what was the perception of alien life even existing fifty years ago?”

“Probably next to none.”

“Yep. Then Erich von Daniken came along in the mid 60s, and even though he was a little crazy, people started to think about the possibility. What do you suppose the numbers look like today?”

“Pretty good, I bet.”

“You won’t believe it. Follow me.” Caster got up and headed for his office, which was down the hall. Justin followed leaving his glass on the coffee table.

“Almost 85 percent of American adults under the age of 30 believe there is life outside of our planet. Its almost 100 percent for kids ages 5-15. Use these numbers to convince an audience that the theory is feasible and you have a living, breathing concept. Have a seat.” Justin found a leather chair as Caster picked up a remote and turned on most of the dozen televisions on the wall. Frederick entered with a pair of drinks. Caster motioned for him to leave them as he continued. He was now in the role of teacher.

“Let’s take it a little farther...have you watched cartoons lately?” One screen began showing cuts of cartoons with alien creatures. Everything from *Space Ghost* to the *Teletubbies* and *Jimmy Neutron* moved past the screen. “They are laced with images of cute little aliens doing everything from teaching morals...” Another screen popped on and this one featured aliens in commercials. “...to selling Pentium processors, batteries, and four-wheel drive trucks. Alien life is not only being considered by the youth of the world, it’s being welcomed into their developing society.”

“Now that you mention it, I have seen that commercial.” Justin pointed to the farthest screen on the right.

“It’s a lot more than that. *Quisp* cereal still has a following, and how many people watch friggin’ *Star Trek*?” The third monitor rolled up images of the famous television show. “Generations removed from the original and they still watch it.”

“Jesus, you’ve put a lot of energy into this haven’t you?”

“Who watched *Star Trek* back in the 60s? You did, didn’t you?” He was ignoring any of Justin’s comments or concerns. His questions were rhetorical and he knew it. The student just nodded.

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“This is where the turnaround started, my friend.” Flashes of episodes and the opening credits whizzed past several of the screens before merging to form one larger picture. “*Star Trek* is the mechanism that got the ball rolling. Think back to the history of the show. It only survived three seasons by the dedication of its fans and a massive letter-writing campaign. And who created the whole thing?”

“Gene Roddenberry.”

“Gene Roddenberry.” Caster’s words came almost on top of Justin’s answer. The host wheeled on his guest. “Was he a variant?” He was staring right into Justin as the author unknowingly stares at the monitors. “Was he?”

“Maybe?”

“No.” Justin breaks his stare to focus on the where the word ‘no’ had come from. “Remember, variants have no real innate human talent. They can’t write or sing or dance. Well, they can, but not in the same league as professionals. While offshoots of the process might become great at some deft talent, a true variant cannot. A true variant might do well singing in the church choir, even solo or conduct it, but he or she couldn’t perform to a level a normal human or an offshoot could. That’s one of the drawbacks of the variation...the emotional, truly human component. Pollex and I feel it makes for a better story and keeps the invasion theme completely out of the mix.”

“Yes. Indeed. Offshoots?”

“Yeah, offshoots, savants; people with advanced abilities, but in a specialized manner. They aren’t the total package. In other words, the procreation wasn’t up to standard; yet, by human standards, still amazing.” He sensed that he was losing his guest again. “It’s a great way of explaining Mozart and other child prodigies who had severe social deficiencies.” The author nodded his understanding.

“But that will have to be spelled out very succinctly and early on or an already confusing plot may get muddied.”

“I agree.” More images raced over the screens featuring shots of movies like *ET* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, both of which dealt kindly with the topic of connecting with outside worlds. “Spielberg; he’s another one. Not a variant, but let’s just say he, like Roddenberry, could have been influenced by one at an early age. It’s something to consider, Jay. The guy does do a lot of these types of movies and they all

get seen by hundreds of millions of people. If a variant wanted to get the message out or turn society's eye toward a first contact, there's nothing like a box office smash."

"Or a best-selling book." The words came effortlessly out of Justin's mouth and caused his friend to recoil ever so slightly.

"Or both." Caster emphasized the statement with the wave of his hand as a carnival barker would when one of his patrons says just what he wants them to.

Justin's eyes were still fixed on the screens as they continued to flash images of anything in the movies or on television that has used or promoted the kindly alien. Scenes he recognized from all sorts of sci-fi shows and films were beginning to have a profound effect on him. He was seeing the sense in all of it. There was a logical argument in front of him and he couldn't deny it. Moreover, he was able to see how easy it would be to convince an audience of readers what this realistically could happen or be happening. Caster turned off the monitors. He sat back down, grabbed a fresh scotch and motioned for his guest to help himself.

"See, Jay, people in the early age of radio got a huge dose of H.G. Wells and the *War of the Worlds* thing and got scared to death of anything outer space. Then Hollywood spun it even farther south. The world got a rash of really bad B-flicks about men from Mars and attackers from Venus. People were terrified of something they weren't sure even existed. So what if a couple of variants took up the mission and began to rework the industry from the inside starting with a little show called *Star Trek*."

"Okay..." Justin was nodding approval for he and Caster had often agreed on the importance of that show as a beacon for all other nouveau science fiction.

"Suppose they find this kid named Roddenberry, see his inner talent, and begin to bounce stuff off him. He has a natural love for space exploration and that makes him a good candidate. Remember, variants can't write great stuff, but in young Gene, they find a gifted lad. They steer him towards a career in writing and he gets marginal success with cowboy stories. But in the back of his mind, he's got this whole *Star Trek* thing kicking around and finally stuff occurs and plenty of string pulling – perhaps even variant aided, and the show gets on the air. For the most part, America isn't ready for Vulcans, warp drives, transporters,

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and Klingons, but the message is getting delivered. Aliens are not always the enemy. Kids love the show and that's the target audience as far as the variants are concerned. By the way, feel free to come up with your own names for these characters. Since Gene's no longer with us and this is science fiction based on reality, let's go with him as his own character. I saw it done in a *Quantum Leap* episode where a young teen-aged Stephen King was apparently given some of his early story ideas. Who's to say it didn't really happen, right?" Justin knew the episode in reference and chuckled at the notion.

"Justin, the original *Star Trek* went off the air because the sponsors weren't consistent and the show cost too much to produce. Kids don't buy the kind of products television was selling at the time. It would have done better to run with Saturday morning cartoons, but at 100 thousand an episode, in those days, it was also a money pit." He was finishing up with the monitors and returned the normal room lights as he continued.

"So it gets shelved for about twenty years. In the interim, the show becomes a cult smash in syndication and Gene writes other stuff about space fantasy and future world concepts. He runs with a motion picture idea and it gives him the necessary fuel for his real passion, pushing *Star Trek* into another future. I can tell you all this because Gene and I were good friends and as you know I was as strong a believer in the show as anyone. Anyhow, the world is realizing some of the vision of the original and certain catch phrases like 'beam me up' and..."

"...Live long and prosper." Justin was getting totally caught up in the presentation just like he did nearly twenty years ago at that convention in Buffalo.

"Yeah. They were still with us, so why not resurrect the original, give it a face-lift and try again. The *Next Generation* was an instant success. Why? Because the kids of the 60s were now the adults of the 80s and they *do* buy the stuff that's advertised. Plus, they control the remote when it comes down to it. This show was worth watching enough to pull rank in the house when they had to. Plus, Paramount was in charge of financing the thing so money became less of an object." Justin was once again mesmerized.

"I always thought Gene Roddenberry was a genius. I just didn't know to what extent."



“He was more than that, my friend. He was a visionary and that’s a very special breed indeed. Perhaps it was a variant who brought that hidden talent out.” There was a wink in the older man’s eye.

“So, where’s it all end up?”

“Well, that’s a good question. What is the motivation of the variants? Ultimately, they are trying to ease the meeting of the two worlds. Somewhere out there is another world waiting to hear that this world is ready for contact. Remember how *The Next Generation* handled first contact situations?”

“They would only enter into them if the world to be contacted was ready.”

“And didn’t one episode address that very problem...of a world not ready.”

“Yeah, more than one, in fact. The second *Next Generation* movie dealt with the same theme. So are you saying that our world is ready and that’s how this should end?”

“Oh, no. I don’t think we’re ready for contact yet, do you?” Justin shook his head. “But that’s to our advantage. If you can come up with a way to leave them hanging, then that might just be reason enough for a sequel.” He raised his glass in a mock toast. “And you and I know how great an instant sequel is, right?” Justin returned the tip of the glass in confirmation.

“Okay...if that’s true, then why the rush to make a movie on a book that isn’t written?”

Caster snorted an uncouth chortle with a voice of knowing.

“You don’t float in the circles Hollywood’s whirlpools create, my friend. It’s nine months to shoot a film. Pollex has enough pull to get the go ahead with any project he wants to start. All he needs is an advance copy of a book to use as a promotional tool and away he goes. Planning is the key.”

“Okay, so I write this and all I need to do is come up with an ending?”

“Right. I’ve given you some conflicts and some characters; create as many more as you need. You have a lot of leeway here; just leave ‘em hanging at the end if you can’t find a big finish. You’re the guy, Jay.”

“And I don’t write the screenplay...because I’ve never thought of doing that. Well, I have, but I don’t think I’d be any good at it...” He was beginning to babble when Caster stopped him.

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“No screenplay. Pollex has his own guys for that. They’ll take your story and make it work.”

“That’s what scares me a little. I don’t want something completely different on the screen.”

“Relax, Jay. I know where you are coming from and I wouldn’t steer you into a project where that might happen. I’ve never steered you into a project at all so I’m going to make damned sure the first one is a good one.” He had put his arm around his guest and was leading him out of the office and down the hall to the sitting room.

“You know I usually take the summer off to be with Zack.”

“I know. And I don’t want to rush you, but the sooner the better. And I’ll be here all summer to help out with Zack if you ever need it. I’ll let Pollex know that you’re in and he’ll start getting the ball rolling on his end. It’s a lot of money, Jay. Take it and have fun with the concept.” Caster stood and offered his hand with the warm half-smile of success. It was clear to Justin that his friend had probably had this same handshake over a done deal countless other times. It was like the closing of a sales pitch. One of Justin’s many mini-careers took him into the underworld of sales. He never liked it, but he could see how much of a comfortable old slipper it was on his friend. Justin took the hand warmly and figured that by doing this, he was now even with Caster for getting him into writing in the first place.

“Gotta admit, it’s a wild idea that could probably be explained.”

“Hell, yeah.” He was reaching for the Fred-phone again. Justin waved him off.

“I’m all set. Gotta be heading back home. Are we on for golf tomorrow?”

“I’ve got an 8:14, if you’re interested.”

“Yeah. That’ll be good. Tomorrow’s Saturday, right?”

“Yeah. What planet have you been on?” Justin could only laugh at his own forgetfulness as he headed out the door for a thought-provoking walk home. The moon was waxing into position for a full showing in the next day or two. He began to fantasize about writing a Hobbit-type book with a cult following. That sort of stuff puts a person in a very elite group. A set like that featured the names of Tolkein, Asimov, and George Lucas. Those guys put their mark on literature and film for all time.

*Steve Bantle*

People could remember Justin Ward forever...and the money would give him the opportunity to take time off, maybe a lot of time; time to watch Zack grow a little bit more than he had the last few years.

As he passed through the front gate to Caster's, another thought began to work its way into his head. If he could write this story and do it justice, he could almost quit writing altogether. Conflicts and histories were rolling around in his head. As he crossed over the median that split Cherry Valley Way, he thought about what it must have been like for Caster and John Pollex to be sitting in a room so many years back discussing this wild idea and trying to fit it into conventional standards. Caster and Pollex. He snickered at the names, as he looked skyward. Ironic. Caster and Pollex, a couple of stars.

He tried to remember where they were in the summer night sky.

## CHAPTER SIX

The Maserati came to a smooth stop in the middle of the driveway, just short of the garage door. Justin would be heading back out to pick up a few things for his weeklong trip so he decided not to park inside. He paused as he entered the house and promptly kicked off his golf shoes at the front door, leaving them on the stoop. Golf technology had changed over the past ten years and all courses now required non-metal cleats. This was good for the courses because people who were unable to walk properly in metal cleats didn't chew the greens up. The ancillary benefit to the golfer was that rubberized cleats, or soft spikes as they were called, were a lot lighter and therefore, more comfortable. So much so, that Justin often found himself wearing the shoes for an entire day and many hours after their use was no longer required. Soft spikes were also easy on hardwood floors and that made more than one golf-widowed housewife happier than normal. Under regular circumstances, Justin might just as well have traipsed through the house with them on, but by leaving them at the door, he figured he would trip over them on the way out and remember to take them along on the trip. The clubs were already in the trunk.

He never really used the front door so the fact that it was unlocked was another testament to the way Justin lived. He was never in fear of thievery. Part of that was because he lived in a gated community and part of that was because, for the longest time, he never thought he had anything worth stealing. It would be just another key that he could lose and with Justin, losing things came as easily as forgetting things. Besides, Caster was the only regular visitor he had these days and he used the front door probably out of courtesy. Adam was well mannered like that.

He sat at the computer and began going over the things he had written the night before. This was another habit of his. He would write like a madman for a couple of hours and then just walk away. Sometimes he wouldn't go back to it for the rest of the day. When he did, he always reread the previous work. This proved to be his best way of editing. Sometimes he would just read the whole book up to the point to see how it flowed and if he were satisfied, that would be it for the day.

There was no actual writing of text for him to browse today. Today it was just a semi-detailed outline of chapters. Justin stopped on a couple of occasions as he scrolled through the pages, making corrections and a number of other adjustments. Then he saved the information on a flash drive and pulled out his laptop. He would be doing as much writing as possible on the trip. It would bide his time on the planes and during the layovers. It would also keep him away from a lot of other distractions traveling offered; one of them being Cassie Jones.

The major argument was that if he were writing, Cassie might not actually talk to him the entire time. The only other time she accompanied him, he learned more about her than he really wanted to as she ranted on, keeping him awake as if it were he doing the flying of the plane across the country. He would be very happy to have conversation with Cassie because in spite of how they interacted at times on the phone, he liked her...not because of how she may have looked, but because she was quite intelligent. He just didn't want it to become a chore.

The power supply for the laptop checked out and the portable drive appeared to be okay so he packed it up in the carry-on bag he would use. Justin figured he could work off his outline and maybe get a couple of chapters in during the trip. This was the routine before every trip. And in every other case, the laptop just ended up taking space. Except that first time, of course, when Cassie commandeered it for her own use. That wasn't so bad seeing as she did keep him on his schedule with it. That particular thought made him pause in reflection before grabbing another blank thumb drive that he labeled 'Cassie'. At least this way, they could keep stuff separated.

Two chimes from the contemporary grandfather clock in the hall were a quick reminder that he still had things to do. He wanted to get all the nitty-gritty out of the way before dinner, seeing as he was heading to Paulie's for the weekly "Fivers" meeting.

The "Fivers" were a unique group of people who had been getting together long before Justin was included and would likely be assembling long after he'd ever gone. Every Saturday this band of several (the exact number was really never figured or even considered) gathered somewhat religiously at Paulie's around five o'clock or at least that is how the legend goes. Some would get there early for one reason or another while others straggled in later in the evening. But sure enough, most members

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of the 'Fivers' managed to show face almost every Saturday. They came from all walks and ilk and included collared workers, both blue and white as well as engineers, both electrical and sanitary. Any particular meeting might find the handyman rubbing elbows with the retired history professor. No roll was taken, no dues were collected and there certainly was no agenda. The only rules there were loosely revolved around what one elder member once described as "barroom etiquette". Other than that, the only truth among the "Fivers" was that no one cared who you were or what you did, only when it was your turn to buy.

Justin was first introduced to the "Fivers" over 15 years ago when a recent hire at the small radio station he was barely keeping afloat dragged him out for a quick beer after a remote broadcast on location at some car dealership in Milbury. A half dozen 'quick' ones later, Justin found himself in the midst of a 'meeting' and he found his way back on a very regular basis, often referring to the entourage as his post college fraternity, complete with well-earned nicknames.

His moniker was 'Penn' with two "n's". The reason was that he was a writer, but could flow with his mouth like the talking half of the magical act *Penn and Teller*. Penn Gillette was the bantering genius while Teller handled difficult slight-of-hand in complete silence. Justin had always thought it was a clever nickname.

As long as he was in town and without Zack, Justin would make it a point to head out to Paulie's every Saturday to catch up with the rest of the world...or at least the world he had been part of for so long. Tonight it could be Larry and Tina along with Brad, Phil, and Jethro. Another week, JT, Kimmy, and 'The Frog' might be out and about. There were others. Some moved; some dropped out of sight. Drew died of a massive heart attack a few years back. It was one of those times where nearly everyone in the group found a way to the funeral. As is the case with many of life's strange twists, a sad event turned out producing several good ones. Because Drew Simski unexpectedly dropped dead at the age of 38, Kammie and Brad got together and JT decided to move back to Massachusetts after spending six years in the Midwest. It turned out to be a great decision as he fell into a job that paid almost twice what he was making. He hasn't missed a Saturday in quite some time. It was the kind of story that almost made Justin veer from science fiction for a change of

pace. He decided in the end that invading the unspoken sanctity of the “Fivers” could not outweigh a retelling of another *St. Elmo’s Fire*.

Either way, if you were a Fiver and you were out, you found your way to Paulie’s sometime on Saturday. It was like the theme song from the TV show *Cheers*; it was a place where everybody indeed knew your name. And so, over the last year, Justin, aka Penn, had tried to become as much a regular as any of them, having come and gone for a spell after Zack was born. A lot of that stemmed from needing some kind of family in the aftermath of the divorce, although he took a long time off at first.

Liz had been an occasional attendee early on, but once Zack was born, she became what the gang termed ‘MIA’, a status suggested upon any member who had a seemingly legitimate excuse to be absent from the Saturday sessions. Being with child and all was certainly a qualified excuse. (However, at some point that may have been upgraded to AWOL). Of course, there was no chain of command in the “Fivers” and there were no formal punishments save that, upon your return for an evening following a lengthy absence, you might be at the mercy of the rest of the attending members’ sarcasm. They, without a doubt, would remind you of all the things you had missed since you last showed your face. This would be portioned out in plentiful heaps of good-natured ribbings and there would be a couple of rounds of ‘you’re buying, slacker’ as well.

Since prodigal returns came at a certain monetary cost, the “Fivers” always welcomed them with open arms and empty mugs. It certainly made returning a very easy thing to do and many a sudden windfall crossed over the bar at Paulie’s during a meeting of the Fivers.

As he headed for the shower, Justin remembered his own return after nearly a year’s absence. It was after the divorce so he was probably being considered ‘MIA’ at the time. Either way, he had just put his third book out and it was putting him on TV and in the papers. The publicity and the separation had also put him in a funk. Ironically, he didn’t run to Paulie’s, he leaned on Caster and spent a lot of that time working on his golf game. He didn’t want to fall into the trap of drinking his sorrows away. Instead, he would play as many as 54 holes a day and sometimes spend another hour practicing, in all kinds of weather. He would be at the course for the entire day so that by the time he got home he would either write or sleep, but never go drinking.

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Stepping under the lukewarm water now, he recalled that Saturday where the rains fell, keeping him off the golf course and at the computer, instead for most of the day. During a break, he flipped through the channels on the tube and caught part of the movie about a parrot named Paulie. That clicked. He shut off the television and took the ten-mile drive to that little dirt water bar that could have passed for an old man's version of Regan's, the beer emporium he had frequented like a second home back in college.

He was ready for the friendly abuse and he armed himself with plenty of cash. His first act after getting the rousing 'hey, looked what the cat dragged in' cheer was to set everyone up for two rounds as a way of making amends. It worked. And his good standing within the group was quickly restored. Good standings among the Fivers were extremely hard *not* to lose. After that, he was careful to go easy on the alcohol and just sat back and listened. Listened to the stories and told a few of his own. No one asked about the divorce and no one seemed overly anxious for an autograph. These were his friends and no stardom or misfortune would keep them from being any more than that.

He chuckled at the thought that the only real differences between the two places, Regan's and Paulie's, was Paulie, himself, and the fact that this establishment didn't cover the pool table after midnight. Other than that, the beer was just as affordably cheap and the place was just as comfortably dingy.

The shower for most of us is that five to ten minutes during the day when we can't be bothered by anything or anyone. Phones can go unanswered and doors bells can remain unheeded. Justin once wrote up a scenario where a mini-disaster occurred to a main character while in the shower. It posed a lot of interesting possibilities, including the attempt to escape the danger sans clothing and with a hairful of shampoo. He opted; instead, to file the idea away along with the many others, for a female lead character. That would certainly add a little sex appeal to a novel of that ilk. As it stood, the shower today served as a reminder to him. Justin, you see, could be oblivious to a lot of things involving personal upkeep. Not having someone around to tell you when things need grooming was a drawback at times. Hair length was one of those maintenance things that he often let go too far and as he began to lather up with a healthy



dose of Suave, he remembered that getting a haircut before the trip was critically important. He would make the call right after he got out.

“Have to look good for the camera,” he thought.

He paused again as the remaining shampoo filtered out of his scalp and into the drain. There was another big reason why he kept going back to Paulie’s. He did not want to lose touch with that one thing that had stayed pretty consistent in his life throughout the years. It was the part of Liz he missed. The part that kept his ego in check no matter how famous he was becoming.

As he reached for the phone, there were two messages waiting. He hadn’t checked when he got home so they could have come in anytime during the day. The first was from Cassie, reminding him to pack enough clothes for at least six shows, including the tapings. She also mentioned that he might want to look in the mirror and see if he didn’t need a haircut. Justin got a kick out of the irony. Had he not realized it on his own, Cassie would have straightened him out.

The second message was from Liz. She was passing along itinerary information about Zack’s trip. He would have his son for ten weeks after he returned from the West Coast. He got a quick glow only to have the rest of the message scold him ahead of time for spoiling his only flesh and blood like he had last year. Justin tuned that part of the message out and when she repeated the itinerary again, he laughed. Why write it down now when the airline might change things at the last minute. Also, he knew she would call right before they left so any thing planned now could be for naught.

That was Liz, though...nervous to a fault about things she had no real control over. He would call her back tomorrow to let her know that he got the message and he would be out of town for the week. He did this for two reasons. The first was to let someone in his immediate family, removed, as it was, know that he was away in case of an emergency. The second was to keep his answering machine from filling up with calls from her. It wasn’t that she called him a lot. In fact, she hardly called. But if there weren’t a return call in at least a day, then she would call every few hours until there was. It was her diligent way of conducting business.

Deep down, Justin also liked to let her know that he would be on TV that week. He knew she would watch or at least have the set on

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somewhere at work. He hit the erase button on the answering machine and reached for the phonebook. He only got his hair done at one place, but he could never remember the number. It would take some charm on his part to get it done on the schedule he was trying to keep.

Lynette often took her own calls. She could do that thing where you brace the cordless on your chin and shoulder while finishing a perm at the same time. Years of practice made it look effortless. She seemed unburdened when he cleverly tried to start the call with, "Hey, you don't sound too busy today."

"Justin Ward, is that you?"

"Yes, ma'am." He was being outwardly polite, Lynette Lefaye was already on to him.

"Let me guess. You need an instant appointment and you should have had it yesterday, right?"

"You're in the wrong business, pretty lady. You should be reading Tarot cards on 900 lines."

"Do I know my customers or what?"

"Yes you do. I could just see you now...doing those infomercials." Justin was mocking now in a deep southern accent, but he knew he was getting what he wanted. "Jus' pick up dat phone and call Mizz LeFaye. Ah can see your future. Let me be yah spira-chel guide through the cosmos." The feminine laughter on the other end was nice to hear.

"Okay, okay. I can't laugh and cut hair at the same time. Is 3:30 fast enough?"

"Are you squeezing me in?"

"And what if I was?"

"Well, I don't want to inconvenience you."

"I've been dealing with a wedding party all day, so doing your ten-minute trim will be a welcomed relief."

"Oh, so this will be no charge, then?"

All Justin heard was another bellowing cackle and a thud followed by scrambling and finally the phone getting picked up again.

"I gotta get me one of those headset things...just get your ass in my chair by 3:30 or else." She had laughed her way through most of the half-whispered threat, but the hanging up of the phone was an indication that he had better comply with her wishes. She was doing him a favor, but he did give her a sincerely unplanned plug once during an appearance on

some show and it almost doubled her business. Lady Lynette, as he liked to call her, would do just about anything to make her number one customer happy.

For the most part, when it came to packing, the author was 100 percent male, meaning he just threw stuff in a bag at the last minute. Talk shows were not the shirt-and-tie affairs they used to be and he abandoned that look after the first book tour. Even at signings, he was quite casual – usually a golf shirt and a pair of chinos. He almost never wore socks, except on the golf course and even then, once in a while he would forego them there as well.

With Justin, however, packing was naturally quicker than for most other people. He had a system that spawned out of being somewhat wealthy. He would bring two shirts and a pair of pants, sneakers and his favorite footwear – a pair of moccasin-loafers that he practically had the soles worn out of. No socks required and that was just the way he liked it. As for the other clothes needed on the trip? He would just buy them before the first show. With the loss of weight over the past two years, Justin had found a new love of buying clothes. He was back to a comfortable 36 waist and a large golf shirt fit perfect. He could buy good-fitting clothes off the rack for the first time in a long while so he used these book trips to replenish his wardrobe. It was simple – leave with two shirts and come back with twelve. That was why he also packed an extra carry-on bag inside; because he would always bring home a lot more clothing than he started with. This system proved fruitful for a couple of reasons. The most obvious was that he could look his brand-new best on television. Another benefit included using the purchases as a business expense, something Justin was becoming ever conscious of. Not having an airline lose his luggage was also an issue he could sidestep with nothing to check except golf clubs, and the fact that it took time to actually shop for the clothes was a nice distraction before the tapings. Justin realized that there was only so much one could do in a hotel room alone. Most places he stayed had the usual conveniences like the pool and a lounge, but he didn't like being cooped-up and most trips happened so fast that he had no real time for sightseeing.

But there would always be time for a quick trip to a clothing store, either before the first taping or just after it.

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He would cover the first show by packing one change of clothes in the carry-on bag. After that, he could always find some place like a JC Penney where he could buy other clothes for the next shows. By the end of the trip, he would have five or six times the clothing as when he left, and if those got lost on the return trip, it would be no big deal.

At present, he had never had a loss to worry about and the trips were a lot easier than the first one where he carried six separate suits, with ties and jackets, in a bag he borrowed from Caster. Sure he was sharp for all the shows, but lugging things through terminal after terminal was not his idea of fun. The only bag he would tote around this trip was the one housing his golf clubs and it was in a special air- travel case on wheels.

Justin would still make the trip to the drugstore for a few trial size items like toothpaste and deodorant. He planned on writing on the trip and the laptop would go in the carry-on bag with his first change of clothes. Still, he always found a new crossword puzzle book to stash in the bag just in case a little writer's block emerged. For some reason, maybe it was just the realization that he was actually good at writing, Justin rarely found himself with any kind of debilitating block. Of course, at times, he would tire and have to get away from the computer for awhile. On those occasions, he would go hit a bucket of balls either on the driving range or in the garage where he had a large golf ball net installed. That kind of change in concentration seemed to refocus his attention once he headed back to the book.

Other times he would just drive around the city. There was always something going on either at the Mall or over by the former Centrum Center. Sometimes a ride by Elm Park or out by the campuses at either Worcester Poly Tech or Assumption would reset his mind and get him back to the book at hand. There was another mall on the other side of the city as was Holy Cross College and the only division one university Worcester had. That campus was less accessible to the average outsider, but Justin had a few contacts, especially in the English department where he had done some guest lecturing over the past year on the subject of writing.

He enjoyed that part of his fame. Being among some of the country's brightest kids was a thrill for him. It reminded him why he wanted to teach in the first place. Sure high school was a distant cousin to a facility like The College of the Holy Cross, but it was still part of the education

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system the nation had decided upon for our children and it was something that always motivated Justin in his writing endeavors. On several occasions he would only agree to speak at a function if there were high school kids involved and they would be allowed to ask questions. It was a demographic that he had hit with his writing and had always identified with when lecturing. Rumor had it he was going to be asked to give commencement at next year's graduation of Milbury High where he taught. He was hoping that bit of gossip would be accurate seeing as he had already enjoyed the privilege of speaking at his old high school in Western New York the year before.

It was nothing out of the ordinary as Justin pulled open the back door to Paulie's. It was ten after five and he was just late enough to get an "all hail" from the half dozen 'Fivers' in early attendance. By the end of the hour, another eight or so would pop in. A few would pop out and some of them would return. It was an informal gathering that usually took place at a large table (sometimes two) in the corner nearest the rest room. It was also pretty close to the side of the bar where the television was located and that served as much a purpose as the proximity to the restrooms did.

It was the reason Stevie 'Scoop' Newton gave it the name 'showcase table' – because everybody would walk past it sometime or another during the evening. As Scoop eloquently phrased it, "when you gotta go, you gotta go past the Fivers to get there."

Scoop was the classic 'fiver'. He was always there first and one of the last to leave, but he rarely got totally drunk. In fact, he was a self-proclaimed sipper of liquor. He could nurse a scotch on the rocks for an hour as long as the conversation was lively and Scoop was good at keeping it that way. He and Justin had many an animated conversation over the simplest thing and for the longest time. He also had a knack for picking out and caricaturizing a person's traits or mannerisms and then finding the perfect nickname for them as he did with Justin. These names would even change from session to session with the exception of Scoop's moniker. He'd been called that for as long as any other member could remember. Legend had it that Stevie used to wear a hat and overcoat that made him look like a reporter, hence the name 'Scoop'.

It also just seemed to roll off the tongue too easily not to call him that.

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Part of the nickname undoubtedly sprouted from Stevie's sharp eye for detail and sharp mind in general. He could still take anybody in the house on the pool table and once ran 42 balls in a straight pool match over at Sharkie's. Scoop could bowl well, too, boasting a 194 average a few years back. The fact that he never gave golf a try was always a point of discussion between him and Justin.

Scoop was the closest to the door when Justin stepped in and that made him the first to conduct the normal greetings.

"Hey...Justin Ward is just in time. Get it? Just-in-time?"

"Hey, Scooper...how's your great Grandma doing?"

"Still deader than Elvis, Penn." He raised his mug to her apparent memory and the two shared a laugh and a shoulder rub. Justin moved on to acknowledge the others present with a variety of handshakes, high fives, fist pops and a quick peck on the cheek each to both Kimmy and Rene, the two ladies present.

"Nice haircut," barked Danny 'the Frog' Jewison. "What kind of soup did you have?"

"Navy bean...wanna smell" Justin then wheeled around and gave Danny a view of his backside while waving away a pantomime fart. The Frog was cackling so loud the whole table shook.

"You were waiting for that."

"Yeah, I knew one of you assholes would give me a rash of shit about getting cropped." Justin slid onto the empty chair next to Danny at the big, round table in the corner. There was something about the seediness of Paulie's that almost required him to swear like a sailor. He didn't do it normally, not even on the golf course. But in here, it just seemed very natural. It was alter-ego therapy and perhaps the real reason he liked to come back.

Danny was a large, barrel-chested man, about six feet tall with a penchant for television trivia. He was good at it, too. One slow Saturday night the group got into *Jeopardy* when it hit the TV at seven o'clock. Froggy aced a category titled 'Tough TV Trivia'. Justin remembered knowing the first and third answers, but as Danny rattled off the final answer, he sat back, folded his arms and proclaimed that it wasn't exactly tough. He then spent the better part of the evening stumping anyone who would listen.

For the record, Danny was a civil service worker of some kind. He scored in the 98<sup>th</sup> percentile on some state exam he took about ten years prior and the government uses him in some way. He had been instantly bestowed with the nickname 'froggy' for he possessed a uniquely deep, raspy voice that resembled the one that a kid with the same nickname had on the "Little Rascals". He claimed his gravelly voice came from his mother who, at 4 feet, 6 inches, had a deeper one than he did. Scoop tagged him with the nickname the first night and that was that.

Kimmy put her hand on his head.

"You got a girl, Penn? Someone we know?"

"What is it about women wanting to know if I have one?"

"Hey, it's important to us. You being the eligible bachelor and all."

This was Kimmy. She was nose-y to a fault. If there was a rumor mill grinding within the loose framework of the 'Fivers', she was the one with her shoulder to the wheel. Kimmy wasn't married and maybe deep down she had a thing for Justin, but that was as far as it would ever get. Justin had a thing for not dating women he met in bars. Yes, it was a double standard, but it was something he wanted to avoid in his post divorce period. Besides, between golf, writing, and Zack, he considered himself too busy to squeeze anything else into his life, much less another serious love interest.

Ironically, he and Liz met in a bar under pretty much the same circumstances that he now avoids like a diabetic avoids Nestle Crunch Bars. Still, if he was ever going to think about another relationship, it would have to be the right individual and Kimberly Towles was not it.

She was petite, but feisty and had no fear of saying what was on her mind. Over the five years or so that she had been hanging with the "Fivers", she had learned to be more careful when it came to choosing her words. Like everyone else, Kimmy could get a little obnoxious when she drank too much. Problem was she had what amounted to a Napoleon complex. One night, she entered into an argument with some guy at the bar and it took a half dozen group members to pull her off him. She was intent on kicking his ass, but when his girlfriend found out, Kimmy got more than she bargained for in the parking lot.

One thing about a cat fight, it happens fast and it's usually over quick with the instigator coming out on top more often than not. Such was the case for Kimmy as things didn't work out in her favor. Needless to say,

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Paulie's never saw the guy again and Kimmy still talks about what she wants to do to that 'fat bitch who blindsided me'.

It was agreed that in a fair fight, Kimmy might do okay, but no one dared consciously bring up the subject for it would set her off on quite a tear and put the wrong spin on a Saturday session. As for Kimmy, licking her wounds did have a positive impact. She thought a little bit more about what she was saying before she said it.

"C'mon Justin, who is she?" Rene jumped in now with an overacted schoolgirl whine. Justin remained calm.

"There is no girl, so you can all take a number." He was flirting, but this was Saturday night after all and they liked it when someone paid attention to them.

"If you must know, I have a date with Oprah this week."

"Oooh. Penn's going on a trip." More of the high school routine, only this time from Froggy and the words coming from that rasp sent everyone in earshot into a brief hysteria.

"I suppose you're not going to be around next week then. You know what that means, guys...Justin's just in time to buy us a couple of sympathy rounds!" With that the group chimed in with a few rousing cheers to egg him on. Justin was ready for this as well and had made a preemptive stop at the ATM on the way over. He had no problem dropping a hundred bucks on the gang on an occasion like this. He didn't do it often, but tonight would be okay. He would be in sunny California next week at this time and although there would be a lot of things to do, he would think about Paulie's at least once.

His first trip to the bar this Saturday night was for several pitchers of Budweiser...the only thing on tap at Paulie's. It was cold and always tasted pretty good going down; at least the first few. After that, Justin would switch to the lowest top shelf whiskey that was offered. One thing about Paulie, he kept the overhead to a minimum and that meant getting served anything more complicated than a beer or a shot was like pulling the remaining few teeth out of his puffy head. Paulie was somewhat of a joke within himself, albeit a pretty rich one. He had to bust a scale at around three and a half bills and was no taller than Justin at 5-10. He looked in his mid fifties and judging by the fact that his son, Billy, often came in to tend bar, he was at least that.



He waddled around the place, whether he was working or not, wearing fat man pants and a dress shirt with the tails hanging out. However, the most noticeable trait about the rotund one was that he always had something surly to say. If Paulie didn't insult you, it should be taken as an insult. When Justin tried ordering a Martini one night for fun, Paulie's response was simply and quickly: "Where the Christ am I supposed to get Vermouth. Get you friggin' ass back in your chair and finish your Goddamn beer." He was like Porky, from the movies of the same name, only Paulie was at least fifty pounds heavier than the guy who played the part in the films.

Paulie certainly had personality and he could take a joke as well as he planted one. Scoop probably came up with the funniest one: "You know why Paulie doesn't tuck in his shirts? Because he can't."

The Fat Man, as he was also known, was also a bit of a gambler. Rumors had it he liked to drive down to Uncasville, in Connecticut, to the Mohegan Sun Casino after closing the bar in an attempt to parlay the night's receipts into even bigger wins. He occasionally bragged about hitting it fat at the tables, but Paulie would bet on anything and he had a sharp eye about wagering with his head instead of his heart. He often took the money of the locals who ventured to wager on the favorite sons, the Red Sox or the Patriots. Paulie wasn't afraid of the action even if it meant taking a team like the hated Yankees or the Dolphins.

Money was money to Paulie and he hung on to quite a bit for himself.

It didn't mean that he won all the time. Sometimes he got hustled. One night a stranger came in and hung on to the pool table for most of the night. Winning a game meant you got to play again and someone else paid the 75 cents to unlock the balls for the next game. This guy didn't lose and finally Paulie got wind of it so he sauntered over and after watching him shoot for ten minutes, told the guy he'd play him for fifty bucks. The guy takes two hundred before Paulie can blink. By now, the bar is closed and Billy is throwing everyone out, except a few of the Fivers, who were hanging out to see what was going to happen.

Paulie, a really good shooter in his own right, tells the guy he'll play him eight-ball, best of five for five hundred dollars. The guy agrees. They settle on the rules and Paulie takes the first two games, and is cleaning up in the third when he scratches after correctly pocketing the eight. According to conventional rules, he lost the game and he got so

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pissed that he lost the next one. In game five, Paulie again scratches while trying to make the eight for the victory. Supposedly, he became so enraged that he changed the house rule. Scratching on the 8-ball on Paulie's table is fine – no penalty.

He was that kind of guy.

"Two pitchers, Paulie."

"Of what?"

"Beer."

"Yeah? What kind?" The fat man behind the bar said this with a little-boy twinkle in his eye. "Got two kinds now. Bud and Bud Light." He was genuinely proud of the fact that after at least a dozen years, he finally decided to offer his loyal customers a choice.

"What the hell, one of each, Fat man." Justin went reaching for some cash in the front right pocket of his chinos. "So why the choice?"

"Because it's *my* Goddam bar and I decide what happens in it." To non-regulars, this might have been a clear, rude insult, but remembering this was Paulie, both the owner and Justin had a laugh over it as the plastic pitchers filled with libations; both of which would be indistinguishable in taste in a few hours.

Once alcohol numbed the tongue, a lot of beer tasted pretty much the same. To Justin, the difference normally between a Bud and a Bud Light was slight. The difference between Michelob and Genesee Ale on the other hand, was cavernous. That is why during his fraternity days, it was always customary to order one keg of something smooth for the guys to tap before a particular party. And the Sig Taus of Buffalo State College didn't exactly need an occasion to have a party. These soirees took place at the run-down house of some of the brothers located on Bird Avenue almost every weekend. The party started at eight and the first keg went down between 7:45 and 8:30. No one really showed up until after nine, but to get the good stuff, you got there early. Otherwise you were drinking Genny Crème Ale or what most folks in the Western New York area described as the Green Death because of the color of the can it was packaged in.

The night featured the usual fare, just good people getting together to share in the miseries and triumphs of the week. Along the way a new story or two would pop up about this guy or that girl who hadn't been seen in a while. No prodigal returns tonight and Justin was happy to

sponsor more than his share of beer. In fact, by eight o'clock, he had switched over to whiskey with a dash of Seven-up and ice. After a few beers, Justin always liked to have something sweet. He would sip this for a while and just listen. There was a time that he would have downed a double-digit number of these before trying to drive home. He had paid for that in a whole lot of ways and learned his lesson. Now with his newfound success, the drive home was taken care of. Sure it was a thirty-dollar taxi ride, but he wouldn't have to worry about wrapping his Maz around a utility pole because that sort of stuff put you in the newspaper, the front page if you lived through it, the back page if you didn't, or in his new celebrity status...both.

The evening went without incident, and there was plenty of laughter. The Sox were on the tube so there was enough sports talk mixing with the stories and the suds. Toker and Ike made a late appearance and took their razzing in stride for being tardy. In all, there were still nine or ten Fivers hanging when Justin called for the cab, said his goodbyes, and strolled out the back door just after 10 o'clock. The Sox won a blowout and the game's end signaled the same for Justin.

His ride featured the post game show on the radio and an interview with some new guy playing first base who had a couple of hits in the game. The cabbie made just enough small talk to keep Justin awake, and forgetting to leave the front-porch light on gave him the opportunity to trip over his golf shoes as he had earlier predicted they would cause him to do. Using the front door was easier when he went out without the car, but since it didn't happen too often, he would almost always forget to put the light on. Perhaps it was the adrenaline surge he got while catching himself from falling, face-first, into the door or maybe it was the allure of the computer he saw when he first entered the foyer, but he caught a rush of second wind and headed right for the desk.

It was like running into an old friend. He flipped off his jacket and allowed the machine to pull him in. It was writing time and in a slightly euphoric state, he just let it all out through the keyboard. It wasn't until the sounding of the second chime that Justin finally stopped typing. He saved the work to a thumb-drive and put everything with the laptop that he then left on top of his carry-on case so that he wouldn't forget it. He then headed off to bed, this time disconnecting the phone before crawling under the covers.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

There is something to be said for rolling out of bed at ten o'clock. Something like, "I have the greatest life in the world," or "I can do whatever I please when I want to." There's a certain freedom associated with sleeping in and every now and then, Justin Ward gave himself that liberty. The skies may have been overcast, but his spirit was above the clouds and he quickly headed for the shower. This was mandatory first thing because he passed up the opportunity to wash away the smells of last night due to the fact that the writing was coming so easy. It meant that he carried the remnants of Paulie's in his hair and on his skin. The smell of perfume, aftershave, and Budweiser would be whisked away under the full blast of his showerhead.

He made a note to himself to change the sheets on the bed then plugged the phone back in before hopping off to the bathroom, hoping that there were no last minute changes in his plans. If there had been, he would surely hear from Cassie soon. She would go nuts trying to reach him while the phone was disconnected. That thought, along with the pounding water on his head reminded him of a call he had to place to Liz. That would come after breakfast for which he was more than ready.

Although he did have a sandwich at Paulie's, he felt like he hadn't eaten in a long while.

Justin, the cook, had a thing for breakfast. He loved the bacon, eggs and potatoes. He would whip up pancakes when Zack came because the two of them could put away a few stacks each. But if it were just he in the house, it would be something with eggs in it. A quick look in the refrigerator this morning revealed a couple of moldy leftovers, some milk on the verge of souring, a bottle of wine that had been there for at least six months, and a few eggs. The bacon looked slimy and the cheese smelled okay, but Justin decided instantly that the lax attention paid to the interior of the fridge was reason enough to let someone else cook breakfast. He tossed three quarters of the contents of the ice box into the trash and then made another note – one to do some serious shopping when Zack came in.

It worked out the same way last year. Justin had promised Liz not to take Zack out all the time because he didn't get to do that at home with Mom. For Justin it was a way to recall those skills he utilized for many

years as his role of chef in the Ward house. He would put together a pan of lasagna and a meatloaf that would last for a week. He would always make breakfast at home and turn lunch into a treat like McDonald's, Taco Bell, or some other fast food chain, depending on what was planned for the day.

And along the lines of planning the day, Justin wasn't even sure what flight he was on. He remembered it was in the afternoon. It was 10:30 so he had time. He scrambled around the computer desk for the itinerary that Cassie e-mailed him, but he couldn't come up with it until he remembered taking it into the bedroom. It was on the nightstand, underneath the TV remote and his trusty notepad. No dreams last night. That was usually the outcome when he drank the night before, another reason why he didn't do it that often.

According to the schedule from Cassie, he was leaving Worcester at 3:15 so he was in plenty of time. If he arrived by two, he would be all right. And from the house, he could get to the terminal in about 12 minutes barring any major traffic tie-ups. What a difference flying out of Worcester than going to Boston or Hartford. Sure it was more expensive to fly out of a smaller regional airport, but money wasn't the problem anymore. Right now, breakfast was. So Justin grabbed the keys and headed out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mentally, Liz was a couple of light years away as the sun soaked into the pores of her golden brown skin. She was in her paradisiacal back yard...the beach. She wouldn't get the phone message from Justin until he was well on his way to New York City via Delta Airlines. She was celebrating her own type of mass in a way very appropriate to the given name of the day. It was Sunday and Liz was having her weekly religious experience. No phones, no meetings, no problems, no worries.

Peter and Zack, meanwhile, were off to the town park where they traditionally spent their Sunday afternoons. If the temperature allowed, they would swim. Most other times, the pair would tour the running track on the park's perimeter with Peter running and Zack pedaling on his bike. The track measured a little over a mile and for the first year or so was an easy run for Peter since Zack was only a novice rider. Nowadays,

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however, it was Zack who had to hold off on the trip around the park so as to not to get too far out in front of the runner.

Peter even suggested that he get a two-minute head start and then Zack come after him. There was even further speculation as to how soon it would be before Zack would be able to lap him.

Once the run ended, the two would sit under a couple of shade trees and cool down before heading over to the actual playground area where Zack could spend nearly an hour running, jumping, climbing and otherwise satisfying all the needs any boy would have. If that weren't enough excitement, the pool could also offer a nice cool down in the form of exercise.

Peter Madsen wasn't the fittest man in Florida, but he tried to stay in decent shape. He would run a couple of times a week and used the weight room at school every now and then instead of eating lunch. However, Peter also had a sweet tooth and could down a bag of mini-Snickers bars during a single school day. He often kept a bag or two in his desk drawer. They made excellent rewards for good behavior or prizes for correct answers when quizzing material in class. But mostly that was an excuse to have handy candy and most of the junk in his drawers would fall under his personal consumption. The exercise was a way of keeping his weight under some semblance of control. It also did wonders for his stamina, especially the running part.

If the weather didn't agree with outdoor plans, then the three would head out to the mall or a movie, something to get them out of the house. These alternative events would always lead right into Sunday dinner, which was also not at home. Liz had a thing for not wanting any kind of housework on the day before having to go back to work. Peter was also certainly in favor. It was why he always planned his house repairs and other projects of that type for Saturdays. Saturday was his day to disappear and Liz's day with Zack. This was usually spent down at the beach, much like her Sundays. Sometimes she would have to go into the office and Zack would be in tow. She didn't really mind having him for those occasions because it could get her out a little quicker and he was very low maintenance despite his hearing handicap. He had been through his share of hospitals as a young child so he was fairly well accustomed to the surroundings. Perhaps it was a subconscious thing, but he just felt comfortable with the sterile surroundings of any medical facility.

*Steve Bantle*

This would be Zack's last weekend in Florida for the summer. He would be on a plane in a week, heading to New England to spend a few months with his Dad. Peter had taken on a lot of the daily fatherhood responsibilities with the soon-to-be nine-year old and letting him go for an entire season was getting harder every year. His sign language abilities now were probably as good if not better than Justin's ever were and he was beginning to consider that he and Liz could maybe have a child of their own someday.

\* \* \* \* \*

The plane ride to New York was only 45 minutes so Justin didn't bother to pull out the laptop. He knew that there wouldn't be enough time for him to get on a roll with the keyboard. At times, he could go for an hour or two without stopping, as many as fifteen to twenty pages of text without a break. He liked being in that zone for the words just came as he went along. It would be like he was reading the story in his mind and just copying it over again on the computer.

He wasn't exactly feeling the urge to write just yet, either. There was the work he had done the night before...just rough ideas based on what Caster had told him. He would look over all the notes he was given and try to let inspiration hit him. He had a few ideas kicking around in his head, but there was no story yet. This wasn't unusual. As was the case with many writers, days could go by without a 'feeling' or urge to write. However, once he did get that 'call', he would go on for several days with only the basic breaks for food...and golf.

As for golf, he was looking forward to eighteen holes at the world's most prestigious golf course, Pebble Beach. He hadn't confirmed anything with Cassie about playing, but she was overly efficient and he trusted her with his instructions. He couldn't help but think about teeing it up at Pebble, being in the same company as a lot of professionals that were emulated by the author. Every great player of the game had walked those same fairways. It had certain majesty about it. If your game was off, the course would take you for a ride. Even if you were playing well, there were a multitude of nearly undetectable hazards waiting to change your attitude. If all else failed, there was the ocean view afforded to you as you languished along the scenic eighteenth hole. The place where

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Payne Stewart was given a royal, 21- tee shot salute upon his untimely death.

He had never played it and yet, Justin felt like he knew every hole. He had wanted to walk the pristine fairways of this golfing Mecca ever since he could remember watching the game on television as a little boy. The last time he made the trip out West, he swore that he would make the time to play the greatest course in the world. He didn't even know where it was, but it was in California and he would find a way. It was about this time, where he was mentally rounding the dogleg of that famous finishing hole, that Justin realized he had left his golf shoes on the front porch, forgetting, in his haste, to pack them in his golf bag. He sighed, and then smiled sheepishly to himself. He probably needed another pair of shoes, anyway he thought to himself.

"Shit..." He half whispered the word while closing his eyes. The woman riding in the seat next to him had been trying not to stare, but the attempt was futile and Justin realized that she had more than likely recognized him as someone she had seen. Putting the picture of the author on the back covers of books had somehow become a way of paying homage to a writer when in fact it sometimes robbed the same of the anonymity some writers, like him, enjoyed. She took his utterance out of the blue as a cue to jump into a conversation.

"Is everything alright?"

"I'm fine, thanks." He was more than willing to leave it at that, but he felt her stare on his face and figured that she was looking for a little more of an explanation, even though it was in no way deserved.

"I've just remembered something I left behind."

"Oh, that happens all the time when I travel. If it isn't a toothbrush or a jacket, it's something to do on the plane." She was in her fifties and fit a little too comfortably in the extra wide first-class seating. She was leaning in towards him now with several of her chins flapping about and Justin knew he was in for non-stop chatter the rest of the trip. "You look awfully familiar." Her name was Barbara and she was a real estate agent from someplace around Boston, like Duxbury or Roxbury or some other 'bury'. She told him all of that and more than he really wanted to know over the half hour that followed and although he was graceful in his conversation, he was sorry he hadn't pulled out the laptop. It would have given him something to hide behind.



As it turned out, she was thrilled to meet him in person and she would look forward to his next book. She had only read *The Paladins of Peace*, so she was at least a partial fan. She asked about being a writer and how glamorous it must be. He, of course, obliged her with the usual “it’s just like any other job” answer that he had memorized from use.

By the time the 707 touched down at LaGuardia, he had two business cards he didn’t want and had given out a dozen autographs, several to flight attendants who turned out to be true fans. It was his hope that one of them might have left a room number for him to find on one of the business cards. He figured every single middle-aged man had the same fantasy.

The author also got a book idea from a guy who sold plumbing fixtures and an invitation to speak at some social club in New Jersey. Justin thought it was nice, in a way, to be recognized in public, but he never liked taking center stage along those lines and in a place where there is no real place to hide. You can’t just get off the airplane up at the corner cloud. The good news was it was a short flight and that meant he’d be going his own way very soon.

He snickered as the plane touched down in a choppy, but safe landing. Of all the propositions he got in the last 40 minutes, the women’s club in New Jersey was the most appealing. He did like talking to groups.

The author had also pretty much forgotten that he was getting an escort for the trip this time so it was a brief shock when he saw a woman resembling Cassie Jones waiting for him in Baggage Claim. She had slimmed down since the last time he saw her and the hair was blonde now. He might have walked right past her had she not opened her mouth. The slight Brooklynese she was trying hard to lose still trailed enough for Justin to do a double take.

“Cassie?”

“Your car is waiting, Mr. Ward. I assume you’ll need your golf clubs?” She stepped toward him wearing a pair of jeans that fit very nicely around her newly slender hips. She had been a pretty, but stocky woman as Justin had remembered from the first trip, almost two years ago. He remembered thinking she had a degree of beauty then. Now Cassie Jones presented the look of a genuine knockout.

“Cassie? Is that really you?”

“Yes, sir.” She was starting to overdo the boss-secretary thing, but Justin smiled and shook his head in a gentle way to indicate that he was having a hard time believing what he was seeing.

“Wow. You’ve changed a little. I like the blonde thing.”

“Thanks. It keeps me under-estimated. I suppose you have no idea where you’re staying and what your schedule looks like.”

He spotted his clubs coming down the chute and chuckled in acknowledgement as he slid past her towards the conveyor belt. He was talking to her over his shoulder as he moved into position.

“I have *you*, so I’m not worrying about anything this time. That’s your job.” He snatched the clubs off the belt and whirled around.

“The only trouble with these is lugging them around for three days before I get to use them.”

“You should have sent them ahead to the course. It could still be arranged.”

“Naw. I need something to sleep with.” He shot her a friendly wink as he strode past her to the exit. Justin had no idea where he was going, but he knew it would be on the other side of the sliding doors marked ‘Exit’.

“This way, Mr. Ward. She took the carry on-bag off his shoulders. “Is this all your luggage?”

“I travel light these days. Don’t worry. I’ll have three times as much stuff on the way home.”

“Ohh...I love shopping.”

“Yeah, I bet you do.” He was having a much harder time handling her charm on this day for she was a transformed duckling and he was doing everything he could to flirt with her without making it obvious.

“The car is this way.”

It was a black limousine and the driver popped out to take his bags, but a skycap beat him to it. He put the clubs and carry-on in the trunk as Justin climbed in the door being held open by the driver. Cassie shook her head and smirked at the author in disbelief before handing the cap a five for his troubles. Justin wasn’t a snob and she knew it. He was truly oblivious to the art of tipping. Oh sure, he did fine at it in restaurants, but when it came to others in the ‘service’ industry, Justin Ward was aloof.

“Forget your wallet?” Cassie was settling in next to her client.

“Huh? My wallet?”

“Never mind.”

The driver pulled away from the curb and asked if there were any other stops. Cassie instructed him to head straight for the hotel.

“Any dinner plans?” Cassie was interested in whether or not Justin had made any type of plans for any of his trip outside of golf on Thursday.

“Nope. He was not exactly familiar with the city and that was scary enough for him to just take in a pizza or some delivery to his room. He would be content watching the tube even if meant suffering through a broadcast of Yankees baseball. The Sci-Fi channel might be available to him and that was always something to entertain his intellect. If the tube failed, he could pull out the laptop and write a little.

“Well, if you’re interested, there’s a home-cooked meal at my place tonight.” She seemed to be concentrating on her notes as a way of avoiding eye contact.

“Oh, well...I don’t know. I, ah, hadn’t really....”

“It’s okay. I was being polite.”

“Oh, well...I wouldn’t want to be any trouble.”

“Oh, it wouldn’t be like you were crashing a party or anything like that.” Cassie was looking at him with an almost sympathetic eye. She knew he would like to say yes, but she didn’t want to be the forceful person she was on the phone with him. This was face to face and she did like what she saw.

“I would be in the way, I’m sure.”

“Of who? It’s just me and my cat and I’ll make sure I wash out his dish before you use it.” This was classic Cassie – quick; a New York wit with enough sarcasm to slice through any tough heart. Justin just smiled.

“Your cat gets pretty upset over company, does he?”

“Only at dinner time, but I think you can take him because he’s got no claws.” They both shared the laugh and fell to silence for a few more moments.

“Can you cook?”

“You’ll have to take up the offer to find out.” There was a hint of flirtation in her voice and he played along, thinking for a moment so as to torture her a little. He would have said ‘yes’ when she first asked, but he was prying for information. The last thing he wanted was to show up for a big family get-together and become the surprise guest of honor. Not that he didn’t like to be the guest of honor, he just wasn’t crazy about

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surprises. Cassie seemed on the level about the intimacy of the evening and that was much more his style.

“Okay. I’ll see what’s cooking at your place.”

“Great. It’s 4:30 now...is six, okay?”

“Six is fine I guess.”

Cassie lowered the window so the driver could hear.

“I’ve got one extra trip. Pick Mr. Ward up at 5:45. He’ll meet you in the lobby. Take him to this address.” She handed him a card that she had scribbled on. The phone number is there too, in case you get lost.”

“This your car? I love the interior.” Justin was being conversationally funny. “Mine’s got a fully stocked bar.” He was presenting an uppity New England accent and looking at Cassie over the top of his nose. She giggled a little as she leaned back to reveal a fully stocked cabinet with soda and beer and a bottle of whiskey. There was ice in the drawer and heavy-bottomed glasses ready to receive. For a moment Justin felt like he was back in high school, going to the prom with Beth Kravner. It was one of those evenings he had never really forgotten and at this very moment, Cassie was charming the dress off Beth Kravner. He couldn’t help but momentarily wonder if she might take him to the same high later on in the evening. He smiled.

“No, Justin, this is the company vehicle for VIP guys like you. I get to have it for your stay here. If you wanted to go somewhere, Ramon here would take you there and back. You’re the hottest thing on our shelves these days so the company wants to take good care of you.”

“So I could have...” He was trying to recall the driver’s name.

“...Ramon.”

“Ramon. I could have Ramon just take me anywhere? This is my transportation here in New York City?” I could go anywhere?”

“Yep.”

“Cool. Where do you want to go after dinner?”

“Well, I...tomorrow’s a busy day and I...” She was caught off guard. Cassie was excited over the invitation, but tried to keep things in their proper perspective.

“Look, if you’re cooking dinner, the least I can do is offer you a little after-dinner entertainment. Is there a place you like to go to meet people or is the cat that good a conversationalist?” Cassie opened her mouth to reply, but could not produce anything in the way of a quick reply. Justin

was given the keys to, and the freedom of, first-class transportation and that in turn provided the freedom he needed to see the city. But he didn't want to go alone.

"Cat got your tongue?"

"Well, I...yes, there is a place I go to now and then."

"Can they dance in this place?"

"Oh...well..." Now she was beginning to imagine where this was all going. Wherever it was, she made it seem to him that it was happening a little bit faster than she was ready for.

"I don't think I could, tonight...we'll have to see."

Ramon's timing was nearly perfect as he pulled up to the entrance of the hotel. His quick stop was just enough of a break in the conversation to allow for things to shift in another direction.

"Okay, here are your room keys. 513 – the elevator is on the left when you walk in. Ramon will be back in about an hour to pick you up." She was back to business. It was like two different Cassies – one in the office and one out. He had caught a glimpse of the one that was out and might let her hair down a little and was liking that one a lot.

"Okay, boss." He jumped out and waited for Ramon to hand him the carry-on bag.

"You can leave your clubs here, senior. I will be taking you back to the airport so you don't have to worry about them." He spoke with a cultured, yet broken, English. Justin did look a little worried, but relented to the little man in the black suit.

"Okay...very good."

"Oh, and sir...?" The little driver was leaning in and whispering to his passenger. "...if I might suggest...*Polly Estás*. Is primo dance club in uptown." His advice was sincere and Justin smiled as he repeated the name of the place to himself.

"Thanks...Ramon."

"My pleasure, Mr. Ward, sir." The mustachioed driver grinned with sincerely big European dimples.

Justin took the bag and headed past the doorman, into the lobby. He looked at the pair of room keys and looked back at Cassie in the back seat of the limo as it was just pulling away from the curb. She was looking at him, too, and he gave a faint wave. He then pulled the bag over his shoulder and headed for the elevator. It wasn't until he got to the

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room that he realized he was in the Plaza, and across the street was famous Central Park. Maybe he would take a little run tomorrow. He placed the bag on the bed and removed the laptop, placing it on the desk near the television.

It was when he turned back to the bed and saw the nearly empty bag that he realized he only had clothes for one night. Tomorrow would be more of a shopping day than he had hoped for, but that was okay. He pulled the shirt and pants from the carry-on. He could use the same pants tomorrow with a new shirt he could surely find with Ramon's help.

"Polly Estas." The name was so corny that it had to be okay. He pulled out the iron provided by the hotel and started taking wrinkles out of the packed clothes.

Dinner turned out to be excellent and Cassie seemed to be quite a cook after all. He had made Fettuccini Alfredo in the past, but this was unique. It complemented the main dish of chicken, lightly seasoned and broiled, and went very well with the vegetable of the evening, broccoli. Cassie picked out a nice Zinfandel and Justin greeted everything heartily. He was not used to these kinds of accommodations in quite sometime, especially being in the company of a very pretty woman, so he took it all in with a slow ease, not wanting to rush anything past its normal point. Cassie seemed a little more at relaxed now that there was no talk of going somewhere afterward. She still had her blonde hair up, but changed into a light summer dress that played well in the dim lighting of her dining room. She told him about what to expect with Regis the next morning and then with Matt Laurer in the afternoon. She was trying not to be so work-oriented, but there was a reason why he was there – it was to promote his new book. As they talked, she informed him that the weather in California was hot and dry so he should have no trouble playing all the golf he wanted to on Thursday. She also let him know that reservations at the course couldn't be made for Thursday until tomorrow so she would do it for him then. He was happy to hear that things were going well for his planned trip to golfing Nirvana.

As she cleared away the dishes and brought out some ice cream for dessert, he explained how Adam Caster, his neighbor and friend, had set up a meeting with some guy named Pollex on Thursday, but he would still be playing golf. He continued to tell her that this guy Pollex was

some sort of Hollywood insider and was apparently willing to front a lot of zeroes for rights to a book that Justin hadn't even written yet.

"And you're just telling me this now?"

"I just talked to Caster about it Friday. I didn't know what to think and I'm meeting this guy sometime Thursday."

"Justin, you know you can't agree to anything unless it goes through us. We still have the rights to your work."

"Well, if I remember correctly, those rights extend to published works and the deal is for two more books. After that, I could go where I want to." He was being cordial. Justin was out to lunch when it came to keeping daily schedules and paying monthly bills, but the truth was, he was pretty keen on big money issues, and Adam had already prepared him for this conversation so he easily anticipated the next move from Cassie.

"Cassie, I have a deal that requires me to write four books in five years. So far I've pieced together two in less than a year. The way I see it, who's to say I have to write the next book for Parsec? I could write it under an assumed name and present it to somebody else; especially for several million dollars." He was reclining in his chair with his glass of wine. Cassie was studying him like never before. He surprised her. She talked to him nearly every day and she wasn't expecting this. She was intrigued about him now more than ever.

"Justin?" The one-word question hung out like a heavy blanket on the clothesline. It was easy to see what was being hung out there in its sagging parabola. He knew she was curious and he enjoyed the cat and mouse that was beginning.

"Yes?" He answered just as heavily. It was serve-and-volley time. She lobbed and he returned, neither approaching the net.

"When were you going to tell me about this?"

"Actually, I wasn't really thinking about telling you. I set aside Thursday as a fun day and it turned out to be a meeting day. I'm doing this as a favor to my friend, okay?"

"Could I be there for this meaningless meeting?"

"Cassie Jones. I had a wife that liked to do this to me. She isn't my wife anymore." He was playful in his tone, but his message to her was loud and clear. She got up from the table and headed for the living room. Justin paused for a minute and followed.

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“I’m sorry.” Her words were sincere. “I shouldn’t pry about things like this, but a big part of me is the eyes and ears of the company.” She turned to face him with compassionate eyes that looked right through him. Inside, his heart melted just a little above the right ventricle as she poured it on a little more. “Y’know, there is a little part of me that wouldn’t mind spending time in the company of a distinguished gentleman. We’ll talk about it later. Wanna go out?”

It was his turn to be floored. He figured it was what a quarterback felt like after getting blindsided by a 265-pound linebacker. It was a rush to be playing, but the unexpected things could smart a little.

“S-S-Sure.” It wasn’t his most solid response to a question. He had told Ramon that he would call when it was time. Cassie was a step ahead...again.

“Let’s go.” She had that same smile from earlier that afternoon and it gave Justin a friendly chill.

“Slow down. I have to call.”

She checked the clock on the wall of her kitchen.

“No you don’t. C’mon.” The smile had knowledge in its lips. Two years ago, on the first trip, Justin thought he and Cassie might have hooked up. He wasn’t looking for anything then and since nothing happened, he was unaffected. Now, something in his bones was tingling with a feeling he hadn’t had for several years. She was out the door in an apparent hurry. Justin, still a little dumbfounded, followed after a moment.

“Make sure the door is closed behind you,” she called up to the landing. Cassie lived in a second floor apartment in the upper West Side. Aside from a well-fed housecat, she was basically alone. Like Justin, she was busy with her work and most of it centered on him, the guy she just had over for dinner.

Justin hit the bottom step only to find Ramon holding the door open to the limo and Cassie already inside. He was now content to just produce an innocently goofy smile and let Cassie do the planning for the remainder of the evening since it appeared she might have done so already.

“Where to, lady?”

“You’ll see.” She was clearly teasing now, but Justin was enjoying it almost as much as she was. He was right back there in high school on



prom night once again, only it was a quarter of a century later and without the formal wear. He eased back in the luxury of the crushed red velvet interior and decided to himself that he would just let things take whatever course they were on...for both the rest of the evening and the rest of the trip.

The place Cassie Jones picked out was crowded and in a state of perpetual motion. Not exactly Paulie's, which by comparison, was a transfusion short when it came to a question of which one had any life. Still, there was something about Paulie's that a place like this couldn't compete with. There was a sense of camaraderie and belonging that Justin huddled up with every Saturday night. He knew more about those people than just about any other folks on the planet. Still, it was exciting to get into an atmosphere of decadence once reserved to him in the form of college social life.

Cassie introduced him to several people and Justin found as the evening pressed on, he was creating comparisons to the Fivers. He understood that for the most part, this was probably Cassie's version of his hangout and these were her friends. None were introduced as boyfriends or someone she was seeing and again, Justin found himself caring a little more than usual as to those particular distinctions. Part of him was interested in knowing her status and part was hoping there was someone there for her so as to take his mind off those deep-seeded feelings that were beginning to surface like bubbles in a pot of water just starting to approach the boiling point.

No one claimed her as a girlfriend and that inched the water's temperature up another few degrees. There were times when she just looked at him and he caught himself glimpsing at her as well. They danced a little, talked a little, and caught each other looking a little, too.

And it all came to an end too soon.

"Time to go, Mr. Ward." She said it not like a mother or a guardian, but like the secretary she was. It was a little after eleven. "Six A-M is going to come pretty quick, y'know."

"Six?" He knew it would be an early day, but the notion of six o'clock in the morning had never really sunk in. "Very well, Ma'am. Lead the way."

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He hadn't worried about a time like 6am since his teaching days. Once in a while, there would be an early tee time and he would rise somewhere near seven. He remembered how much he loathed having to jump out of a beautiful dream and a warm bed and into the cold, real world. As they touched onto the sidewalk, Justin realized that this might very well be how Ramon felt, too, since the red indentation along his cheek revealed the spot where his face was resting against the back of the seat. The chauffeur had undoubtedly taken a little nap and there was a slight hint of a yawn as he opened the door for his two passengers.

"Did we have a good time?" His query was sincere.

"It was awesome." Cassie was equally sincere in her reply as she ducked into the back ahead of Justin who got a raised eyebrow, a quick smile, and a little wink from Ramon. Justin gave his shoulders an indifferent shrug and took his place in the back next to Cassie.

The ride to Cassie's was more fact than fun as she turned the dial from 'pleasure' to 'business' by centering the conversation on what the next day's itinerary would be. Nothing too complicated, just one of the country's most watched morning shows and a stop off at *Good Morning America*, the NBC version of national morning syndication. The limo was pulling up to the hotel curbside.

"Ramon will be back at six to get you. Please don't make him wait."

"I'll be ready." Justin was warming up his 'yes, dear' routine for her.

"Do you want me to call in the morning to wake you?" The author paused as the thought of an old pick up line raced through his head. It was the one where the guy asks the girl if she wants to have breakfast in the morning and when she answers 'yes', he asks if he should call her or nudge her.

"Well, do you?" He just smiled at the inside joke in his head.

"No, thanks. I'll be able to get up just fine. I didn't exactly have a lot to drink." That much was true for Justin's big drinking days were well by him. The fact that this was a third consecutive day of having a drink had begun to wear on him physically and he had no problems sipping on Diet Coke for a portion of the evening.

"Okay, then. I'll see you there tomorrow morning. Remember...two sets of clothing, okay?"

It took a about a mile and a half into the limo's final destination of the evening for Justin to realize something that made him freeze. He only

had the one extra shirt. He was planning on buying a couple earlier, but got wrapped up with Cassie. He leaned into the driver section of the big car.

“Ramon?”

“Si, senior?”

“You wear about the same size shirt as me?”

“Same shirt, senior?”

“Yeah, large shirt size?”

“I suppose.”

“See, I only have one shirt with me. I was planning on buying some earlier. Do you think I could borrow...?”

“...Say no more, Senior Ward. I will take care of it.”

“You think you have something that will work okay for television?”

“I have just the thing. You will look primo!” His excitement was overshadowed only by his charming sincerity and Justin eased back into his luxurious back seat.

“Ramon, you are a man of many talents and I owe you lunch tomorrow.”

“I know just the place.” Justin laughed at how seriously the little driver had taken him to his word.

“I bet you do.” And with that, the limousine pulled up to the front door of the hotel. The hired driver quickly escorted Justin out of the back and the writer headed for the lobby, fishing for his key.

“Good night, sir.” Ramon headed for the driver’s seat and the limo sped off past the park.

Justin made one stop to inform the front desk that he would need a wake-up call for 5:30. That would give him enough time to shit, shower, and shave. He almost thought about taking a shower before bed. The smell from the nightclub was making his eyes water a little. He hadn’t been in that kind of atmosphere for some time and the more he thought about it, as he lay dwarfed by a king-sized bed, he realized that he had just gone out to a bar two nights in a row. He couldn’t remember the last time that had happened.

“No more bars for awhile.” He said this softly to himself for he wouldn’t slip into that kind of life. He had been faithful to his post-divorce vow for over three years. He drifted off to sleep reasoning over

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the notion that he had done well to this point and this would be a one-time thing.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“Mrs. Madsen? Sorry to interrupt...it’s a Dr. Queensbury on line two.” The voice blared over an intercom in the phone on the desk of Liz Madsen. She was in the middle of yet another meeting and was beginning to wonder why she left the sanctity of nursing for the insanity of administration.

“I’m not taking any calls right now.” This response came from a distance approximate to the span one generated when reclined back in a comfortable chair. It also served as an interruption to someone’s input on scheduling, which happened to be the meeting’s current topic of discussion.

“I understand, but she said she was from the school. It’s about Zack.” Liz shot forward in her chair, held out a hand like a traffic cop and brought the meeting to a sudden halt while she picked up the receiver and punched in line two.

“This is Elizabeth Madsen.”

During the next 90 seconds or so, Liz went through a series of facial contortions to match a similar series of “uh-huh’s” as it was obvious the caller was dominating the conversation. At one point she was able to interrupt.

“What kind of test was this?” She also scribbled the apparent answer on a scratch pad near the phone. “And you need to see me right away about this?” There was more frowning and a little disparity before a concession. “Okay.” There was a standard clock on the wall to her right. She flashed a look before continuing. “I can probably be there in about 15 to 20 minutes.” There was some final scribbling on the handy note pad after which Liz punched into the intercom.

“Marcy?”

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“Clear my schedule for the remainder of the day.”

“Yes ma’am.” Liz had thrown herself back into the reclining position of the chair and had placed both hands over her face as if she were attempting to rub the situation out of her mind through her eyes. She reached with one hand and tapped the intercom.

“And tomorrow morning.”

“Everything okay, Ma’am?”

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“It’s fine. Can you handle this alright?”

“Yes, Mrs. Madsen.”

“Thank you.” Liz stood from the chair and moved from behind her desk. “Folks, we need to finish this meeting tomorrow after lunch. I’ll have JMarcy reset things. I apologize, but something has come up that I must deal with.” It was typical Liz. She had a commanding way about things. Had college not beckoned her to call, she might have done very well as a woman in this man’s army.

There were the usual appeals of concern and offers of assistance and she politely waved them off. They could not really understand what was going on because at this moment, neither could Liz. She headed for the parking lot and then headed for the elementary school.

*Monday morning, she thought. It’s going to be a long week.*

\* \* \* \* \*

It seemed like minutes between the time Justin Ward eased his head onto the pillow of his over-sized bed at the Plaza and when the front desk was sending word via a loud telephone that his time had come to get out of the bed.

He had asked for it and he got it, right on time.

The night before was still prancing around in his head, somewhere between ganglia and the oblongata, but he had to focus on figuring out how the shower worked as a means of not scalding himself. This wasn’t always easy. Hotel showers not only varied in style, but also in how they worked. Having spent his share of time in different types of rooms, Justin was able to recognize most systems. Of course, this was the famous Plaza and the shower gave a sleepy Justin the proverbial run for his plumbing money.

After a few tries, he managed to get wet without getting burned. As a rule, he liked his showers to be tepid. And as another rule, he often thought about Liz, the ex-wife, when he was in a shower. It was quirky, but he couldn’t help it. She always took her showers very hot – almost to the point of burning the skin. She just had a thing for heat on the body. Today was no different only the thinking shifted to Zack. It was going to be great seeing him and how much he had grown. Justin spent most of the wash-down dreaming a little about the Sox games they would take in

at Fenway and maybe playing more golf this year. Zack really had enjoyed it last year even though it was only his first experience. He was looking forward to seeing how the new hearing device was working and if it would help them communicate better. As it was, Justin's signing was sure to be rusty. Maybe he would practice it a little on the plane.

Once done with the cleaning, the writer had only his limited wardrobe to concentrate on and since he had put everything out before going to bed, he was nervously ready and waiting in the lobby at six when Ramon produced a limousine and more importantly several shirts to choose from.

"Ramon...I am impressed. Not only did you remember, but you came through in style. May I take two of these? I'll give them back before I leave."

"Senor...no problem. I have a lot of shirts. But I will get hungry around noon, right?"

"*You* have lots of shirts?"

"Si, senor. I have a lot of these shirts." Justin let out a genuine laugh. It was true. These *were* his shirts only they looked very new, almost unworn. It was clear to see that Ramon indeed had the writer's problem well under control. Still, Justin made the necessary inquiry to substantiate his theory.

"Ramon? Is this yours or did you buy this for me?"

"They are mine, Senor Ward." He was almost embarrassed to admit it. "Thanks to Rosa's cooking, I have put on some weight the last few years and these were in the back of the closet. I had her wash a few for you last night."

With a laugh, Justin rolled into the backseat and proceeded to change out of the golf shirt he wore on the plane the day before and into a fresh, clean, black Izod golf shirt that fit him very well.

"They fit great."

"I was your size once." He laughed as he peered into the rear-view mirror.

"I was your size once, too," laughed the author. It was comical to think that Ramon, all five-feet-nothing of him was actually bigger in shirt size than Justin, better than a half foot taller.

"I won't be needing them, senor. They are yours to keep if you wish."

"Rosa is your wife?"

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Si. Yes. And a beautiful woman at that Mr. Justin.”

“Well Ramon, maybe we should swing by and get Rosa for lunch today. If I’m buying, then everyone involved should get a piece of the payment.”

“Mr. Justin, sir...I think she would be very surprised.”

“Then make it so, number one.” This of course was yet another homage to the Star Trek return show, *The Next Generation*. It was a popular saying among people fond of the production and Justin was certainly an avid fan. He leaned back in the crushed red velvet. He was starting to get used to limos; the tinted windows, the driver, the aura of what it is to get out of a limo wherever you go...it was almost engrossing to him. Maybe he and Zack would go to Fenway one night in one. That would be a hoot. He could kick back with a cold one and Zack could drink soda all the way there. Liz would hate the idea of him spoiling Zack, but his only child was a bit of a miracle at that and he was fond of showing off his success a little. He gazed out into the early morning traffic.

“So where are we going again?”

“30 Rock.” The little driver could see the confusion on his customer’s face. “Rockefeller Center. That’s where they do all those TV shows.” Justin nodded in a semblance of understanding and began tucking in the shirt while fixing his hair in a mirror in the back of the limo. It was promising to be a nice day although the Manhattan skyline was doing all it could to block out the sun. He was feeling a little hungry and hoped there would be time for breakfast backstage. He broke the silence with another address to the foreign driver.

“How long from there to your house?”

“My house, senor?”

“Yeah. How long to get your wife and get back?”

“To 30 Rock? How long to go home, get my wife and bring her back?”

“Yeah. How long will it take for the whole trip?”

“Not counting how long it takes for her to get ready...hour, all the way around.”

“Good. We’ll plan on lunch.”

“I’ll call her to let her know. That way it won’t be two hours. She takes a long time to get ready, sometimes.” They both got a laugh out of



that line...more so from Ramon. The trip was relatively quick and Justin enjoyed the view in what was fast becoming a marvelous morning in Manhattan.

“Very good, Mr. Justin. We are here.” The big car came to a stop. The author had been staring out of the window for most of the trip. His earlier butterflies over his wardrobe dilemma had made a path for the new ones he was experiencing as the car door swung open. He tried to keep it under his new, used shirt. He had spent several years on the radio and for the most part was better equipped than most people to handle the spotlight. Still, this was a nationally televised live show.

He had done these before: Regis, Larry King, Oprah. He knew what to expect, but there was always something about being there that turned what he thought was hunger in his stomach into wrenching anguish. He flipped his sunglasses, previously resting on the top of his head, onto his nose and proceeded down a familiar walk to the entrance. The first was live and it would be over almost before he knew it; those after would be taped. In between each of the network’s television bits, he would make a trip either up or down a few floors to the respective radio studios where he would get sandwiched into any number of quick segments.

It was madness to do it all in one day, but then again, Cassie had been very good at promoting his books thus far, so he would just hunker down and get through the day. He kept thinking of the first tee at Pebble Beach. The imagined wind off the Pacific was quite therapeutic. He almost didn’t notice Cassie in the lobby as he strolled in.

“Ready?”

This startled Justin almost to the point where he jumped. He actually did on the inside, but showed no outward signs of it. His sunglasses were doing a superb job of hiding his frightened eyes. They were also making it hard to see.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, sure. Ready to go.”

“You feeling okay this morning?”

“Oh, yeah. Slept like a baby.” She turned to lead him on and he finished the thought under his breath. “Like an unchanged, unfed baby.”

“You say something?”

“Nope. All I hear is the ocean breeze.” He walked past her and into an available elevator. Cassie was quickly removed from the daze that his comments put her in and joined him for the ride up to Studio 5. Most of

the conversation was directed at reminders of what to say and what was likely going to be asked. He had over an hour before he would be on and breakfast would be available in the Green Room.

“What’s next after this?”

“Down to do a morning radio bit. They’re putting you on around 8:45. It might be a bit tight, but it’s a good opportunity...worth the trouble.”

“Okay...then what?”

“Well, then we go over to *The Today Show*. They’ll tape the segment for tomorrow and we’ll do a radio bit for them, too. We’re scheduled there for about 11:30.”

“Then lunch.”

“Then anything you want until our flight at 4:45. I suggest you check out of the hotel before lunch. My stuff is already packed in the limo so we can do whatever. Ramon will take us to the airport.”

“My clubs still in the trunk?”

“Yes. Your precious golf sticks are still in the trunk.” Justin was starting to regret taking her along. He was wondering if last night wasn’t just a way of buttering him up so he wouldn’t change his mind at the last minute. He wouldn’t have. That would’ve been too cruel. But still, he was starting to wish he had kept his mouth shut.

The elevator came to a stop. Justin allowed Cassie the honor of exiting first.

“We’re having guests for lunch.”

“Oh?” She was ahead of him so her voice was coming over her shoulder. “Who?”

“Ramon and his wife are joining us.”

“The driver?” This stopped her in her tracks and the perfect pirouette brought them nearly nose-to-nose. He dropped the glasses a notch so as to see over them as he looked down at her. She had that incredulous gawk of disbelief plastered all over her face and Justin couldn’t help but smile at the notion that he had innocently pissed her off.

“Yep. I owed Ramon a favor and this is how I...we...planned it out.” Cassie re-pirouetted and returned to her original heading. “You’re more than welcome to join us.” Justin was playfully chasing after her. “In fact, we were hoping you could pick out a nice place to eat and possibly pay for it...the company, I mean.”

She stopped abruptly at a door. “In here.” Justin took off the glasses and entered what the Carson Show once deemed the Green Room. Ever since then, that moniker has been assigned to any type of backstage area cordoned off for guests of the show as they lay in waiting. The Green Room was very lounge-like and did indeed provide a much-needed breakfast.

“Men.” Cassie did not follow, but instead let the door close, separating her from her client as she headed to another area of the studio in search of a show producer of some kind.

The only trouble Justin had with the Regis show was remembering who the girl was. For the longest time it was Kathie Lee so remembering a “Kelly” was tricky. He was getting better at calling it simply the Regis show, but he was always at a loss to remember his latest sidekick’s name. The monitor in the Green Room reminded him when after a commercial break, the announcer bellowed that it was Regis and Kelly...Live!

“Kelly...Kelly...Kelly...gotta remember that.”

A little pacing before his introduction created another inspiration. He simply wouldn’t call her by any name. That way he wouldn’t call her Kathie Lee by accident. The two names were just too close and he really didn’t want to screw up the first thing. Regis is Regis so that would be okay. It was about this time that Justin had hoped one of Ramon’s shirts had a Notre Dame emblem on it. That would have been a conversational piece for the host, a famed alum of the Fighting Irish. As it was, his black shirt would create plenty of body heat under the intensity of the studio lights. Just as well, he thought. It’ll be over quick enough.

Cassie had been in a few times to make sure he was okay. The last time, he teased her about lunch again, reminding her that she was picking out the restaurant. She didn’t exactly storm out, but the exit was a little noisier than normal. Justin decided that something was up and he was involved in it somehow, but this wasn’t the time to think about it. There would be plenty of time on the airplane to find out what was going on. Back to the monitor in the waiting area where Regis was now holding up a copy of *The Milkyway Merger* and was going into a brief history of Justin’s short tenure as a writer. Just offstage, the author was actually enjoying the fact that there were phrases like ‘bestseller’ being used in

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conjunction with his name as well as words like ‘wonderful’ and ‘rising star’. Finally, there was the cue to head out.

“Would you please welcome, Justin Ward.” The applause sign produced the necessary response and the author was greeted warmly. Regis had a great handshake. What’s-her-name was also very hospitable. The interview lasted more than the normal five minutes, with the tail end of the segment addressing Justin’s ability to sign because of Zack. He tried to deflect bringing Zack into the interview, but Regis was part journalist and part bulldog so the writer relented and then did a little signing for the audience after apologizing for not practicing ahead of time. He added a little message for Zack, should he get the chance to see the show. He knew that Liz would probably tune in so he signed that he would see him soon.

As advertised, it was over almost before it started. He was glad the stage manager, using her own brand of hand signing, called for a commercial break because it ended the questions and started the good-byes. At the same time, part of him would have loved staying and talking about his new book or golf, baseball, whatever. Regis was a big tennis fan and Justin figured if things ever went in the wrong direction, he’d just start talking about tennis or Notre Dame football and that would put things back to rights. ‘Reeg’ did manage to ask, just before the stage manager’s timely signal, if Justin had another book in the works. He was ready with the standard, “I haven’t decided what direction to go in yet” answer. The sign language thing was a nice diversion, if nothing else, and the appearance would be good for a meaningful increase in book sales, according to Cassie, who was off stage, still scowling, and only unfolded her arms long enough to clap at the end of the segment.

It was going to be an interesting afternoon, thought Justin.

Next was upstairs to a radio show of some kind. The host was filling in for the regular and he was spending more time needling Justin for writing sappy, meaningless crap when he had the talent to do better. The 3-minutes in the booth felt like close to an hour and although he defended his work as entertainment and with a sense of humor, he wanted to fly across the table and throttle the guy more than once.

Upon his return to the Green Room, he couldn’t help feeling relieved. It was almost 10 o’clock and his stomach was finally easing off enough for him to grab a little complimentary breakfast. His day was half done;

just one more TV interview, one more radio spot. Thankfully, TV would be a taped session.

He placed the shades over his eyes as he and Cassie waited momentarily for the big black car to stretch its way around the corner. Justin still had to check out of the hotel and they could squeeze that in before returning for the taping. The radio was playing loudly throughout the vehicle as it sidled up to the awaiting riders. It was a replay of the interview as is often done in a following hour to fill a little time and give another morning audience on their way to work the chance to hear Justin Ward get grilled again.

“Very good, Mr. Justin.” Ramon was beaming as he bounded from the driver’s seat to perform his duties.

“Yeah, yeah. Shut that shit off, okay?” Justin barely moved a muscle as he said the words with a deadpan seriousness. Cassie practically giggled out loud behind him as Ramon, still smiling without knowing why, opened the door for them. Justin ducked in first and Cassie gave the driver the cut off sign with her fingers across the throat to let Ramon know that the radio did indeed need to be turned off.

“Yes sir, Mr. Justin.” He scrambled back to his post and lurched the big car away from the curb with haste.

“Did it suck that badly?” Justin usually left his brooding to the golf course. Even in sunglasses he had the look of a guy who had just missed yet another 3-foot putt.

“You were charming and almost witty, especially this early in the morning.”

“I wanted to beat him with my moccasins. Fat jerk wouldn’t know good writing if he used it to wipe his ass. Hey Cass...let’s never do that again, okay?” She suppressed another smirk while consoling his bruised ego.

“Hey. Forget it. No one said they hated the book.” Justin perked up a little, found a diet Coke in the ice bucket prepared for him by Ramon and eased back for the rest of the ride.

“Ramon, how about some music, instead – anything but country or that Latino shit. Find some easy listening stuff.” He was definitely getting used to being driven places. Cassie was easier, too, now that her client had put the recent past behind him.

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Ramon left him and Cassie at the lobby with the promise that he was going to turn around and be waiting for them when they came out. The pair swung past the doorman as Justin fumbled for his room card. He was wondering why Cassie was escorting him to his room.

“So why in the hell did you invite Ramon and his wife to lunch? He’s our friggin’ driver for Christ’s sake.” Justin stopped dead in his tracks and Cassie had to come a quick stop herself to avoid bumping into him. Now he knew why she didn’t stay in the limo.

“What does it matter to you? He did me a big favor this morning and that was the best way to repay him. His wife was a contributor, so I invited her along, too. Hey, it’s my lunch and you can come too, if you’d like.” It was almost scary to him how easily he could turn the nastiness on. He hadn’t used it since the last fight he and Liz had. He wheeled around and headed to the elevators. The ride up was reserved only for the hum of the motors, the vibrations in the floor, and the ‘ding’ when the car reached the destination. The rest of the short skyward trip was unyielding nervousness and as the doors slid slowly open, Cassie dropped her head a little and spoke softly.

“*I* wanted to take *you* out to lunch.” She hadn’t moved from the car while Justin was already part way down the hall. He stopped. It was his turn to drop his head a little.

“I’m not the chivalrous type, Cass. I used to be, but that got old. I’ll let you take me anywhere you want, but how about I let you do that in Chicago or LA? I don’t like to disappoint people and, well, Ramon seems to have his little heart set on high for this.” She slowly left the elevator and presented Justin with a twisted look of regret.

“What? What do you want me to do? Call Ramon and tell him something came up? First off, I don’t have his number...” Cassie was now in the hallway next to her client with new optimism in her dark brown eyes. “...and second, I just can’t do that to the little guy. It’ll be the thing he tells his grand kids someday...that I took him and ‘grandma’ to lunch once. Do you want to spoil that moment for him? I know I don’t.” She smiled and relented. He was simultaneously sarcastic and sincere and she seemed to like that a lot about him.

“No. I suppose Ramon and his wife are both delightful and I can see it would give you some kind of happiness to reward him for whatever he did...and trust me, I don’t want to know what it was.”

“It was nothing, really.” He was almost pleading as he came to a stop outside the room. “He got me a couple of shirts to wear...” He noticed that she was looking at him the same way a puppy looks at its master when it doesn’t understand something.

“Here, let me show you what I mean.” He slid the key into the door and opened it for her to enter. She walked into a room that looked like it had not been occupied before. Sure the maid had taken care of the bed, but there wasn’t the usual clutter of sundries that one might find in a hotel room of someone on the first leg of a weeklong trip. He took a moment to open the drawers of the bureau and the closet door to reveal a lot of nothing.

“You’re packed already? What, did Ramon pack for you, too?”

“Nothing’s been packed.”

“There is nothing to pack?” She was searching out the room for any sign of clothing and casually peeked inside the top dresser drawer. “You have no clothes.” The second sentence wasn’t in the form of a question. She instead made it a pronouncement of fact. And it was nearly a fact at that.

“Nope. I have a travel bag and in it I packed an empty gym bag. That’s all I need to start with.”

“Where are your clothes?”

“Hopefully in the stores I will be shopping at tomorrow morning.”

“You buy your clothes on the road?”

“It’s the lightest and easiest way to travel.” There was a new look of disbelief on Cassie’s face. “Actually, it’s the only way I’ll even buy clothes for myself.” He was sheepish in his admittance.

“Unbelievable. And yet, I suppose it makes sense.” The look on her face segued from bewildered disbelief to uneasy affirmation. “I gotta hand it to ya, it *does* make sense. It’s less to carry going there and you look great every show, right?”

“Plus, since I lost the weight, I can pull from the rack with no trouble so any store, anywhere, works for me.” Now the look on her face had jealous contempt written all over it; the kind of look that pouts, “So what,” back at someone. Justin headed into the bathroom to collect the toothbrush, paste, deodorant, and electric shaver. He tried to keep the conversation going while Cassie took a load off, sitting on the end of the king-sized bed.

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“Can’t believe you’re letting the clothes shopping thing slide.”

“Yeah...it was a bit of a stunner. But I do know some great stores in Chicago. Maybe the limo driver there can help us out if you want to invite him along.”

“That’s better.” He tossed it all into the bags and was out the door in an instant with her quick on his heels, again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Liz Madsen didn’t wait too long before being shown into the office of Janet Fontaine, the Principal at Ormond Beach Elementary School. The room was pleasant, with chairs of different sizes and a rather ominous fake tree in one corner. Some of the chairs were definitely more comfortable looking than the others. In one of the bigger chairs in the room was another woman, soon to be introduced as Doctor Diane Queensbury. She was a tall, thin, African American with slightly graying hair and in her late forties, perhaps. During the traditional greetings, it was discovered that the good doctor was a child psychologist and in charge of testing at several elementary schools in this region of the state. Once finished with the formalities, Liz picked the next most comfortable chair and jump-started the conversation.

“Now let me see if I understand this. You’re saying that Zack’s recent test scores are off the scale and that represents a dramatic increase since last year?”

“That is essentially correct.” The doctor was quick to answer and without even a glance at the principal. Liz figured that since she made the phone call, it was her meeting, but since the good doctor took the initiative to answer, Liz knew whose meeting this really was and complied by directing her next question right at the distinguished looking woman.

“Like what kind of increase are we talking and what does it mean? You did say this was urgent.” The last comment was directed at Principal Fontaine before Liz returned her focus on the doctor.

“First off, I appreciate you seeing us on short notice. I do not have a lot of time as I am leaving very soon to monitor a test site in Virginia.”



“Luckily, I have some time to give today.” Liz was trying to be polite, but it was obvious that she was displeased with having to leave the office for a non-medical emergency that seemed to involve test scores.

“Last year, Zack tested at above normal on the standard IQ test. Now Mrs. Madsen, I do not put a lot of stock in the test to the point where I think it ultimately defines intelligence, but the test is a start in that direction. Last month, as you may remember, we tested the kids again, using a different type of test that combines features from several standard tests as well as the IQ test. It was designed to bring about a more comprehensive look at where each student’s strengths and weaknesses are.” She leaned in a little to stress the impact of the information she was about to disseminate.

“Mrs. Madsen, Zack scored higher on the test than anyone else.”

“You think he cheated or something?” She was immediately defensive of her pride and joy as any good mother would be. Dr. Queensbury nearly laughed out loud.

“No, no, Mrs. Madsen; nothing like that. We take very good care to eliminate that aspect of the testing, especially with this second test. Not everyone takes this test.

“But Zack did.”

“And he scored better than anyone.” Her broad smile nearly covered her enthusiasm regarding the proclamation. Liz still seemed a little unnerved.

“You mean...he’s some kind of genius because he did better than everyone in his class?”

“You don’t understand. Zack didn’t score better than everyone in his class or even in this school.” She was leaning in again as if to tell Liz a big secret. “Mrs. Madsen, Zack scored better than anyone in the country...ever.” Liz sat transfixed on the idea that her son just became a mental freak of some kind.

“How...what...how does, how did this happen?”

“First off, let’s not jump to conclusions. As I’m sure you are aware, there are always false positives in any test given. That being said, the reason we gave this new test to certain children was to eliminate that possibility and to gather further, more specific data. The results may be a false positive, but I assure you the possibility of that in this case is virtually non-existent.”

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“So he is a genius of some kind. I mean it’s hard to believe because he’s deaf and all. I mean how could he...how could know so much to do that well?”

“Remember, Mrs. Madsen, intelligence is not always based on factual knowledge. There are varying degrees of intelligence. Some kids with IQ’s at 85 or 90 might have the talent of a virtuoso. These people are called idiot savants and this test, although designed to, does not always pick them out. They are designed to find different types of intelligence, including most idiot savants.”

“You’re saying that Zack is an idiot of some kind with an above average intelligence.”

“Actually, Mrs. Madsen, we think Zack has the potential of being one of the most intelligent people ever born and he’s nothing like a savant. Savants generally withdraw and are often reclusive to the point where they are perceived as dopes or...idiots; henceforth the name.” Liz closed her eyes and fell back into her chair. Part of her wanted to scream with delight and part of her was terrified of what this might mean for her son.

“Wow.” It came out low and soft with a discernible amount of awe wrapped around the word. “What do I do next?”

“Well, we are concerned about a few things. Intelligence like this does not usually manifest itself at this age. In other words, we are very interested in understanding how Zack jumped from being a little above average to being a super-genius in a little under a year and at this time in his development.”

“I’d kind of like to know that myself.” Again, this was said very softly, but audible to all three women. “Are we sure this is Zack we are talking about?” Both the doctor and the principal glanced at each other and then nodded in cohesion.

“We are also...Mrs. Fontaine and I...a little worried that Zachary might be recoiling a bit socially. I have had extensive involvement with savants and I don’t see Zachary as being one. However, he hasn’t been taking recess for quite a while and his teacher, Mrs. Miller is worried that he has started to alienate himself because of how fast he gets through the work. What takes the rest of his class a few hours, Zack is finishing with perfection in a few minutes. She has run out of things for him to do and he often spends class time in the library.” The furrow on Liz’s brow was deepening. “Has there been any kind of change at home? Like a change

in diet or did he have a fall or a mild head injury of some kind? We'd like to be able to see his medical records. Would that be possible?" The questions came rapid-fire style and Liz looked lost for a few seconds as she concentrated on answering the first one.

"Hold it." She stood up. "First off, I haven't seen or done anything different to or about my son and no, he hasn't had any kind of head injury. You will not get a medical record aside from the one I legally supplied the school and I am not going to let you study him like some test rat. And why is he not taking part in recess?" The doctor and the principal stopped cold. They looked at each other and then back at her. Doctor Queensbury re-ignited the talks on a less urgent scale.

"Mrs. Madsen, Zack is not a test rat. He is however, a very unique little boy with a wonderful gift. On top of that, being completely deaf has also weighed in our concerns. With further specialized help, who knows what he could achieve?"

"I need to talk with my husband and with Zack's father about all of this before we go any farther. I also want to talk to Zack about it. Can I take him now?"

This time Janet Fontaine answered. "The kids are at recess now so Zack is in the library."

"Yes, why is he in the library and not on the playground? Is he being punished for something?" Liz was becoming borderline hostile. Janet Fontaine was just as alarmed.

"I told you he has been taking recess in the library. You sent the note in with approval. Zack brought it in a while ago." She was into a file cabinet near her desk almost before she had finished defending the action.

"I did no such thing. You mean Zack hasn't taken recess most of the year?"

"It was per your request. We found nothing wrong with it considering how well Zack responded to being in the library." She pulled a folder from the drawer with Zack Ward (Madsen) in bold black letters on the tab. It was plainly visible and Liz reclaimed her seat for the moment while the principal shuffled through over an inch of documentation. "He's very well behaved and other kids spend recess there so with your note..." She pulled a folder and then a piece of paper from the drawer. "Here it is." She handed it to Liz for her inspection.

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“It truly looked authentic. I get a forgery every now and then and I’m pretty good at separating them from the real thing.” Liz was amazed at how much the signature was like hers. Had she actually written this note while half asleep or something? It indeed resembled her handwriting very much.

“I don’t know what to say. It looks like my writing and yet I never would have asked for Zack to be dealt with differently than other children. I don’t remember this being something I wrote.”

“Then whose clever work is it?” The doctor had been quiet long enough. “It would appear that perhaps young Zachary has more talent than you think.”

“Well, I’m going to find out.” Liz bolted the room, note in hand, and headed down to the library with both the principal and the doctor hot on her heels. Zack was engrossed in a book at a table in a section of the room that was away from the front desk. It wasn’t a big library. Being that it was in the center of an elementary school it probably seemed huge to an eight year old, but Zack did manage to find a peninsula of shelves with which to tuck himself into. He had his back to the main body of the room, facing, instead, the central bookcase some five shelves high. Liz sat in the tiny seat next to him. He quickly looked up and smiled. He also had a bit of a nervous look for he knew even before she got there that someone in the vicinity was feeling confused, someone he knew very well. They played out the conversation in sign language as the two interested women looked on from nearby.

*Why are you inside on a beautiful day?*

*I like to read.* Liz was happy about his joy of reading and gave him a smile. He pulled the EAAR unit out of his bag. He used to leave it in the classroom during recess, but he needed it to better understand Ms. Kendall, the librarian. He turned it on.

*You should go out and play with the others.*

*I love to read. I learn a lot.*

*You read everyday?*

*Yes.* Liz realized that at the age of eight, he was finding a new skill in reading and that would be a challenge that Zack would likely relish seeing that he couldn’t hear. Words on paper could give him something he couldn’t otherwise experience outside. She put her arm on his and looked into his eyes as she put the forgery on the table.

Steve Bantle

*You wrote the note?* Zack just nodded. He was feeling a little more comfortable that his mother wasn't all that mad with him. In fact, he was starting to sense a feeling of pride come over her. It was bold orange and blue. He had seen it in Justin once after the Red Sox had come from behind in the bottom of the ninth inning to beat the dreaded Yankees.

*You could have just asked. It's something we should have talked about.* The boy shook his head.

*You would have said no.*

Liz's lip twisted a little for the son had figured correctly and she knew it. The boy just stared at his mother, but the eyes let her know that he was sorry. She understood those eyes almost as well as he could read her feelings.

*How many of these books have you read?* Liz was trying to work her way into a conversation and made a faint sweeping motion so as to include the three cases of books that surrounded them. Zack followed the hand as it moved gracefully from one case to the next. He asked his mother for the question again.

*How many?*

*Yes. How many of these books have you read?* She was interested in finding out just how advanced he may have been. Both the onlookers moved in for a better view of the answer.

*All of them.* Zack signed his answer not like he was proud of it, but like it was natural for him to have read all the books in the room by now.

*All of them?* Zack nodded innocently. Liz looked back at the bookcases. There had to be a couple hundred books in those shelves. She animated her question with crisp signing to stress each word.

*You have read all these books?* The boy's eyes widened and he continued to nod slowly. She stood up and looked at him in bewilderment. The Principal looked at the Doctor and questioned her as well.

"He's read all those books? Some of that's high school material."

"Shhh. He has a brilliant mind. His ability to read might be heightened greatly by his inability to hear." Liz didn't even notice the pair of bystanders. She was concentrating on her son who was developing the look of a person accused of some wrongdoing. She fingered the volumes and quickly checked some of the titles. It was the advanced reading section – 6<sup>th</sup> grade level and higher. These weren't the

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adventures of ‘Dick and Jane’ or second grade readers. The shelves had *Moby Dick*, *Ivanhoe*, a basic algebra textbook, some foreign language primers and various historical accounts of famous men and women from George Washington to George Clooney.

*You have read all these books.* It was delivered softer and sans the hand gesturing, and not at Zack, but at the books in general. One thing about the EAAR unit – it had no real way of portraying tonal quality of speech. Lucky for Zack he had inner abilities that let him know his mother was toning things down a little while presenting an aura suggesting she was again confused, only with a mixed sense of wonder. He hesitated, but answered her non-question confidently.

*Yes, all of them. Some more than one time.* Liz slowly backed here derriere into the nearest chair and sat admiring her gifted son. All mothers want to have talented children and they all feel their offspring are special in ways only they can tell, but this was completely unexpected.

*You’ve been in here for a few months and you have read all these?* She was again marveling at what had to be over 200 books on the three shelving units.

*And all of those, too.* He had stood from his chair and moved around the alcove to view other parts of the library. *I took some home to read.* He signed and then pointed to the area he was spying. She got up to see several other three-tiered sets of shelves. He was trying to deflect the situation as being normal and Liz could see that he was becoming confused as well.

*When did you read these at home?*

*When you thought I was playing video games in my room.* Liz chuckled and eased back into the tyke-sized chair. He let out a squeal of delight and she realized that her only son was finding more pleasure in a book than with a video screen. It was a good feeling. He wasn’t being punished and he wasn’t anti-social. He just liked to read. No, as he told her, he *loved* to read. She shook her head with an incredulous smile and got up.

*Let’s go.*

*Can I take the book?*

*Sure. Why not,* she thought to herself. *What book is it?*

*Steve Bantle*

*One about A-L-B-E-R-T E-I-N...* He was so quick with the lettering in the signing that even Liz had to slow him down.

*Albert Einstein.* He glowed with the affirmative.

*Yes, very smart.*

*Yep, very smart.* Liz thought to herself that old Albert might be laughing hardest in spirit after today.

The two women had saddled up next to Mrs. Madsen and son by now.

“We would really like to test Zack again.” The good doctor was trying to be pleasantly diplomatic.

“What for?” There was a motherly protection in the voice of Liz.

“Mrs. Madsen, there is a group of people I would like you and Zack to meet, at your convenience, of course. They study children with high intelligence and can enhance the learning process far better than a public school ever could. They are at Harvard University in Boston...”

“I know where Harvard is.”

“Mrs. Madsen, this group of specialists works under a financially well-endowed project. Zack’s education would be completely paid for and his abilities might be a cornerstone for learning more about ourselves than at any other point in history.” The mother and child continued to walk the corridor towards the front door. “Don’t you understand? Zack is one of the smartest people on the planet, and he can’t hear a sound. There is no one like him, at least none that we know of. The closest thing I can come up with is Helen Keller and he blows the doors off her ability.” Her monologue had taken on an urgency and with it a quickened pace.

“You speak of ‘we’. Who are ‘we’ exactly?” Liz stopped upon asking the question. Dr. Queensbury stopped as well. Somewhere close at hand was Principal Fontaine.

“It is true that I administrate special kinds of testing in this area of the country, but I am also a spotter for this group at Harvard. There are many of us around the nation who set up the tests, collect the data, and literally seek out young super-geniuses. I’ve been doing this for fifteen years, Mrs. Madsen and I have never seen anything even remotely close to what Zack is and could be.”

“But doctor, he is just a boy. When we found out that he couldn’t hear we wanted to make sure that he was treated like any other boy. The fact that he has this wonderful brain is great, but I don’t want him put under any kind of microscope.” She was scared and Zack knew it. “I need some

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time to think this over and I have to consult with both my husband and Zack's father. Do you have a card or a number you can be reached at?" The doctor was not up to playing telephone tag over this.

"We'll be in touch with you in a few days. It's very possible that someone from the University will come down to see you." Liz took Zack by the hand and headed him out the door without speaking any more to the doctor. She told the Principal that Zack would not be in Tuesday for the last day of school and if they could collect his things, she would come by and get them by the end of the week and drop off Zack's borrowed book on yet another genius.

The air was fresh outside the school walls and holding her little boy by the hand was enough of a memory for her to shed a tear. The sunglasses she fished out of her purse created a little diversion to get the eyes rubbed, but Zack was immune to this and knew his mother was feeling a sense of relief and anxiety at the same time. He was inquisitive, as are most little boys.

*You okay?*

*Yes, sweetie, I'm fine. Let's go home. Mommy's got a few calls to make.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Taping the *Today Show* proved to be the least strenuous of the events for the day. Any time the interview is not live things tend to go a little easier. Yes, there is a schedule that has to be adhered to, but if a mistake gets made or a segment of it goes badly for whatever reason, things can be changed before going out to millions of people to see. Justin had surmised that this was the obvious reason that most television was not done live.

He actually did quite well and it wasn't as if there were any points that had to be re-done. With an interview of this nature, there are two cameras...one shooting his face and getting his responses and the other doing the same for the host. In this case it was Matt Laurer. He felt very much at ease with him as an interviewer. Part of that may have stemmed from the pre-interview where a few ground rules get hashed over and each finds out a little about the other. With Laurer, the subject of golf came up quickly and both are avid participants, unlike Regis and most



morning radio hosts. In a way it was funny, both Matt and Regis had very athletic looks and lifestyles where most of the radio guys were the farthest thing from pictures of health. But that was the advantage of radio over TV. On the tube, you had to look good first, sound good second. It was with this thought that Justin headed into a wardrobe room as both he and the host had to change clothes to do the interview in an attempt to make it look live.

Now having finished his grueling morning, it was time for lunch. Ramon had promised to be back with Rosa by the time the interview was done. Justin warned him against reckless driving and told him not to rush. Cassie was still simmering a little, but decided that the Stage Deli would be the perfect place to dine. In Worcester, the place to have a quick bite is a hot dog shop called *Coney Island*. Three dogs for a buck or two, anyway you can imagine and the guy taking the order remembers just how you had them when you go back for seconds no matter how busy the place is.

In New York City, it's apparently the Stage Deli, somewhere around 59<sup>th</sup> Street or so Justin was told.

Ramon was his usual timely self and was at the ready with door open when both Justin and Cassie emerged from the Today Show studios.

"A good interview, Mr. Justin?"

"Much better, Ramon. Isn't your wife with you?" Justin asked because it was apparent that the backseat was empty when he was expecting to see a woman of Spanish decent.

"She is riding with me, senior." Ramon gave him a quick wink, and the nod of the head in the direction of the front of the vehicle clued Justin in to the fact that Rosa was next to her man in the front of the car. Cassie took the pause in his action to jump into the back first.

"Very good. Cassie says we are going to the Stage Deli. Any objections?" Ramon's eyes lit up.

"Oh, no, senior. The Stage Deli would be excellent." He closed the door and raced around to the driver's side. The partition between the two sections was closed and the noticeable pause in the time it took for Ramon to get in and for the car to actually move made Justin think that the driver and his wife were celebrating his choice. He flipped his sunshades down onto his nose and smiled.

"He's like a five-year old at Christmas."

“And he owes it all to you, Santa.” There was more than a hint of sarcasm in her voice. Justin had started paying more attention to the voice. It was deep for a woman, but not too much so. It was a confident voice that he could tell didn’t get shaken. It had that New York toughness to it, but without the thick accent. She had the ability to take the edge off of her Brooklynese or add it when she wanted to enhance a point she was making. It was clear that Cassie wasn’t from here originally, but this place had hardened her enough to give her confidence. He could hear it now in her voice.

“It’s not so bad playing Santa. It makes me feel good. Aren’t you just a little bit happy to see that excitement?”

“Yeah. I’m thrilled...can’t wait to write about it in my diary tonight.” This was really punched up with a purposeful dose of Brooklyn, especially the ‘d’ in the word diary.

“Whatever. You are going to get happy after lunch, right?”

“We should try to be at the airport by three. That gives us two hours for lunch, give or take. Try not to invite the waiter to go to Chicago” Justin chuckled a little. It was sarcasm directed right at him, but it was nevertheless, funny and he always appreciated humor, even at his own expense. He perked up on the edge of the seat and made like a prude with a lisp all in the attempt to pull off the stereotype of a homosexual.

“It depends what he looks like in his little waiter suit.”

“Puleeze. You wouldn’t be interested in anyone unless they were holding a bag of golf clubs.”

“Now that is just not true.” He had righted himself and pulled the glasses back to his forehead. The chuckle was gone and his tone was serious. “You’re wrong to think that way about me. I’m not that superficial at all.” He paused to make sure she was paying attention. “It would depend entirely on what kind of clubs.” Even the tough city girl got a yuck out of that one as Justin’s comedic timing guaranteed the laugh.

Over the last year, she was the closest thing to a wife he had. She kept him on schedule, made sure he was okay, answered the mail, paid his bills and, talked to him like Liz used to. It was the way she treated him like just another guy when he was getting a swelled head and like the greatest writer in the world when he was feeling insecure. Maybe she

was doing it because he was her client, but part of him wanted to believe that she did it because she liked him enough to care.

"I could very easily be interested in people. I just haven't applied myself to doing it, especially after the breakup. I just can't always get close to people nowadays." He dropped the glasses back down over his eyes. "You know...you're one of the only people I've gotten close to at all in the last two years and that was over the damned telephone." He was looking away from her in large part because the realization of his own isolation had finally set in. Aside from Adam's presence and Saturday nights at Paulie's, he never really stopped to get to know anyone, especially female. Cassie was looking at him with a sense of remorse.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it as the God's honest truth. I was just being funny, okay?"

"It's okay. I had it coming to me. A lot of what you said is probably true. I just never stopped to look at it." He turned to face her. "I suppose a little change will do me good?" He had a tiny smirk of acknowledgment on his face and she returned it in kind. The car rolled to a noticeable stop.

"Maybe."

The separator between the front and back electronically rolled down.

"The Stage Deli," Ramon proudly announced as he leapt from the cab of the big car. He let Cassie out first and then swung around to open the door for Justin.

"Mr. Justin?" Ramon was using a covert whisper so Justin leaned in to keep the conversation secret. "Would you mind if we did not have lunch?" Justin shot him a look of astonishment and Ramon quickly silenced him with his finger over the lips.

"I would instead like to borrow the limo for an hour...to drive my Rosalie around in. I drive for over a year now and she's never been in one. She's all dressed up and would like a ride. What do you say, senior?" Justin righted his head and flashed a quick look over to Cassie, who was standing near the front door to the restaurant. He pulled out a twenty-dollar bill, which he placed in Ramon's top pocket.

"Make sure you feed her, too. She can go in style." Ramon grateful eyes lit up like the phone lines at the Labor Day telethon.

"One hour." He started to scramble back to the driver's side.

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“Just be here for 2:30. I don’t want to see you until then.” The little driver’s big smile covered his entire face, and he raced back to the driver’s side. Cassie saddled up to her client.

“Ho. Ho. Ho.” Cassie was smiling as she dinged him again.

“I tell you, it’s just a great feeling.” He breezed past her into the lobby of the famous Stage Deli. She was hot on his heels. He let her catch up and then put a big-brother arm around her.

“Hey, you get to buy me lunch. Now what’s good here?” She smiled warmly. His arm felt good around her.

“Everything. Everything is good, Santa.”

## CHAPTER NINE

“And just what am I supposed to do? Am I just supposed to let him go off to college at age nine?” Liz Madsen was pacing the kitchen floor and puffing wildly on a Marlboro. Peter knew she smoked once in a while, at work, but she was on her third one and there were signs that there would be more to follow before any kind of a decision was rendered. “Why doesn’t he call me back?”

“Look, Liz...he’s on the road. Maybe he just hasn’t gotten the message. You and I both know that when it comes to Zack, he’s a pretty stand-up guy. Now why don’t you relax a little, take a load off. No one’s making any decisions about anything in the immediate future.” He halted her jaunt around the kitchen by taking her hand as she passed by. This influenced her enough to sit on his lap at the table whereupon he removed the nicotine stick from her mouth and extinguished it in a plate used for dinner. The fact that there were no ashtrays anywhere to be found was another testament to the notion that there was never any smoking in the Madsen house.

“It’s just that...it’s just that I’m mad at myself for not seeing this. Was I that busy to not notice my own son becoming some kind of brainiac?”

“Hey, I’m the teacher and I didn’t see this at all. I mean, I did notice that he was reading a lot more, but I never thought it was to the degree you described.” She had removed herself from his lap and returned to pacing. “I mean Zack always was a very bright kid, especially considering he doesn’t hear anything. Maybe it was the introduction of the EAAR unit. Maybe this thing has opened his ears for him and has unlocked a part of him that we never knew was there. Maybe that’s the answer.”

Liz stopped to consider his words.

“Maybe...but what do we do about it?”

“Well. I think we talk to Justin, first. If it were up to me, I’d be very interested in having him tested again. Let the people at Harvard weigh in and then we’ll have a lot more information. We were getting ready to send Zack up there soon anyway.”

“I suppose.” She headed for the patio door. “I need to take a walk.” The patio door had been a virtual symbol of her means of escape from

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the real world for over three years, and it would certainly do wonders now. She was already in her bathing suit and her hat was waiting on the hook near the sliding glass doors. But as she turned the corner of the kitchen there were a pair of eyes attached to a boy she almost didn't recognize anymore. It wasn't that he changed, but that she was looking at him a lot differently. His EAAR unit was hanging around his neck and he gestured as Liz stopped in startled tracks in the hall.

"Oh. I'm sorry, dear. I didn't even see you there." She was signing similar words as she spoke them. It was a natural reflex she had – to speak and sign even before the EAAR was put into use. Zack continued gesturing as well.

*Can I go with you?*

"You want to go with me? For a walk?" She was even more taken aback. This was her beach. This was her escape. She looked into his deep dark eyes. He pleaded again with his hands. She smiled her acceptance.

"Okay, okay. No EAAR...and wear a hat."

He smiled, squealed a little and ran to his room to comply with her request.

"Actually, the one person we haven't considered in all this is Zack. Why not ask him. If he *is* a super-genius, he can make a decision like this just as well as we can." Peter was half amused with his calm logic while Liz was not. She flashed him that certain look of discontent that he had grown to know. If there was one thing Peter and Justin had in common aside from being teachers in the same high school at one time was that they both understood, all too well, the deep meaning of the 'look'.

"Well, it's his future...you should ask him what he thinks. He might even already know what's going on."

She just turned and headed for the door with Zachary close behind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Justin had picked up the routine down the first time he went on the book tour circuit. Hurry up and wait. Get to the airport hours ahead of schedule and then mope around. He wasn't vain, but there was always the temptation of checking out the bookstore to see how he was being marketed at the time. It was one thing to run across several of his offerings in a drug store, but to see his book really being highlighted in

an airport gave his ego an international boost. He almost always made it a point to check out the bookshops in the airports largely because being on another tour meant he was promoting again, and most recent releases got forefront attention in the main display cases. Luckily, as was noted before, writers had a certain degree of anonymity keeping them from being swarmed at places like airports the way a more recognizable athlete or movie star might be.

That started to change a little for Justin when book number three came out.

He was beginning to get that stare. The one that total strangers feel obligated to emit when they think they recognize you as ‘someone’, but aren’t really sure. So they leer deep into you, almost in invading fashion to see if you give back some clue as to your existence in their world of knowledge.

Moreover, it wasn’t just a passing fancy once they did point you out of a crowd of normalcy. These people wanted things signed and they wanted to tell him their wonderful ideas and they wouldn’t go away. They were celebrity flies and Justin was the reigning piece of shit to land on. He figured what he really needed was a swatter of some kind.

That’s when a ticket liaison or someone of some authority came to his rescue, not with a swatter, but with a can of repellent. Seems every major airline has a little guestroom off the main terminal drag where first-class fliers can hang out and get pampered a little within the secured confines of a somewhat guarded and secret room. Up until book three, he wasn’t on any airline’s ‘significant personae’ list, but with the success of number three came a nice contract to put out four more and to do so at a very large fee. This turned out to be his pass to what the writer often called ‘hospitality heaven’. Oh sure, the down-to-Earth Justin would still often indulge in the simpler luxuries only realized by actually sitting in the commoner lounge and having a beer. And of course there was the customary stroll through the airport bookstore, but being able to escape to the elitism of the hospitality suite was more than just a convenience. He used it on several occasions to shed a celebrity fly or to ward off a possible talk-a-thon with a fan. However, whenever possible, Justin usually found it easier to pass the time in places where real people interacted and he could remember what it was like to be a plain old English teacher in the everyday world again.

*Point-Six Percent*

The only other true convenience of Hospitality Heaven was the solitude to write. Once in a while, he would find inspiration and use the time to get his thoughts down. Sometimes that inspiration even came from the beer and the lounge.

That was the way travel normally happened. With Cassie along for the ride, Justin figured things would be far from normal.

He hadn't done much writing in the last few days and that was starting to worry him a little. It wasn't the 'not writing' part that was bothering him so much as the anxious feelings he was experiencing already about not having a direction to go in with the new project. True, he was given a concept and an outline, but there had to be a story to tell. There was a need for conflict, resolution, romance, and action. He was the one charged with bringing the story to the great public and he was not having his usual good fortune in creating just those lines.

Still, there was no timetable put on it – at least not yet – and he would have to eventually run the idea by Cassie and her bosses. It could no doubt wait until after the meeting with Adam's friend, John...something – begins with a 'P'. He remembered it was the name of a star. Pollex. That was it...Pollex, with an 'e'. But at this moment, he was tired, so any writing would likely be of little use. He'd opt for the beer instead.

He hadn't noticed that he was starting to mumble some of these Parsec thoughts out loud, or at least loud enough for Cassie to hear. She was just staring at him and trying hard not to burst out laughing while at the same time, wanting him to know that she was able to pick up what he was thinking.

"Who are you talking to?" He was startled enough to know that he was caught talking to himself.

"Huh?"

"You were talking to someone." This was said with a giggle and under her hand, which was covering her mouth in such a way as to hide the fact that she was even in a conversation with him.

"Sorry. I was just thinking and sometimes I do it out loud. I guess when one lives alone, that stuff happens more often than someone would probably notice. I mean, think about this...if there's no one to hear you talking to yourself, are you really doing it?" She scrunched her face up in an expression of incomprehension. Justin turned his attention to some askew direction while realizing that he had successfully created a tangent



to the conversation with a bit of quick paradoxical logic. Cassie finally gave up in her attempt to rationalize his last statement and took a sip of wine.

“Was I really that loud?” He was now looking over his sunglasses and with the raised brow that suggested he was very much at ease with whatever he was muttering and he wasn’t the least bit concerned with who might have heard it. So far, the airport bar was quiet. His book looked great in the window of the kiosk across the way. He particularly liked the way the black cover played upon the raised silver imaging and the blood-red glossy raised print. He had seen the mock-ups for the cover, but this was the first time he actually studied it. Not like the first book. He practically slept with the copy of that one for the first week it was released.

“I was just beginning to worry a little. You know what they say about people who always talk to themselves...”

“...Yeah, they write best-selling books.” Justin was once again at ease in the high-backed leather chair. The comfort level in first class would be comparable. However, the view at 30 thousand feet was always better than the one inside a bar. He had his hands over his head and his eyes were closed. The shades were effectively hiding that fact. He didn’t exactly get a decent amount of sleep in New York so he was leaning towards the idea of napping on the plane to Chicago. Cassie was calling someone. He could tell because of the beep tones generated when dialing a cell phone. He heard them very clearly. It made him wonder why they still called it ‘dialing’. Why not change the verb to ‘punching’ or ‘pushing’ or better yet, ‘buttoning’? He thought maybe that would be something to pop into this next book – a futuristic way of describing the action of making a phone call. Instead of dialing up a number, a person could ‘button’ it. It could be the next generation’s way of verbalizing the phone call. Of course that would mean this book based on Caster’s idea would have to be set in the future. He started to further ponder the notion when Cassie gave him a little nudge.

“Are you sleeping?”

“Huh, not anymore. What?”

“Hey, your ex called the office looking for you. Something about your son.” Justin sat up and wiped his eyes from under the sunglasses.

*Point-Six Percent*

“Yeah...he’s coming for his summer visit. She probably wants to make sure I know his exact itinerary. She’s like that. You two would get along just great.” Cassie scowled at the notion.

“I’m hardly amused and I’m not that stuck on details.” She was playing with the phone some more; more ‘buttoning’. “You know, if I didn’t keep you on some kind of schedule, you wouldn’t even know what plane to get on or where you were staying on these trips.” She turned toward him even though he was apparently ignoring her. “And another thing, it has come to my attention that I get very little thanks for keeping you on that schedule. Maybe I’ll take that vacation right in the middle of your next book-signing tour.” She was leaning in to make sure he was listening. He continued to face straight ahead with his eyes closed behind reflective sunglasses without moving a twitch. She waved her hand in front of his face to affirm her own belief of his planned ignorance. The writer was oblivious, hidden from the rest of the world by a pair of Ray-Bans.

“You’re not even listening.” She threw herself back in her chair in obvious anger. Justin, moving his lips and little else, responded:

“Not true. You are probably nowhere near as anal as Liz. She’s a true organization freak. There was a time when that was appealing only, unlike you, it wasn’t her job to be that way; she just *was* that way. I admit it kept things smooth for a very long time and especially when money was tight.” He looked over at her without lifting his head from the back of the chair and peered over the glasses to influence the point he was about to make. “Relax, okay?”

“You should call her. She really sounded upset on the message.”

“Phone.” He reached out his hand and she fumbled in one of her bags to retrieve it. He buttoned the number off the top of his head and then crossed his legs, revealing the casual fact that he wore no socks, while settling in to talk to his ex-wife.

“Where the hell are you and what took you so long to call back?”

“Well, hello to you, too, Liz. What seems to be the problem?”

“The problem is that your son is going to start college soon.”

“College? Is this what you’re calling about? Yeah, Zack can go to whatever school he wants. He can go to friggin’ Harvard if he can get in. And he can do all of that in about ten years. I’ll pay for it, don’t worry.”

“Funny you should mention Harvard, smartass, because that’s where they are thinking of sending him...next semester.” Justin removed the glasses and sat up in the chair.

“Okay...Liz, have you been drinking today? You’re not making any sense, here.” He was trying to remain calm in light of the fact that she was talking nonsense to him.

“Look, Zack took some test and the scores came back and these people are now saying he might be some kind of super-genius. He’s, like, smarter than anybody else in the world.” There was a momentary silence as the author tried to formulate a word to say next.

“Okay, could you start from the beginning and fill in a whole bunch of detail. What are you talking about?”

“Last year sometime, I don’t know when, Zack took one of those IQ things and did pretty well; well enough to take this other specialized intelligence test last month. The results came back and now they’re telling me he’s some kind of super-genius. He’s got an IQ of, like, 200 or something and they want to try him out in a special school at Harvard.”

“*Thee* Harvard?”

“Yeah, *thee* Harvard.”

“Ivy League, Ivy walls...that Harvard?”

“For chrissake, Jay...it’s goddam Harvard.”

“Wow.” He fell back into his chair, with his glasses in resting on his forehead and now motioning to Cassie that he needed another beer. His response came with a degree of caution.

“Well, this is really great news...isn’t it?” There was only silence on the other end and Justin took the opportunity to continue with his thinking out loud. “...I mean...this sort of thing doesn’t just happen to anybody. We have a gifted son and...are they sure about these test results?”

“They’re sure.” The reply was planned for she had anticipated the question.

“I mean...I don’t doubt Zack is extremely bright, but a super-genius?”

“They said a false-positive on the second test he took was impossible.”

“Hmph...well, y’know, he should be exposed to everything that will enhance him further. If they want him at Harvard, well, that’s fine with me. I think it’s great...and...you don’t, right?”

They had been divorced for two years and separated for three, but the first 16 years taught each of them the others' moods and Justin was well aware of what her tone on the phone was all about. "What does Zack think?"

"No, I don't think it's a good idea. I hate the idea."

"And Zack?" Justin was pressing for another opinion.

"He's a little nervous, but he likes the idea of being challenged. He kind of likes the idea of being closer to you." Justin knew what that meant. He had a very quick mind as well and was already seeing the scenario in his head – he and Liz would be reversing roles. Zack would likely now have to spend his school year with him instead of the summer. That would mean he would get the lion's share of time with him. Plus, there would be this commute to Boston everyday. He banked this around his skull for a nanosecond before letting his emotions for his son pour right out

"Well, he'd stay with me, right? And I could certainly see to his getting there everyday."

"Jesus, Jay, I don't want him to be two thousand miles from me like this for eight months out of the year."

"Well, babe, he does this during the summer with me, right?"

"Yeah, but does it have to be Harvard. Why can't it be a college down here?"

"Oh, I'm sure Suntan U. has a super-genius program. They can't graduate 25-year old football players. I think Harvard is your top-of-the-line college, and I'm pretty sure my old pal Petey would agree." Cassie was staring in awe as to how fast Justin was able to turn the conversation in his direction. It was obvious to her that the author had plenty of practice when it came to arguing with the person on the other end of the phone.

"I'm just not ready for this. I'm going to look into other options."

"You do that. In the meantime, you're still planning on sending Zack up next Monday, right?"

"Sunday...afternoon." This was a cold reply. She had sent him the schedule, the flight information and the times they would arrive. She knew he didn't look at it and if he did, it was not a detail he would naturally remember. Ironically enough, Cassie was waving and trying to get Justin's attention as he said the word, 'Monday', because she also

knew it was a Sunday flight that they would be on. She was the one who booked the flight, after all. This only confirmed Justin's earlier observation that Cassie and Liz would indeed probably get along just great. Maybe that was why he liked Cassie as much as he did.

"Whatever. I have it at home, somewhere. Look, I'm in an airport right now, waiting to go to Chicago. Do whatever you want, but why not come along with Zack and bring Pistol Pete, too. That way we can all go out and look at what Harvard is offering and see what they have. We can all do it *together*. I'll get the guestroom ready and you can stay with me for a few days until we get all the details. Then we can all sit down and make a decision on things. I'll have Cassie call you to set up the reservations for all of you and I'll see you on *Sunday*, okay?" Cassie had mouthed the word 'Sunday' just to help out her client and he made a point of emphasizing it to Liz. That awkward silence fell over the conversation the way an unfamiliar noise can make a whole group of people just stop talking for a moment to let their ears investigate. The good news was that Liz had not completely shot the idea down yet, so she was at least thinking about it. Maybe she was talking it over with Peter. Either way, it could have been mistaken for her just hanging up on him so he checked.

"Liz, you still there?" More silence.

"Yeah, I'm here. Look, I don't know about coming up there. Well...actually, I do know that I should come up and see what's going on, but...I..."

"...You don't want to stay in my house. That's fine. I'll have Cassie book you guys a room somewhere else. Where would you like to stay?"

"No, actually, I will stay at your place. I think it's about time I saw what your house looks like. Peter still has to teach, so he'll stay here. I'll come with Zack...if that's okay."

"Okay? That's perfect. I'll have Cassie call later to set things up." The waiter put a fresh beer in front of him. "Well, they're calling my flight, I've gotta go now. See you *Sunday*. I'll pick you up at the airport. Ward out." He snapped the cell phone closed and handed it back to Cassie who took the phone back in a minor huff. "Remember to send her about a dozen copies of the book; she asked for them the other day. Just sign 'em for me...you write my name better than I do anyhow."

"I could have talked to her right now."

*Point-Six Percent*

He was placing the glasses back over his eyes. “Yeah, but then you wouldn’t get to see the inside of a hospitality suite now would you?”

“A hospitality suite?” She had that puzzled puppy look again and Justin knew he was being mysterious enough to grab her interest.

“Grab your stuff and follow me.”

He was off in a whisk, beer in hand, carry-on bag thrown over the shoulder. The epitome of the unencumbered traveler, Justin trusted the people at the airlines to get his luggage, golf clubs included, to Chicago and eventually Los Angeles. He was a few steps ahead of his companion as she struggled with a pair of bags.

“My son’s a genius, y’know.”

“His mother must be extremely intelligent.”

“Yeah, that’s right...make fun of the guy who is letting you go to sunny California with him.”

“You wouldn’t even know what airport you were in if I weren’t with you.” She was almost caught up to him by now.

“For the record, I have done this without you before and of course, without all the sarcasm.” He strode confidently to a plain, unmarked door and knocked as he directed his attention to Cassie.

“You’ll need your ticket.”

“This is the hospitality suite?”

“You aren’t judging a book by its cover are you?” She went tearing through the other bag in search of the ticket. Justin had his at the ready, being that he merely had to pull it out of the inner pocket of his light tan suit jacket. A five o’clock shadow would have completed the Don Johnson look. He wasn’t necessarily going for that appearance, it just happened naturally with Justin, who dressed more for comfort than anything else.

The door was opened and a uniformed gentleman smiled. Justin handed him his ticket for inspection. A quick scan by the sentry and a voiced “welcome” signaled accepted entry into the secret room. Cassie followed, almost forgetting to take her ticket back from the gatekeeper who identified himself as Charles.

“Charles, could you find out if flight 377 is on time to Chicago?”

“Yessir, Mr. Ward.” He moved off to apparently seek the required information. Justin found an even more comfortable chair than before

and settled in for further napping. “This way, he now knows that I am aware of a flight and he will make sure that I don’t oversleep for it.”

“How do you know this?”

“Been here before, and Charles naturally remembers the bigger tippers.”

“And that would be you?”

“Father of a super-genius. Hey, now that would be a great title for a book, don’t you think...*Father of the Super-Genius?*” He looked away from her for a moment and thought briefly about the first plotline that came into his head. He shook it off quickly and redirected his conversation towards the traveling secretary. “Oh, and don’t call Liz back until we get to Chicago. I want her to worry for a few more hours.” He was starting to relax a little. “Y’know, I did notice that Zack was very mature and grown-up when he was up for Christmas. He really seemed overly perceptive. I just figured it was something kids went through and me not being there everyday, would definitely notice any changes a lot quicker.” The large gatekeeper returned to Justin’s side.

“Flight 377 is on time and leaving in approximately 45 minutes, Mr. Ward. I’ll make sure to let you know when you can board.”

“Awesome, Charles. Thank you.”

“Is there anything else I can get for you and the lady?” Justin held up his beer.

“I’m great, thanks. Cassie?” She was trying to hide it, but she was beaming at the thought of being pampered in an airport.

“A glass of Chablis would be terrific.”

“How big of a glass?” The large man with a booming, but soft voice was being flirtatiously enticing, and Cassie nearly blushed at the sales pitch. She looked at Justin who was holding back a smile of his own. He had been in her seat before and it was fun to see how a neophyte reacted to the service. He gave her a thumbs-up sign.

“Oh, what the hell, the biggest one you’ve got, Charles.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” And he headed over to the bar to place the order.

“Oh, God, I can see how a person could get used to this kind of treatment.”

“The trick is to act like it happens everyday and you won’t give yourself away.”

“Is it that obvious?” She was naively nervous.

*Point-Six Percent*

“Jesus, you ask a lot of questions.” He was starting to ease into a chair that was even cushier than the one that nearly put him to sleep in the passenger lounge. This one wasn’t leather. It had a suede feel and it seemed to allow his back to form into it. This was an excellent combination, and Justin was beginning to let his mind wander again into the suburban outskirts of dreamland. Maybe he could get them to put this kind of a seat on the airplane. Now there’s an idea, he thought. And what about this ‘father of the super-genius’ thing? Wow. Was that weird or what?

Meanwhile, Cassie was also easing back into her very comfortable chair just as Charles returned with a rather large glass of red wine.

“Madam, is this large enough?”

“It’s a start.” She took the glass and wasted no time testing its palate. As she considered the aftertaste, she smiled very approvingly to the gentle giant of a man and Charles took his leave with a gracious, toothy grin. Justin vaguely remembered the wine being delivered before being gently roused by the same man seemingly moments later. A short, but sound nap had done wonders for him and Cassie had let him doze off.

“Your plane will be boarding soon, Mr. Ward.” Justin picked the glasses up off his nose and ran his fingers quickly over his eyes in an effort to gracefully wake up.

“Thank you. It is Charles, right?”

“Yessir, Mr. Ward.” As he was yawning off the remains of his slight slumber, Justin reached into the jacket pocket and produced a ten-dollar bill, which he gingerly passed off to the uniform in a heartfelt handshake. Tipping might be frowned upon or even against some airline rules, but Justin enjoyed paying for service. It was something he always did because of his mother, a woman who waited tables for 25 years in order to keep the lights on in their not-so-middle-class home in an affluent part of suburban Buffalo.

“I thank you very much, Charles.” The transition of the bill was smooth and not too obvious, and the recipient felt the crinkle between the palms. No doubt, he was tipped a lot for he received the bill with very little effort and easily slid it into his pants pocket.

“Thank you, Mr. Ward, and have a good flight.” Justin was heading for the door when he realized that he wasn’t traveling alone. “Shall I tell the missus you headed out?” Charles was trying to please one more time



for his reward. Justin stopped short of the door. He didn't turn around, but instead directed his conversation to both the door in front of him and the ceiling above him.

"Ladies room, I suppose?"

"Yessir, Mr. Ward."

"Been in there awhile?"

"Oh yessir, Mr. Ward." The writer's head dropped in concession. He flipped a look quick look over his shoulder to the large steward. "Get this..." He was leaning in as if to tell a joke. "She's not even my 'missus'." They both had a quick giggle before he wheeled completely around to face the servant. "I guess I'll be waiting then won't I, Charles?"

"Oh, I believe you should, Mr. Ward." He started to turn to his right as Cassie was zipping around the corner, head down, nearly shoulder-blocking the wine-bringer.

"Whoa. I'm sorry, Charles."

"Quite alright, miss. Your plane will be leaving shortly. Gate 34." She was burdened just enough with carry-on luggage to have to really struggle to get into her purse. She flung it up in a way so as to balance it on her knee, while opening it with one hand. Justin was amazed at her deftness in completing this maneuver and almost let her get to what she was trying to do before finally stopping her.

"Don't go anywhere, Charles," she said as she fought to hold her one-legged balance while holding the purse with the other, lofted knee.

"Cassie, dear? What are you doing?"

"I've got to leave him something, he was wonderful." She continued fishing around the handbag.

"Ahem...Cassie?" She stopped momentarily and looked at him. He winked back at her casually.

"It's all set." She stared at him and he just nodded with the eyebrows raised as if to give her the 'okay' sign.

"Oh. Oh, okay. Well, we'd better be off, then." Charles could only smile large and stand rigid.

"Yes, ma'am."

She pieced together the insides of her purse and they headed down to gate 34 in an uncomfortable silence.

"You could have told me. I just made a fool of myself back there."

*Point-Six Percent*

“Yes, you did.” Justin couldn’t keep the laughter out of his voice. “Listen, Cassie, this is your vacation, okay. Enjoy it and leave the money stuff to me; me and Parsec Books. By the way, did they charge you for the plane ticket? If they did, I’ll gladly reimburse you. You said I don’t appreciate you? Well, it’s Cassie Appreciation Week. Okay?” his tone was consoling and actually gentle in a scolding kind of way. She wanted to laugh with him, but there was a pride about her. It was that thing that perhaps drove her to get to a position of some prominence in her life. She bit her lip a little and decided right then and there to let Justin Ward pamper her a little on this trip, if he would be so inclined.

“Call your wife again.”

“Ex-wife. And I will as soon as we land. I’m not talking to her in an airplane. I’ll have nowhere to lie about going.” Cassie just shook her head as they found their way into the line at the gate.

“Is she that bad? I mean you were married to her for quite a while.”

“Almost seventeen years. Let’s just say that she is fastidious with a capital ‘f’, and I did love her a lot, a long time ago. When Zack came along, she changed and maybe I did, too, but in a much different direction. Having Zack, with his handicap, was a real strain on both of us.” He fished in his jacket for his ticket and Cassie took the cue to reenact the now famous purse-balancing trick in order to find hers. “I love him so much, but I just wonder what his life will be like when he has to go out in the world and survive. He gets all my money if this plane goes down. She doesn’t get a dime. But here’s the funny part...she doesn’t want it and that much I believe. All she wanted was the house she’s in, and that I bought her.” Justin had his ticket and ID ready when they got to the agent’s stand just before the ramp to the aircraft. Once again, Cassie had to do the purse trick. She had successfully retrieved the ticket during the first performance, but had forgotten the ID. Justin figured he had to have been just as unprepared the first time he went out on the road. “Hey Cass, do me one last favor before we get to Chicago?”

“Sure.” She was putting herself back together for the trip down the ramp to board the plane.

“Don’t wake me up until we land in Chicago.” He casually headed down the runway with her right behind as if on an invisible leash.

\* \* \* \* \*

Oprah, in person and in front of a national audience, was easier to talk to than Liz, and Justin considered the irony since he was more nervous with the former than the latter. Still, he managed to get through both conversations, as well as a dozen or so telephone interviews in the hotel room, and a quick clothes-shopping trip to the mall that morning before he and Cassie headed out to Los Angeles for the final, but anxiously eventful leg of the trip. Since Oprah was the one and only main attraction in the City of Big Shoulders, Cassie had taken the liberty to use the rest of Tuesday for all the other ‘quick stuff’ that had to be taken care of. There were literary editors and some radio bits that she lined up for him to do. This was the system and although it was several hours of answering the same damned questions, it was undoubtedly best to do them all at once and outside the comforts of home where distraction could happen a lot easier. It was also better to do things with Cassie in the room as she was her ever-efficient self and he was well informed as to whom he was talking to in each segment.

She had become all business in Chicago. Meals were taken right in the room and Justin didn’t get to do much in the way of sightseeing. Night came quick and he fell asleep in front of the television, watching a White Sox game not long after the last interview. He woke up hours later thinking people just never could understand the rigors of traveling.

One thing helped drive him through his whirlwind of the media - the thought about being on that little slice of heaven known to passionate golfers around the world as Pebble Beach. In fact, it wasn’t just golfers who knew what Pebble Beach was. Even Cassie had a notion, placed deep in her brain probably a long time ago, as to the effect of knowing that the words ‘pebble’ and ‘beach’, when verbalized consecutively, had something to do with golf, a game she has never even tried to play. He had asked her to get him an early tee time and he had no doubts that she would come through...Cassie had never not come through.

It was Mecca to golfers...the place dictating at least one pilgrimage in every hacker’s lifetime. It might be the one course in the world that if given the opportunity to play, any sane duffer would gladly fork over his Visa card, despite the fact that he couldn’t necessarily pay his rent, in order to stroll those sacred links. The less mentally stable might try to do it twice in the same day.

*Point-Six Percent*

It was the same thinking he took with him as he shopped around a nearby mall while Cassie stayed to finish making West Coast arrangements, and it was the same thinking he had as they both boarded the plane for California later that afternoon.

Also, in the back of his mind, the writer was getting a little anxious about the meeting with Adam's friend. If this Pollex guy was willing to pay out huge dollars just to have him write a book, well that would be fine with him. In his brain, things were starting to tumble, and he was thinking of ways in which to make just one book work for both this guy and his publisher.

With another time zone came another readjustment. Landing at LAX at around 5 pm PST still represented about eight to Justin's internal, East Coast clock. He was figuring on taking in a light dinner and maybe a movie or more downtime in the hotel. The little nap on the plane offered a few angles on this book for Caster upon waking, and he thought he might try to get them down before sleeping. He pretty much told Cassie that Thursday was going to be his day off and she was more than welcome to do her own thing. He promised that he would be back by early evening if she wanted to have dinner or something. Cassie seemed much more at ease after Chicago.

The meeting with Caster's friend, John Pollex was scheduled at 3 o'clock at some studio lot in Hollywood. The message at the hotel was that he would get picked up at 2:30. That left just enough time to take advantage of that early tee time. He got into the elevator with Cassie and headed for the sixth floor.

"Can't wait for tomorrow."

"Oh, yeah...golf."

"You did get me a tee time."

"Yep. May I ask how you were planning to get there?"

"I was going to have the limo drop me off and then you could take it for the day if you wanted it. I'm sure I could get a cab back to the hotel later."

"Do you know where this course is? The guy on the phone said it would take a while to get there from Los Angeles."

"How long of a while?" Justin wanted to stop the elevator right there.

“He said it was like 300 miles to get there and was I sure I wanted to play at that course.” Justin was getting angry, but managed to keep most of it inside. He wanted to play Pebble Beach. He was unfamiliar with the layout of the state, but he had always associated the famous course with Hollywood types that played it during the pro-am events he watched on TV. How was it that it was so far away from LA?

“He said there were plenty of courses that were a lot closer.” Cassie was trying to make things better than she sensed they were.

“Did you make a tee time?” Cassie was cowering slightly as she understood his quiet wrath.

“I told you I did; seven-forty...something.”

“Good. Let me see what options I have.” They arrived at the sixth floor through an uncomfortable silence.

“Can I still use the limo for the day?” Cassie had strategically waited to ask this as Justin was departing the elevator ahead of her.

“I’ll call you.”

His laptop was opened in an instant and he frantically began searching for directions from LA to Pebble Beach. It wasn’t that he was stupid over the geography of the State of California he just never identified the Monterey Peninsula as being that far away from the Hollywood glitter seen on TV. As disheartening as it was, Justin had realized the obvious; it was not feasible to both play Pebble Beach tomorrow and meet with Caster’s friend. He weighed the dilemma and concluded that there would be other opportunities and he would certainly make the time to play there in the fall. For now, he was back in the yellow pages trying to find a local club worthy of his desire. There were other courses in California that were used by the pros. He would find one of them and for once play his celebrity status for whatever he could get out of it.

About the time he got to the “g’s” in the directory, the phone rang.

“Ward here.”

“Justin Ward? This is John Pollex. Welcome to LA.” It was a warm, but direct voice and although Justin was preoccupied with the alphabetized listings in the book on his lap, he did stop to take note of the outgoing nature of the caller.

“Thanks. I don’t suppose you know a good golf course around here.”

“As a matter of fact, I know a couple. What can I do for you?”

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“Well...not being familiar with the area, I thought I would be able to play Pebble Beach, but that’s apparently on the other side of the world.” The voice on the other end seemed to beam with a knowledgeable delight.

“Oh, no.” there was almost laughter in the words. “But I think I can help you. Ever hear of a course called Riviera?”

“Sure, they played the championship there a few times.”

“And the Nissan Open every year. It’s this little town’s best offering and it’s quite private, but if you want I can put you on the first tee tomorrow at say...7:52. Will that be okay?”

“Umm...Yeah. That’d be terrific.” Justin, usually quick with his words, was pretty much speechless.

“You’ll have to humor a few of my other friends, but if what Caster says is true about your game, you’ll be more than welcome.

“Hey, whatever works for you; wow, how can I thank you for this?”

“I believe I might find a way for you to accommodate me. I’m glad I called to see how you had settled in.”

“Hey, I’m glad, too. Now, I’d like to somehow get out of the tee time I had for Pebble Beach.” Although money wasn’t a concern for Justin Ward anymore, the complete waste of it always was. It would turn out to be an expensive day if he reneged on the first tee time for Cassie would have used his credit card to reserve it, and at the very least, there would likely be a cancellation charge. He would have to do that first thing in the morning.

“Actually, Justin, I might be able to take care of that, too. The pro over there is an old friend of mine and he owes me a favor or two. Don’t do anything. Just leave it to me and it’ll be taken care of, okay?”

“Okay, do you own this town?” The old Justin was getting his voice back.

“No, but you might say that I pay very little rent.”

“At least let me buy you lunch or something.”

“I’ll see you at three tomorrow.” He was ignoring Justin, albeit in a courteous manner, as the phone was hung up on his end. Justin, meanwhile, just held the receiver until he was sure there was no one else on the other end.

“Ward out,” he said to no one in particular and hung up. He was amazed at what just happened and couldn’t help but smile. Pebble Beach

was indeed a Mecca to golfers, but Riviera was certainly the next best thing. In fact, where Pebble Beach was accessible to the public, Riviera was not, so in a sense, Justin figured he was making out in the deal and he told himself that as he picked up the phone.

“Hey...you got your limo.”

“Are you sure you don’t need it?”

“Nope. Gonna play right here in the city. It’s all taken care of. I just need it to get there in the morning. Could you call the driver for me and have him here for 6:45?”

“Sure. I could have him back to pick you up when you want. I mean, I don’t need a limo if you...”

“...I told you to relax and have fun. I’ll even leave you a little surprise at the front desk, too. Now, I plan on being back here tomorrow for dinner. If you want to get together that would be great by me.”

“Are you asking me out?” She was playfully inquisitive.

“Well, if you put it that way, no. I mean...I guess...well...you know what I mean. Is there someone else in LA that you plan on having dinner with?”

“I don’t know...Tom Hanks hasn’t called yet.”

“Why did I bring you with me, again?”

“We’ve already been over that. I keep you in line, remember?” She was teasing even more now.

“Look, if you’re not too busy and you happen to get hungry, I’ll be in the lounge at...I don’t know...six. But I’m not waiting too long after that.”

“Tough to pass up an invitation so tenderly delivered.” Cassie could hardly contain her laughter. “I won’t think about eating until you return.” Her tone was submissively condescending in a mocking way.

“Just be there at six, okay?”

“Okay, chief. Thanks for the limo.”

“No problem. Ward out.”

A shower and a little room service were all Justin was in the mood for. It was getting late and tomorrow would be a very long and exciting day. There were about two-dozen channels of nothing on the television, but he stopped on a dime when he hit an episode of *Deep Space Nine*, another Star Trek offshoot. As he lay in the spaciousness of yet another

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king-sized bed, he began to vision a guy like Gene Roddenberry coming up with this amazing, ever-existing show. In fact, it wasn't just a show. For some people, *Star Trek* was practically a way of life; the ideal that somewhere in our planet's future were stable economies, no more global or holy wars, and people rallied for a greater good...the harmony of the universe.

He was trying to imagine that all of this perhaps could have come about because an outside force was able to manipulate a very young Gene Roddenberry. Or maybe it was because the writer, himself, was some product of an alien intelligence subtly trying to get this world ready for a meeting. The more he watched the re-run, the more he could see the amazing depth of perception that his friend Adam, and his other new friend, the apparent CEO of LA, John Pollex, had when it came to science fiction theory.

He wanted to reopen his laptop and started to roll over on the big bed, but the thought of playing at Riviera in the morning kept him in the prone position. He tried to focus the fleeting late-night thoughts on a golf swing that hadn't been utilized in almost a week. It wasn't Pebble Beach tomorrow, but it was a course the pros play and he was aiming to play from the deep tees. It would certainly be the kind of barometer he was looking for in determining where his game truly was. Shooting a course-record a little over two weeks ago and then rolling a few 68s to go with a 70 last week had been very encouraging to his middle-aged ego.

He was still considered his options for the second half of his life. Most people would have been deeply satisfied with the type of success that Justin had achieved. Justin was not most people. He had a desire to participate in a professional sport since he was six years old. All kids wanted to be Mickey Mantle, Wayne Gretzky, or Larry Bird and Justin was no different. However, by the time he reached 15, it was clear to him that his athletic talents were going to be limited to weekend softball, pick-up basketball games at the YMCA, and inter-mural floor hockey at college. There would be no Wheaties endorsement or commercials for Disneyworld. He would have to be content to join that immense coalition of wannabes who take their games to the practice fields and public golf courses of the world.

*Next year I'll try to qualify for the Open, he thought. I'll try every year until I'm fifty and then I'll try the Senior Tour.*



Golf was one of those sports that carried popularity through its professional personalities. As some of the more enigmatic players aged to the point of not being able to compete with the young guns, a 'senior' tour was formed to give them further audience and thereby reason to keep entertaining. Names like Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus had enormous success with the so-called 'Champions Tour' as have some players who did not exactly fair well on the original tour, but had instead improved with age. Dana Quigley and Jim Colbert made millions as senior tour golfers. Justin wasn't interested in the money so much as he was the knowledge as to whether or not he could compete on that level. The only book he actually read over the past five years was James Patterson's *Miracle on the Seventeenth Green*. It was just the inspiration he needed to consider his own dream of playing professional golf. He now felt like he might have the ability.

He tried to put swing thoughts in his head as he drifted off to dreamland, but images of Cassie kept creeping in, and his subconscious waged a somewhat pleasant battle in a natural attempt to merge the two. There was Cassie in a nice outfit, teeing up a golf ball and Justin showing her how to swing by standing directly behind her. It was like slow dancing, and soon enough, as that notion filtered through his subconscious, they were dancing...in his dreams; only it was in a club, with mood lighting, and soft music and he went from being behind her shapely figure to fronting the curves. She was allowing him to take her into his arms...

Something about hotel telephones...they are traditionally loud. And the author fumbled to answer it when it blared. The first thought that came to his mind was why a fire alarm was stopping the dance he was having with Cassie.

"Ward here...I think." It was the reassurance of the automated system calling him that brought him the remainder of the distance from dreamland to reality. He didn't bother to listen to the rest of the call. The first few computer-generated syllables snapped him right out of his sleep. An automated wake-up call wasn't nearly the same as getting a nudge from Cassie would have been.

After hanging up the phone it was like Christmas morning.

*Point-Six Percent*

There were very few things that could get Justin Ward out of a warm bed at an unusually early hour. A tee time at a famous private course was very near the top of that list, for he sprung with delight from the still sheets and hopped right into a new golf shirt and slacks. They were just some of the things he purchased in Chicago along with a book about young geniuses that he picked up. He thought maybe five years was long enough - time to read another book. He flipped through to find a pair of socks and grabbed his wallet. He'd pick up a hat at the pro shop as well as a new pair of shoes. He was momentarily mad at himself again for forgetting the older more comfortable shoes on the porch. If he had one true weakness it was organization. He knew it and even made fun of it when it came to arguing with Cassie.

Truth was he did need her more than he let on to keep his schedule or he would just drift off in his own world. He had essentially been in that world for the last three years. Liz was the one who had kept his feet firmly planted on the earth. He strode off the elevator and stopped at the front desk to leave an envelope for Cassie. He was waiting for the limo on the curb when it pulled up.

"Still have the clubs in the trunk, I hope." Justin was not just being talkative. He really wanted an affirmation as to his query. The driver nodded sleepily and proceeded to swing around and open the back compartment to assure his rider of the fact.

"Thanks. It's bad enough I left the shoes at home." The unconcerned driver closed the trunk and headed back to the wheel as Justin jumped in the back and handled the door himself. Things didn't have to be formal this morning. There was no one around to put the driver-passenger show on for and that was fine with the rider on this particular morning.

"I thought it was going to be sunny today." Justin was peering out the windows in an attempt to prognosticate on the weather. "They said it was going to be sunny." The driver gave it a minute before feeling a sense of duty and responded.

"It is still early, sir. We should have plenty of sunshine for you today. We'll be far enough out of the city to avoid the fog, too." He said this with a chuckle as if it were funny. Justin didn't get the joke, being an out-of-towner. But the driver was reassuringly authoritative and Justin leaned back with a certain satisfaction. He would get there in plenty of time to loosen up, hit a few balls on the range, make a few putts on the

practice green, and buy a new pair of golf shoes that would no doubt be a hundred dollars more than what he paid for the perfect-fitting ones back on the front porch, some 3,000 miles away. He started to get down on himself a little when he reminded his brain that it was Riviera and he would play it barefoot if he had to. No expense was too great for this opportunity and his MasterCard was due for a workout.

It was a majestic arrival. Normally there would be valet parking available, but no doubt this was not the first time a limousine pulled up to deposit players. Justin chuckled to himself as to the possible reaction at the club back home if he were to limo to his weekly Saturday morning tee time. Now that would be a bit gaudy.

The attendant grabbed the clubs out of the trunk and had them on a cart in no time. Justin flipped him a ten, pulled out the credit card, and headed for the pro shop.

“Ward. Justin Ward. I was told I have a 7:52 tee time this morning.”

“Yes, Mr. Ward. You are all set, compliments of Mr. Pollex.” The counter attendant had noticed the credit card and was waving him off politely as he presented the author with the news. “He regrets not being able to play with you himself this morning as he was hoping for. Is there anything else I can do for you?” Justin was dumbfounded as his brain tried to process what his ears just heard.

“Taken care of?”

“Yes, Mr. Ward; compliments of Mr. Pollex. You are ready to tee off at 7:52. In fact, we are a little ahead of schedule this morning so you might be off before that.” He started to put the credit card back into his wallet when he realized that there was the minor matter of shoes.

“Well, this might sound funny, but I seem to have left my shoes back in Massachusetts.” The attendant was out from behind the counter in a flash and walking his customer right over to a line of Footjoys, Nikes, and Etonics that had Justin’s head spinning.

“Anything in particular, Mr. Ward.”

“Please, call me Justin and I really like Footjoys a lot.”

“Then you’ll love these.” He grabbed an all-white shoe from the display rack. “Like playing in bedroom slippers. What size do you take?” It appeared to Justin that perhaps he wasn’t the only one who really enjoyed getting up this morning. This guy seemed like he was happier than ever to be working right here. Actually, the more he thought about

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it, the more he agreed that next to writing for a living, this might be the best job in the world and worth getting up early for.

“Oh...nine and a half, I guess.”

“Be right back.” He happily trotted off to a back area where Justin knew all the shoes in stock were stored. He took a look at some shirts with the club logo on them and figured on picking one up after playing.

“Try this one.” The salesman wasn’t kidding when he said they felt like bedroom slippers. It was perhaps the most comfortable new shoe Justin had ever slid his foot into. He laced them and took a quick stroll around. Justin had wanted a pair of these anyhow so this seemed like the perfect deal.

He started to go for the credit card again. There might have been a price on them somewhere, but Justin wasn’t concerned with it and he was not going to embarrass himself with asking at this point

“MasterCard okay?”

“For what, sir?”

“For the shoes.” The attendant flashed a welcome smile.

“Thank Mr. Pollex when you see him.”

“Is the man going to let me pay for anything?” Justin was standing there, holding a wallet in one hand and a credit card in another.

“I’ll tell you what...I’ll let you buy whatever you want after you play.” There was an air of comfort in his voice as if he had been through this same scenario before and had developed all the right answers because of past experience.

“Deal.” He placed the card back in its slot and put the wallet away. “I suppose range balls are part of the Pollex program?”

“Oh, of course. You’ll find a few tokens in your golf cart and you’ll find the machine right outside near the cart pick-up area. Everything will be ready in about five minutes and you’ll be playing with Mr. Wagner and Mr. Cooper today. Both are looking forward to meeting you. Enjoy your day here, Mr. Ward; it should be quite entertaining. By the way, my name is Skip, if you need anything.” Justin smiled back at the shop man and headed out to play.

He was halfway to the Range ball dispenser when Skip bolted out of the pro shop.

*Steve Bantle*

“Mr. Ward? Mr. Ward?” Justin wheeled around to see the attendant heading for him in a slow gallop and holding a familiar pair of deck shoes. “Your shoes, Mr. Ward.”

“Thanks, Skip. Please call me Justin.”

“Yessir, Mister...Justin.” Justin winked at him.

“I’ll catch up with you later, Skip. Thanks again.”

It turned out to be a lovely day and as a treat, the Misters Wagner and Cooper he was playing with held celebrity status in their own right. Jack Wagner was a singer/actor who Justin recognized as a member of the Celebrity Golf Tour and a guy who sported about a one handicap. Cooper turned out to be legendary rocker Alice Cooper. Aside from being a favorite of Justin’s back in his teenaged years, Alice Cooper played a lot of golf, was a television pitchman for Calloway for a while, and could boast about a seven handicap. These guys were good and they knew this course, so good old ‘Skipper’ was right about it being entertaining. In fact, it was probably the most fun Justin had on a golf course in the last 20 years.

As quietly awed as he was by his playing partners, The author seemed to be the center of attention for the first few holes. They opted for one cart to carry all the bags because Wagner liked to walk, as did Justin. It turns out that showbiz people are just that...people. And they read books, especially Cooper. He loved a good science fiction novel and had read everything Justin had written to date.

By the turn at number ten, the writer had his mind on his company and not so much his game, which was sailing along okay. The course record was in no jeopardy, but Wagner was already trying to get him to consider playing in the big celebrity pro-am events. This was something Justin had only dreamed of, watching guys like Wagner on television during the Bob Hope Classic or the AT&T event. Wagner was serious and told him he could play as well as anyone on the course and that included some of the pros. Actually, Justin was plus one on the front side, but the wind on some of the holes was giving him a little trouble. But he was hitting the ball very solid and that was comforting. He managed a pair of birdies and one double bogey on the par 3, sixth hole. It’s the toughest short hole Justin ever played, but he would play it again a dozen times if he could. It was also the only hole where hitting a safe

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shot to the center of the green was the worst thing you could do. The green was almost as large as a hockey rink only with a sand trap right in the middle of it. Both his partners got a kick out of the reaction to his first impression of the hole.

The back nine was a little windier and therefore a bit tougher. But Justin rolled in a few putts and saved a bunch of strokes by playing well around the greens on his way to an even par 36. It was the best 72 he ever shot and he was almost exhausted from the mental grind it put him through. Wagner posted a very respectable 75 and Justin received congratulations from his attestors for a great round. Both declined an invitation to lunch, but a few phone numbers were exchanged. Alice was simply looking for signed copies of some of Justin's books. As it turned out, the seemingly mild-mannered, one-time menace of the stage was quite a sci-fi fan. Of course, Justin was more than willing to oblige. Wagner was always looking for a fellow celebrity golfer with the kind of game that Justin showed up with, and he pressed upon the writer to consider a few pro-ams and maybe becoming a member of the course.

Up until that morning, Justin had never considered himself a celebrity. Yes, he did the talk show thing, but he never valued himself one of those guys who played golf on television with Bill Murray or Clint Eastwood. His whole attitude changed as he re-entered the pro shop to buy a few shirts and call for a cab.

The shower was invigorating and his limo ride to the Pollex meeting was timely. Justin had donned one of the new Riviera golf shirts and a new pair of slacks for his meeting. He wasn't too much on sightseeing, especially in a metropolis like LA, but there was a degree of fascination with getting an up-close look at some of the more famous streets in the country. Passing places like Rodeo Drive conjured up comparisons to those preconceived notions he had of the glitz and glitter of the Left Coast. It wasn't exactly Exchange Street in downtown Worcester.

The studio was somewhere in the Hollywood Hills and the driver skillfully wove the big car through the meticulous lots of staging and backdrops to get his rider to the prescribed meeting place. A doorman of sorts escorted Justin through another maze of turns and doors before he was finally led into a conference-type room with cushy swivel chairs and

a large oak table. He figured this was where many a big movie deal was made and that he wasn't the first writer to get to this room.

A door from the other side nearly exploded open to allow a wiry, well-dressed man in his early 50s to stride through. He was a little taller than Justin, perhaps six-foot, one or two. His gray jacket, matching vest and red power tie had high executive written all over it. He threw a generous hand out to greet the writer.

"John Pollex." Justin took the hand and realized that he could have easily been talking to his friend Caster. Although they looked different, both Adam, his neighbor, and John Pollex had a lot of similar features and mannerisms.

"Justin Ward. Thanks for golf today, I owe you one."

"How'd you hit 'em?"

"Often." Justin chuckled over the old line used by many a golfer that hacked at turf.

"That's not the way I heard it. Alice says you've got some game. Adam tells me you own a course record back home." He plopped down into the nearest chair. "Sorry I wasn't able to round out the foursome. Business first." He invited Justin to take a seat, which he did.

"Speaking of business, Justin...I'm sure my old friend Caster has given you the frontline speech on what we'd like." Justin merely nodded. He was still sizing up Mr. Pollex. Here was a guy who knew people. He obviously talked to either Cooper or Wagner or both after golf today probably to see just what kind of guy he was. It was immediately apparent to Justin that this Mr. Pollex was someone who did his homework.

"And the way I understand it, you have already started some preliminary work on a book that would suit our needs." More slow nodding from Justin.

"Let me spell it out." From his inside jacket pocket he produced several pieces of paper. "This is an agreement that would allow us to purchase the script rights to the book once it is written and sent to publication. I have already worked out a deal with your publisher so there is no conflict and they are perfectly happy with me talking to you right now." Justin leaned back in the chair. This had been one of his biggest concerns. He was under contract with Parsec and didn't want to jeopardize that in anyway. But here was a man telling him it was okay

and Justin fully believed him. He couldn't explain it to himself...not at the moment and not even later when he analyzed the event. He just had that feeling that John Pollex was telling him the truth.

"Do you need something to drink, Justin?" He quickly located a button on a console previously unnoticed by Justin and called for some refreshments. "Coke, soda, beer? Something a little stronger, maybe?"

"A diet Coke would be great."

"A diet Coke and my usual." There was no reply, but it was understood that there would be someone coming through a door with two drinks in a mere matter of moments. It was even more obvious to Justin than ever before that John Pollex had incredible power.

"I understand you are divorced and have a son." Now Justin knew he was in a weak position. It was reminiscent of the feeling he experienced when he faced off against a fledgling grandmaster in a local chess tournament once, long before he got married. He had the same pieces as the other guy, but he was hopelessly outmatched.

The man knew a lot about him and he really knew nothing about John Pollex.

"Yes. Apparently I am the father of a budding super-genius." Justin was laughing nervously at his comment, which was aired as a way of breaking the tension he was feeling.

"A super-genius?" Pollex was bearing down on him a little.

"Well, it seems that Zack...that's my son's name...just tested out at like 190 on an IQ test and he might be going to Harvard next year."

"Really? That's amazing. He's only, what, about nine years old?" Again, Pollex had received a lot of information on his subject.

"Almost." Justin was beginning to feel a little better about having to fill in some details of his life to this near stranger.

"Adam tells me he's profoundly deaf, though. That's amazing he could be that intelligent considering the circumstances." Justin was now becoming a little defensive.

"Well, his mother was really smart." Justin was taking a stab at humor.

"Do you get to see him often? He stays with your ex-wife, right?" Justin remained on the defensive although the questioner seemed sincerely interested.



“I get him for the summers and for a week at Christmas.” A young, uniformed man came through the door with a tray of drinks including two cans of Diet Coke with a glass of ice and a large glass of what Justin figured was scotch or bourbon on the rocks. It was yet another similarity that he could draw between Pollex and Adam Caster. The waiter placed all articles on the table and departed as quickly and as quietly as he came. “Have you considered using that notion for a storyline?”

“What notion?”

“A boy super-genius who happens to be isolated by complete deafness. Sounds like the premise for a good story.” His mind was working in a circle Justin had never considered entering. He was always taught to write what he knew, but he never thought to use a person he loved, in their exact way, as a character in one of his books. Sure, he would take bits and pieces of the lives of people he knew and combine them to form his own characters, but there was some merit to using a child like Zack in a plot line just because he was so unique and individual in his own right.

“Well, getting back to business...to make things easy to understand, we get your book and you get a few million dollars from us. This is on top of what you normally get through Parsec Books. That deal with them is totally unaffected by this. You get what every writer wants. You get to sell the same story twice for a lot of money each time.” A sincere smile was starting to take shape on his thin, hardened face, revealing a pair of huge dimples. It was the kind of grin that lets someone in on a private joke and almost required a wink to accompany it

“What’s a *few million*?” Justin wasn’t floored completely by the offer. He knew it was going to be a lot and he just wanted to test the quality of the math being tossed around the room.

“Well, it would come down to a percentage of the box office, but if it makes you feel better, we can guarantee one million up front for the book and between 2 and 5 percent of the gross; could be another 5-7 million.”

“One million, straight up today?”

“I think that’s a fair offer.”

“I think it is, too.” Justin was trying to remain calm, but his heart was lapping his chest as he reached for his glass. “You realize that I’ve never written a screenplay before.” The suit’s smile turned out a slight chuckle.

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“We aren’t asking you to write anything but the book. We have our own people all lined up to handle the movie and I assure you, we will not rip your original work to shreds. We will try to keep everything as close to the text as possible.” He took a hearty swig of his obviously alcoholic beverage while Justin transferred his Coke from the can to the glass.

“It was one of the reasons that Adam suggested you write the book. We both agreed that your previous novels would translate to movies quite well. In fact, it was a little amazing to find that no one had approached you yet for rights to other books.”

“Are *you* interested in the other books?” Justin wasn’t greedy, but he couldn’t resist the attempt to milk this guy out of whatever they were willing to part with. Pollex chuckled again.

“Maybe in the future. Right now, we’re just really interested in this next book. And I believe I can give you a couple of incentives to help you create this all in a timely manner.”

“Oh?”

“Justin, I realize that you spend your summers with your son, but we are hoping for a manuscript by the end of July.” Justin nearly gagged on the soda he was sipping. “I know that is only about seven weeks, but if you can bear down and finish by then, we’ll add a million dollars to the pot.”

“A whole book in seven weeks.”

“It’s two million up front and we really just need an unedited manuscript. Something with an end and something that isn’t going to drastically change once your editor at Parsec gets a hold of it.” He pressed another button on the desk and almost immediately another man entered holding a large manila envelope. He placed it on the table and walked out. “Justin, we would be happy to pay an extra million for your timeliness because in the long run, it will save us a lot more money. In this envelope are several ideas that could help you to develop the story. These are just the brainstorming efforts of some of the screenplay writers on my payroll. Use them if you wish at no penalty. These people are well paid and will not claim any rights to the storylines.” He casually added the contracts to the contents and slid the envelope across the table. “Take it. Look everything over. Have whatever legal teams you want peruse the offer as well. I could arrange for another round at Riviera if that will help you decide faster. I know at times I think better on the golf

course. Either way, I'll call you on Wednesday for an answer." He shot up out of the chair as if he just remembered an important meeting somewhere else. Justin also stood.

"I can assure you, Mr. Pollex that I will agree to at least let you have the rights to the book. I can also assure you that I can't assure you of its completion by a certain date. I will certainly consider it. After all, an extra million dollars is plenty of incentive, but I couldn't promise this in all good conscience." Pollex extended a warm hand of good faith once again.

"Very well. I'll consider it a deal on the first part and I'll still call next week to set up something more formal. Now, if you'll please excuse me, I have a phone call to make. Drey will see you out." Justin turned to find the escort from before standing silently behind him. It was unclear as to whether or not he was there the whole time. Justin didn't think so, but Drey seemed to have a mysterious way about him. He didn't speak. He just turned in a beckoning manner, and Justin dutifully followed.

Once alone in the conference room, John Pollex pulled a cell phone from another inside jacket pocket and quickly punched a series of numbers without even looking at the keypad. He took another large swallow as the call paged through.

"Pollex here. Phase two is apparently complete so let's begin phase three. Can you take care of it soon? Excellent." He clapped the phone closed with a rigid efficiency and then finished the rest of his drink in one gulp before heading back out the door he came through.

## CHAPTER TEN

Justin's head was spinning. He was sitting on two million dollars if he could somehow whip up a book in just under two months. It was the first time in over a year that Justin had even thought about money. It was also the first time in a long while that he had worked under any type of deadline. Granted, he was still good for a few million by just coming up with something, but there was an allure in the challenge of pulling it off. Something in the thought of having mastered the craft to such an extent that he could do it in any time frame. Maybe that was what stuck in his brain...the notion that this was the next level of attainment for him. He had proven that he was a competent author; now the trick would be in how fast he could package a final product. It was a gauntlet, laid down before him.

And Justin Ward could not resist that kind of challenge.

It wasn't as if he were writing for some two-million dollar prize, he was writing to prove to himself, if no one else, that he could do it. It would be another piece of hardware for his emotional trophy case. A way of saying to all other authors, *sure you can write well. But can you do it as fast as I can?* The fires of confidence had been ignited and Justin wore an equally self-assured grin as he reclined satisfactorily in the elegance of his ride back to the hotel.

The fruits of this labor would ultimately entitle the writer to more than enough money to take care of him and Zack for the rest of their lives. As he thought further while passing the remnants of the city's evening commute, it became clear to Justin Ward that meeting this challenge might also signify an end to his writing career and the beginning of yet another adventure. It would only seem natural for the writer to stay at any one occupation for more than a few years before trying something new and exciting. There would be a new mountain for him to climb. If he were to try playing Senior Tour golf, he would need to practice a lot more than he currently did. Writing in comfortable surroundings was the main thing keeping him in Worcester. Maybe he might consider moving somewhere golf-friendly once writing stopped; perhaps take up the offer to join Riviera and move to LA. He shuddered for a moment as the thoughts of what Liz would say about any move to enhance his popularity or lifestyle. Still, there were a lot of things to consider,

including what would become of his son, the newly discovered super-genius.

It was hard to imagine his day getting any better than it already had been: first, a near even-par round of golf at the prestigious Riviera Country Club, and with a pair of celebrities to boot. Then, your everyday, run-of-the-mill, multi-million dollar offer to churn out a book and, oh yeah, they're supplying the story idea. He locked his fingers over his head and closed his eyes. The smile of success was still there. He was almost missing the sensation of driving the Maz around suburban Worcester. He again thought about a move out West, but it was just so damned hot in the summer and forget what Liz would say, earthquakes did happen to scare the hell out of him. Just something about losing everything in one felled swoop really made him quite uneasy.

And then there was Zack. A move out to a place like California would put just that much more distance between him and his son, especially if he was going to be part of some project at Harvard. Maybe in six years or so he would reconsider things. That would be when he would try to play senior golf. He was convinced of his future now. Today's showing on one of the tougher courses out there instilled even more confidence in him that there would indeed be a great life ahead at age fifty. Still, today was a pretty damned good day.

The car pulled up to the Wilshire Hilton and Justin was greeted to the standard royal treatment of driver servitude. He had found his shades in the jacket pocket and flipped them on as he exited the cab. He fumbled around for a bill, which he handed to the driver...maybe a ten, maybe a twenty...he wasn't sure and it didn't matter; at least not today, a day to seemingly end all others. He was about to grab his clubs when the doorman snatched them up and reminded him that they would be placed with his reserved car, the limo Cassie had for the day. Justin smiled and thought, "Yep...about the best day ever."

Only for Justin Ward, the night was still to come.

The post-it note on the door to room 616 was simple, and truly inviting.

*Thanks for the wonderful day!  
I'm waiting in the lounge -*

*Cassie*

Justin smiled as he gingerly pulled the note from the door and entered the room. A quick change of clothes and a freshening up found him on the exact same elevator, heading back down to meet a lovely woman who seemed very pleased with him and according to the note, was waiting for him.

It was close to six o'clock, but it seemed later. Justin figured that his jet-lagged brain was finally starting to catch up with him. He spotted Cassie right away. She was dressed to kill in a slinky black skirt that was thigh-high, revealing a pair of very long legs that were no doubt out for a bit of teasing. Justin had certainly noticed her weight loss from the last time they met, but he had no idea she could look this good. Her white, silky top was a bit more conservative, but not so as to hide a blossoming cleavage. She wore black heels and was nursing something at the bar when Justin gently put his arm on her back to let her know he was there without startling her.

"Hey!" She was genuinely glad to see him and her smile indicated that perhaps she had been waiting through at least a few drinks.

"Been here long?"

"My second one." She held the glass up for him to see. It was nearly empty.

"Hungry?" Justin couldn't help himself from inspecting the cleavage a little more carefully. Being that she was sitting and he was standing, he had the perfect opportunity. Up until now, Cassie had dressed very businesslike and not at all the picture of femininity she was currently portraying, much to the delight of the author.

"Sure." She slid gracefully off the stool and promptly lost her balance on the high heels. Justin half caught her and she used his chest to break the rest of her fall.

"Whoa, there. You okay?"

"I'm sorry." She was trying not to giggle. "I'm not used to these new shoes. Like 'em?" Although Justin was the least bit interested in women's shoes, he learned from Liz a long time ago that when a woman asks about her shoes, they are to be pacified as best as possible without patronizing them. This came from years of marriage.

“They look great and I like the way they match the rest of the outfit.” His charm was as genuine as his compliment and both were seemingly well received.

“Thanks.” She was still leaning a little on his chest as she reached down to right the shoe. Then she slid her hand down the chest letting it gently come to her side as she stepped around him. “You have a nice chest.” This was obviously a line of some playful intention and the automatic comeback ran instantly through his head. He contemplated this next line, the obvious one; the first and only thing he thought of saying. However, he didn’t know how it would be received, and that was always something to worry about when talking to women. He knew the timing was crucial or the line wouldn’t work. Hell, there was a distinct possibility it wouldn’t work even if he did deliver it on time. All of these things raced through the ganglia in his head in a split-second and perhaps his better judgment failed him, but he blurted out the witty response anyway.

“So do you.”

Yep. He said it. It was his voice and he heard it with his own ears. He didn’t say it very loudly; in fact, just loud enough to be heard by someone really listening. He cringed internally as she stepped past him with purse in hand. He figured if she didn’t haul off and whack him with said purse immediately, then maybe she didn’t hear him. That might be a blessing in disguise. His own satisfaction coming from actually saying it and hers from not hearing it or taking it as the sexist remark it totally was.

“Thanks. I was beginning to wonder if you still liked girls.” She headed for the door and giggled in a delightfully unnerving way so as to intoxicate the author who followed her out onto the street. As the warm evening air hit his face, Justin was reminded of something he used to teach in English class concerning William Shakespeare. It had always been Justin’s opinion that the great Bard was quite superstitious and was especially enamored with the number three. Almost all of his writing concerned events and things, both good and bad, that came in bunches of threes. Justin was having what he used to call a ‘Shakespearian’ moment and Cassie was starting to look very much like the third great thing to happen on this already very good day.

*Point-Six Percent*

“I know just the place.” She was leading the charge to the forever-waiting limousine.

“Been there before?” Justin was lapsing back into the old routine with Cassie, but instantly realized that this was not going to be one of those conversations.

“Nope. But I know some people who have.” Justin decided at that point to just let her do the ‘driving’ for the evening as he did in New York. They both took advantage of the driver’s purchased hospitality and entered the rear of the big car.

“I hope you like Thai food,” she said as they got settled into the plush seats.

“Can’t say that I’ve ever had it...” She gave him a look of disappointment similar to that of a child with a hurt feeling. Justin tried to salvage the sadness. “...but, I love Asian food and I’ll try anything tonight.” She perked up and gave him a risqué little smile.

“Anything, huh? Now that’s what I wanted to hear.”

And Justin silently thanked Shakespeare while his heart finished a back flip somewhere between his stomach and his throat. He knew at some point during the evening he would have to explain to Cassie that he would be writing another book for this movie and that it might be his last book ever. She would have to know sometime about the deal. As she smiled at him from across the back of the limo, he figured this wasn’t a good time to spill the beans.

“Want something?” She was rummaging through the available liquors in the door cabinet.

“Umm...sure.”

“Hey, found some scotch.” He wasn’t normally a scotch drinker, but like he already knew...this wasn’t a normal evening.

“Lots of ice, please.”

The lights of LA were just starting to mingle with the sunset as they crossed through yet another intersection. The city was just waking up to nightlife, and its people were busy getting from one place to the next. In a lot of ways, Justin could see where the two cities, New York and LA, were so much alike. Then as they hit a more open stretch of road, where the buildings were sprawled out, he knew in an instant how different they



*Steve Bantle*

also were. The writer decided that no matter what, he would steer clear of metropolis life in most of its forms wherever the rest of his life took him.

The name of the restaurant was *Tommy Tung's* and the line was out the door. Cassie confidently moved to the host's station and whispered something to an oriental gentleman with a very reserved look. He nodded quickly and the next thing, they're in what turns out to be one of the city's hottest eateries. He didn't ask although he definitely wanted to know how it was they skirted the line. Cassie Jones was proving to be far more mysterious and versatile than Justin had ever realized and he was thoroughly enjoying it. Her smile was terribly inviting and he was getting the feeling that the night would end even better than it started. There comes a time when a guy just knows that he's about to hit the bedspread jackpot and Justin's lucky number was about to come in.

No sir, not at all your typical day.

\* \* \* \* \*

The author sprang to a sitting position in the king-sized bed. He was hardly aware of the fact that he wasn't alone as he scrambled for paper and something to write with. It was all in his head. He could see the whole run of the book...the start, the end, the main characters. He had 'seen' them like a composer 'sees' a symphony before it's actually written. It all came overnight, only never this cathartic before. It was just a matter of getting all those ideas out of his brain and onto solid paper before they disappeared.

He unfurled the covers, leapt out onto the carpet and fumbled around in the dark for his overnight bag.

The sudden burst of light from the tableside lamp opposite his side of the bed reminded him in an instant that yesterday was indeed the most excellent day he had ever had.

"What's the matter?" The voice was familiar if not a little altered by sleep. Cassie was using the bed sheet as morning wear.

"Nothing. I need to write things down and I can't talk right now." His tone was not quite frantic, but with a definite urgency.

"Can I help?" She pulled the hair back that had been partially covering her eyes.

*Point-Six Percent*

“Yeah. Find me something to write on.” He was still struggling with the zipper on the computer bag. Cassie calmly reached into the top drawer of the nearby nightstand and produced both complimentary pens and stationery.

“Will this do?” He stopped to see that she had answered his call with exacting efficiency. He promptly dove back into the bed, grabbed the offerings and began scribbling the idea at a furious pace. Cassie just sat next to him for the moment, a little dumbfounded at the intensity he was displaying, and then slowly she snuggled up to his shoulder and closed her eyes.

“It was so simple.” Justin was talking to himself as he normally did in his own house. Cassie perked up on cue. He felt obliged to tell her what he was doing.

“This guy Pollex gave me the idea. If the children are the ones who will understand the message and pass it on, then why not have children, or a child, deliver the message?”

“Message?”

“Yeah...the message that other life outside of Earth is waiting for us to be mature enough to handle their contact.” He stopped for a moment to collect other thoughts. Cassie seemed either mildly interested or somewhat bemused at the intensity of this guy.

“So, what...” He stopped her with the motion of his left hand and she took the hint instantly.

“I need to organize things.” he closed his eyes and furrowed his brow in concentration. She went back to her position on his shoulder.

“Yes! That’s it.” He was back at the pad of hotel stationery. He already had a few pages of notes and flipped to another clean page. “Of course, a science teacher! In the beginning, he could be discussing the theories of interplanetary life to his class. Maybe throw in some Carl Sagan, who by the way believed there were as many as a million industrialized civilizations in the Milkyway Galaxy alone, and that would, in a sense, bring the reader up to speed on the theory involved. Yes. It’s perfect.”

“Carl Sagan?”

“A very famous astronomer. He’s the guy who said there were billions and billions of stars.” He paused for a moment with what seemed like another flash of brilliance. “Yes. Then bring in von Daniken’s ideas

and you've got the scientific base. Oh, this is golden." He returned to scribbling wildly on the pad.

"Von Dani-who?"

"I'll explain later. My glasses, seen them?" He was panning the immediate bed area for the signs of his trusty reading frames. Cassie shadowed his movements.

"I think they're on the dresser next to the TV."

"Yep. Thanks." He leaped out of the bed, snatched the apparatus, flipped them on his face, and was back under the sheets in one fluid motion. The scribbling continued for the next few furious minutes.

At one point, the author paused as she ran her hand over his bare chest. That was something that could stop him in his most intense writing session. It made him realize that being alone for the last few years was a blessing in deep disguise; at least as far as his career was concerned. He paused briefly to explain the scribbling as both a way to bring her into the moment and to take a reflective look at the notes he had pieced together so far.

"Erich Von Daniken." He closed his eyes to collect his thoughts. By now, he was convinced that the story line would stay in his head so he would get it down in out line form within the next fifteen minutes.

"He wrote an actual book titled *Chariots of the Gods* back in the 60s. He tried to make the case that every unnatural phenomenon that ever occurred in history had an explanation routed in the idea that visitors from other worlds came here at a time when they would have been looked upon as...well...gods; henceforth the title of the book."

"I think I remember seeing a movie about something like that."

"Yes, there was a movie. But von Daniken went so far as to conclude that these beings, coming in the form of humans, also propagated our species to what it is today with their own genetic pool."

"That sounds kinda weird."

"Well it is, and let's face it, von Daniken was considered by most scientists as nothing more than a big puffy snowflake and obviously, with no real proof, most of what he theorized was dismissed as corny; but what a fuel for science fiction."

"You know a lot about this guy."

"Actually, I know very little about him. Some of the stuff I just told you has been in the back of my brain for over twenty years. I took an

*Point-Six Percent*

astronomy class in college and got pretty absorbed in the theories of life outside our world. It just popped out when I woke up.” She furrowed her brow a little as he stared at her plain beautiful face.

“It happens this way with me. I wake up and there’s this story. It’s like a gift or something.” He sounded genuinely apologetic. “Hey I don’t argue with it...its how I got here.” She rested her head on his shoulder again. Justin started to write, but after a few words, put the pad in his lap.

“See, there are actually mathematical ways of looking at the probability of the existence of life on other planets. It’s easy if you assume that of the billions of stars in our celestial view, even a tiny percentage...like point-one percent *could* contain planets that *could* sustain some form of life...even life other than that as we know it. Point one percent of a few billion is still a lot of possible life out there. And since our sun is mid-range as far as age goes, there exists further possibilities that there are worlds out there with life that has existed far longer and is so much more advanced than ours.”

“So you’ll present this story from the stand point of a teacher?”

“Yeah, it’s perfect; but, not just an ordinary teacher...one with a very special student. A link between what we are now and what we will be in the future. The kid would be genetically more advanced than other humans. He’ll look like us and bleed like us, but have...” He retook the pad and pen and started to make notes in the margin. “...point six percent better DNA than normal humans.”

“Point six percent?”

“Yeah...it’s a number I remember from Caster’s notes. That’s the genetic difference between chimps and us. This kid turns things the other way. As a child, he’s on the level of most of the world’s greatest minds.” He continued sketching out the story, proceeding into another page of notes.

“Kinda like Zack?” The writer stopped his pen in mid word and flashed a quick but powerful stare at his bedfellow.

“Yeah...kinda like Zack.” A pensive look crossed his face and jumped to hers. She was just making what she thought was an obvious comparison, but was realizing that he had never thought about it totally that way. He slowly went back to writing.

“I could write this in six weeks.” He stopped and looked at his beautiful bedmate. “It’s worth a lot of money if I do.”

“I know; two million dollars and between three to five percent of the box office.” She didn’t so much as flinch when she said it. Justin, on the other hand, let the pad and pen fall back into his lap as he leered again at her inquisitively. “I know about the deal.” She sat up and rested on the headboard. “Justin, who do you think acted as the go-between in the negotiations with the company for the rights to the book?”

“So...you knew?”

“Yup. I finalized things yesterday with that...Pollex guy while you were soaking up the sun on the golf course.”

“I thought you were shopping and lounging around the pool.”

“Hey, I did that, too. It was a short meeting. I am pretty efficient in case you hadn’t noticed.” There was that sexy smile again as she tried to cheer him up. It was obvious to her that he was a little hurt over being in the dark in this lucrative endeavor.

“Look, you get a chance to make a lot of money from both the movie rights and the book sales, which when attached to a movie, usually means a second run at the newsstands; initially, before the movie and then again after it comes out...especially if it’s a hit.” He slowly grinned over the prospects of being filthy rich.

“How much would it cost me to get out of writing the remaining book?”

“Why?”

“Just tell me how much.”

“It would be a pretty hefty sum. Couple hundred thousand. The company is pretty strict on letting people just walk away. I’d have to pull the actual contract.” The all-business Cassie was beginning to emerge. He leaned over and slid her down off the headboard into a prone position and got very close to her. She didn’t fight the motion and smiled at his advances.

“Maybe I’ll take some time off after this and rethink my life. Care to take a little trip somewhere warm this winter?”

“Like where?” She was teasing him back.

“Pick a spot. Anywhere you want, and if you like it enough, we can just stay there for as long as you want.”

“But I’d have to come back to work sometime.”

“Says who?”

“Says me. I’ve got bills to pay.”

*Point-Six Percent*

“Come work and stay with me. Its rent free and I’ll pick up the bills.”

“I don’t really need someone to take care of me. I’m doing pretty well on my own.” She sat up to defend her herself.

“Don’t you get lonely?” She wasn’t exactly smiling anymore. “Cassie, until last night, I had forgotten what it means to have someone besides Zack in my life. I know now I need that someone and I can’t think of a better combination. You gotta admit we’re pretty good together.”

“You’re serious about this aren’t you?” Justin continued to stare into her big dark brown eyes. She wasn’t mad at him or shunning the notion, but she was keenly interested in just how genuine it was. He nodded in deadpan frankness.

“You want me to live with you? Be with you? Like forever.” He nodded in approval to the first two questions and answered the third.

“For as long as it lasts.”

“And what happens if it doesn’t? I’m back on the outs only with no job.”

“Look, if its security you want, you got it. I’ll sign an agreement. You get security. My ex-wife couldn’t be burdened with any of my money, so you can split it with Zack. I’ll even redraw my will. Hell, if Zack’s so damned smart, he’ll make multiples out of what I’ve got.” She was focusing in on him and laid her hands on his. “If we break, you get all the security you want. I wouldn’t ask you to make this kind of commitment without taking care of you...if you want it that way.”

“Well, for one, what if Zack ends up hating me or resenting me.”

“Zack’s like me. He’s pretty easy to get along with.” He stared out into the room in thought of the last line he said. “Okay, he’s probably easier to get along with than me.”

“You got that right.”

“Hey, you know you can keep me in line and I could try a lot harder. Besides, have I been good this trip. Was I not a real nice guy?” It was her turn to nod in agreement. A little bit of the smile was returning to her face.

“How big is your house? I might need some room to work.”

“I’ve got rooms I don’t even use. They’re all yours. Just say yes.” She was face to face with him.

“Take off the glasses and ask me again.” He dropped his head a little to stare over the frames at her. She cocked her head a little and raised an eyebrow of encouragement. He gently removed the specs and gazed back at her.

“Come live with me...please.”

She pierced his sincere blue eyes with hers, looking for a hint of deceit, but it was obvious that the puppy inside the man had just touched the heart of the girl inside the woman. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and whispered her affirmative in his ear, sending the shivers right to his toes.

He couldn't believe that as good as yesterday was, it was starting to look even better today.

“I expect breakfast in bed at least twice a week.” He pulled away in mock disdain.

“Am I going to have to hire a maid?”

“You don't have one, now?” She was equally mocking for she knew he didn't; at least not one he was regularly billed for.

“Is that a deal-breaker? I suppose you won't do windows either.”

“Nope. I do other things.”

“I have an idea what those might be.”

“You have no idea, Mr. Ward.” She was employing a thick European accent that gave her the moniker of a James Bond mistress-nemesis. He raised an eyebrow in amused surprise before popping his head under the sheets. She giggled as he obviously found the right spot.

“Do I have at least some idea?” His voice was barely audible under the covers.

“Maybe.” She was teasing as he popped back out from his investigation.

“So what's the company's cut in all this? How much am I worth to them?”

“They get a percentage of the gross of the movie, too, if that's what you mean. And that means they have a lot of stock in you as a writer who can produce.”

“I suppose that is a lot, isn't it?”

“Oh, it's not that much.”

“You don't think I'm worth that much?”

*Point-Six Percent*

“Me? I think you’re priceless.” She put her hands around his head and planted a quick soft kiss on his lips.

“So does that mean you’ll come away with me, Fraulein?”

“I already said I would.”

“I know, but I just wanted to hear it again.” He jumped back under the sheets.

“For as long as it lasts.” She said this out loud, but to herself and then giggled again as she slid under the sheets to join him. It was only a moment before the covers came flying off with the realization by the writer that he forgot to ask the one vital question.

“You’re not a Yankee fan are you?”

“Don’t tell me we have to watch the Red Sox on television.”

“No. We have to watch all the Red Sox games at Fenway.” They gazed at one another in frozen stillness, like a snow sculpture, as they considered the epic proportions of Justin’s last statement.

“I’ll put another TV in the office.”

“Good thinking, cowboy...and you’ll buy me a Yankee hat.”

“What?” He acted like she was asking Gandhi how he wanted his steak cooked. “Anything else?” She thought for a moment.

“Nope. That’s enough...for now.” She giggled satisfactorily, and they scurried under again, returning the covers to life.

Friday in LA was a lot like Wednesday in Chicago; there were a few tapings and a whole lot of telephone interviews. Justin couldn’t wait for it all to end. He had a lot of writing to do and his basic outline was nearly finished. The writer spent most of the non-stop back to New York putting meat into the major characters and developing a couple of conflicts. Cassie spent much of the flight sleeping and occasionally, Justin would pause to watch her in her stillness. She was truly an angel in his eyes and had he not already hit the literary lottery in the past 24 hours, he might think himself lucky enough to go buy a scratch ticket or two somewhere.

The pair parted ways temporarily in New York, where Cassie had to get her things in order. She figured it would take a few weeks to transfer her office to his house. Of course the company would have to allow this



and both Justin and Cassie agreed that if this became a problem, they would both bolt the firm, no matter what the cost. There were several spare rooms that could easily be converted into whatever space she needed. They had discussed this while waiting at LAX and again at LaGuardia during Justin's hour layover.

The only problem he could foresee was explaining Cassie to Zack. He spent the puddle jumper flight from New York to Worcester trying to formulate just the right way to inform his son that there would be a new guest in the house and that it was someone he cared for a great deal. Zack already had two fathers... why not two mothers, he thought.

Writing a novel in record time was also not part of the equation, but Cassie's presence in the house would certainly be a welcome relief. Adam was almost always available but it would be nice to have someone who could also help out with Zack, especially when the author got on a roll with his writing. And on the plus side was that not only did Cassie appreciate the writing, she understood the rewards and supported it.

Not like Liz.

The more Justin thought about it on the plane, the more he was convinced his son would like Cassie. Hell, he liked her a lot and they were indeed alike in a lot of ways. He closed his eyes for what appeared to be a moment and before he knew it, the plane touched down on runway 29.

As he strolled through the little used terminal, Justin Ward came to several realizations: his son was a super genius, his next book was about to net him somewhere between a couple and several million dollars, and this very hot, intelligent woman was moving in with him.

It didn't even happen that way in the movies.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

A rainy day and a half later, another plane glided onto the same runway. This one had the precious cargo of an almost nine-year old boy and his mother. Zack raced into his father's arms as they spotted each other on the concourse. Liz and Justin exchanged formal pecks on the cheek and the ride back to the house was filled with a degree of nervous tension, especially from Liz who had never been to see the house that Justin bought.

That wasn't exactly true and the ride through Worcester was a reminder of what it was she didn't like about New England. It was cool, drizzly, and just plain dismal. Even in the middle of June, Worcester could hide a summer day better than any other place on the planet. Her apprehension was like the gray underbelly of storm clouds. There was something brewing inside, but whether or not it would happen here was not known. Justin sensed the mild avarice and knew enough to wait on the subject that must be eating at her. It would be awhile before mentioning Zack's future.

She had taken the drive before. The drive that took her out of the ordinary, comfortable, middle-class existence and into a lime-lit, gated community with the rest of the rich and as famous as it gets in Central Massachusetts. Three years had passed since her one and only trip through the postcard perfect neighborhoods of Birch Hill.

It was even more unappealing now than she remembered it. It wasn't that the houses weren't beautiful. They were immaculate. It was just the sterility of it all and more importantly...the phoniness she had always perceived as going hand-in-hand with this type of area.

Liz was the middle of seven kids and they grew up on the very low side of what was considered middle-class. There might have been some deep psychological reason why she felt so out of place amongst this clientele. Maybe it came out of a not knowing how to act or not knowing what the proper thing to say was. The mid-kid had a small-town upbringing and manners, although learned, weren't always practiced in the circles of her society. And one thing was very clear about Elizabeth Ann Riordan Ward Madsen...she hated to embarrass herself and avoided doing so at all costs.

Her ruthless efficiency was what churned the turbine of her success in life and her pleasures were simple. She had always enjoyed the middle class existence shared with Justin. They were a couple of ‘dinks’ - Double Income, No Kids. There was enough money to live on and they had done well over the first eight years of wedded bliss to pay off a bunch of credit cards and student loans, maxed-out in the college years, as they survived on the love they had for each other.

Then the miracle of Zack came along, but with it were a new slew of medical bills and the savings went away. Still, both would heartily agree that it was worth it, and when Justin turned yet another flight of employment fancy into an actual money factory, things seemed to be back on track again.

Only this time it was different.

For most of their life together, Liz had been the chief breadwinner and that kind of meant that she got to call some, if not most of the shots. Plus, they obviously couldn’t afford anything more than middle America until the second book went top ten, bringing with it a big contract worth more money than either had made in their lives, combined. She was no longer calling any shots and that had been yet another reason to get out.

Justin flashed a turn signal and made a right down a semi-secluded drive, past a pair of large stone pillars and ahead about another fifty yards to a large gate. A small brick outpost, similar to a pay-port at a parking garage, stood to the immediate left and an elderly gentleman sat on the other side of a retractable glass shield, which was slightly ajar on this misty afternoon. He was in a brown, security-type uniform from what Liz could tell. It was difficult to make out much more than the face as he was sitting a few feet above the car. The barrier was already rising even before Justin could fully stop to be identified. The Maserati had obviously become well known to the elderly gatekeeper.

“Hey, Frank.” Justin gave him a wave as he passed under the gate while Frank acknowledged by merely raising what appeared to be a Dunkin Donuts coffee mug.

“He’s a real comfort.” It was Liz’s turn to be sarcastic. Zack chimed in from the back with hands flying. Obviously the EAAR was working well enough for him to ‘hear’ what was going on. He feverishly signaled that he liked Frank.

*Point-Six Percent*

“I’m sure he’s a very nice man.” She turned her attention to Justin. “A very nice man who couldn’t hurt a fly.” She was snickering as she said it. She wanted to laugh but the whole idea of having a rent-a-cop at the gate was even more comical to her as an outsider.

“Remember which one it was?” That was part of the problem. She did know which one it was and right where it was. They lived in Worcester for a long time and being away for three years hadn’t completely wiped the memory of the place away. She recalled that fateful day when he showed her the house he bought. He must have figured she would see it and back off her claim to leave if he ever went the way of the snobbery. He just up and bought the damned house and thought it would be impressive enough to change her mind. What it did was solidify her distaste for it and although she never really noticed a change in Justin, she was convinced that there would be a day when she would no longer even recognize him. Maybe that was what she feared losing the most...her own identity and certainly her career. After all, women who live in these houses do not work in any field where they don’t own the company.

Justin hit the garage door opener and turned left. Normally the car would stay in the driveway, but the rain was enough to force a trip indoors. It wasn’t just a garage, it was a three-car, workshop-garage-driving range combined. The shop part was hard to make out through the netting assembled in the other two unused bays. It was Justin’s winter escape area. He constructed the netting and picked up a pair of mats for the purpose of hitting balls in the off-season. Every now and then, when a writer’s block hit or he needed to reason out a scenario, he would simply head down to the heated garage and whack practice balls into the net. It was therapeutic exercise and as noted, Justin seemed to think better when holding a golf club. It also doubled as a batting cage for Zack when he visited and the batting tee was always somewhere nearby.

Liz took a nervous breath and opened the door. It was just enough room for the only child to boulder from the back seat and fly into the house through the side door. He returned in a flash to urge his mother on with an excited, sweeping hand gesture and a perfect little-kid grin, complete with two missing front teeth.

“Someone’s really happy to have you here.” Justin closed the driver’s side door.

“Are you?” The other car door echoed in closure.

“Sure.” He might have been more sincere had this happened a week ago. Now he was just being polite. “You finally get to see what you didn’t want.”

“A three-car garage? Justin, my whole family didn’t need a three-car garage.”

“Your whole family never had the chance to own one. How do you know they didn’t need one, or better yet, want one?”

“I don’t want to talk about this.” She had lowered her voice so the EAAR might not pick up her voice.

“Okay with me.” Justin was next to her and both were near the door. Zack had already headed off. “After you.” He was going to be gracious and unaffected during her stay. She still looked good to him, but Cassie was so much in his mind that he had to keep from saying her name when addressing the ex.

The tour went as quick as could be expected. Liz gawked and gazed at everything from the solid oak banister to the Leroy Nieman originals on the walls. Nieman had a distinct style that Justin found peace in. He was also a contemporary sports artist and many of the paintings Justin had acquired were of famous scenes in golf history, most notably the putt on #17 by Jack Nicklaus at the ‘86 Masters when the Golden Bear stabbed in the tricky 20-footer capping off a stunning charge to yet another green jacket.

Another one of Justin’s favorites also came out of the Masters. It was the Tiger Woods fist-pump on the final hole after destroying the rest of the field at the ripe old age of 21 to claim his first jacket and serve some notice of his impending greatness.

Augusta National Country Club, like Riviera in LA, was a very private course and one he would give any amount of money to play. As Liz moved on to another section of the house, Justin found himself staring, as he sometimes did, at the paintings while contemplating a way to get on that golf course. Someday he would.

Liz broke the trance with another gasp.

“This is your office? It’s bigger than my living room.” Her attitude was segueing from contempt to wonder and Justin picked up on it quickly. He noticed the tone change when she moved through the big kitchen and began to realize how sometimes bigger is okay. The island

stove in the middle was especially interesting to her even though cooking was never a strong suit. Justin had been the one who prepared most of the major meals in the Ward house for all of those years although they spent a lot of time eating out until Zack came along.

“All this space. I can imagine what it looks like upstairs.”

“Oh, you don’t have to imagine. Just head on up.” He signaled over to Zack who was following at a distance and squealing every time his mother would smile. She had a few times, too. It was as if there was disapproval of this mini-mansion for the sake of chastising the owner while all the while a tiny part of her might have tolerated living in all this.

“I suppose I’m going to have this huge room.” It was an anticipatory comment for they were still at the bottom of the massive winding staircase.

“It’s just a guest room, and it’s smaller than either mine or Zack’s.” He had actually figured the likelihood of her question and was ready for the best answer. There was another guestroom in the house and he picked the smaller of the two for her. In fact, aside from the laundry room and the bathrooms, this *was* probably the smallest room in the house and it would help to ease her fear of wealth and luxury to know she was in the tiniest room he could offer her.

“Zack. Show your mother her room. The green one.” He was signing as best as could, considering his lack of practice. Zack nodded, squealed a little again in obvious delight and raced up the stairs, stopping at the top to beckon Liz to follow.

“Go ahead...I’ll get your bags from the car.”

As was his custom, Justin spent a portion of the chore talking out loud to no one in particular but himself. Among other points that he internally discussed were a desire to have Cassie here instead of his ex-wife and how his secretary might have perceived this current arrangement had she unexpectedly dropped-in. This wouldn’t have been possible, as the author further reasoned, for she wouldn’t be able to get past the gate without a phone call. Even still, he was wishing for different company. It was already proving to be a trying experience that he could be doing without.

The bags weren't too heavy and that meant maybe the stay wasn't going to last very long. The idea was for them to meet with some folks at this Project Zero place, located somewhere on the Harvard Campus, as he was informed of on the ride over from the airport. This would be happening sometime tomorrow afternoon. That meant things could be resolved fairly quickly, and she could get back out of his life.

As he toted a pair of suitcases through the kitchen towards the stairs, he also came to a couple of other conclusions. One was that he might want to consider getting a servant after all, and two was that deep down he really didn't mind, too terribly, seeing Liz again. They were, after all, once very much in love and he would like to tell her about Cassie in person. He would, however, wait until the end of the visit for that little bombshell.

"You didn't have to pack rocks," he shouted up the stairs. "I have plenty of rocks in the back yard." He was trying to be funny, but it was Zack who came to the railing and signed a squeally reply. Justin was saying out loud what his son was signing.

"Mom...says...only...rocks...in...your, my...head." The author chuckled at the slight.

"Very funny." He signed back and grabbed the cases as he headed up the semi-circular staircase. "Very funny, indeed." This was said only for his benefit. In the last few years of the marriage, Justin had turned talking under his breath into an art form. He had learned how to get the last word in any argument without her actually hearing it. Yet, it would be loud enough to satisfy the level of tolerance that testosterone would allow in the human male.

It was decided that Pizza Hut would be the perfect place to go; Zack's choice. It was obvious that both Justin and Liz were reminded of those first times when they, as the happy Ward's, would venture out to the very same place to have a family meal. Part of Justin wanted to have that back and part of him couldn't help smile occasionally through the once customary antipasto appetizer.

Up until then, there had been no discussion on Project Zero except what it was and when they were going. Justin had tiptoed around the pending conversation until they were in public. Strategically, this was the

best way to win an argument with Liz. She didn't like making scenes and there was sure to be cause for one in this event.

"So, tell me what you know about this Project Zero." Justin even carefully waited for her to place a forkful of lettuce in her mouth before asking. She swallowed a little and talked through the rest.

"It's not necessarily associated with Harvard. They house the project and have some input. It's a place for extremely intelligent kids to go and learn."

"And this is bad for Zack...how?"

"It's not bad for Zack." She had finished ingesting and put her fork down. This usually meant that the tone of the discussion was going to change. Justin also put the fork down. Zack stopped chewing. He wasn't allowed to bring the EAAR with him to the restaurant and this was most likely the reason why. He sensed a color change in both Mom and Dad and that was enough to stop eating. "It isn't bad for him...it's just so much, so fast. I'd like to have a little time to see what they mean about his intelligence. I'll be honest with you, Jay I never realized he was this kind of smart. I mean I knew he was a bright kid, but a super-genius? I didn't see it and neither did Peter."

"Neither did I at Christmas time." He was not just being agreeable for that was the truth. He took the break in the conversation to segue. "So how is Petey these days?"

"Don't start on that. Do you think we can get through this without going down that road?"

"I suppose. He's doing well I take it?"

"He's fine." She picked up the fork, but only used it to poke at the leafy stuff on the plate before putting it down again. "I know what you're thinking. Zack could move up here and live with you for the school year and then have his summers in Florida. Believe me, I've thought about it, too. It would be easier on both Peter and I, but I would miss him so much, I don't know if I can just let go like this. I was supposed to have another ten years to get over him leaving for college."

It was Justin's turn to play with his food. Zack was busily working on a piece of ham. The colors were starting to work themselves out. He had seen the both of them like this before. The colors were very familiar, so he knew they were having a decent discussion and not the real angry bouts they had when he was younger.



*Steve Bantle*

“Well, if that’s what’s worrying you then just keep things the way they are and have our son waste his ability in a public school that is mediocre at best. This is friggin’ Harvard. What do you want to do, hold him back and then in eight years see him off to some local state college so he can be close to his mommie? Liz, he has a chance to be great. He has the chance to show people that his handicap is not a hindrance.” The teacher-preacher was coming out of a place hidden for many years. It was like he was back in English class.

In those teaching days, at least once a week, Justin’s classes would be treated to ‘Mr. Ward’s motivational speech of the week’ – or so it was named by one of his wittier students. These were unplanned as to when they would be aired out and to which class, but they were emotional and were often aimed at either a social injustice or a retrospect on what growing up fully entails. One way or the other, something would trigger one of many uplifting, moralistic, you-can-do-it speeches that made him the popular teacher he ended up being. This had the makings of one of those orations, with its passion and logic neatly woven and ad-libbed. He was good at speaking off the cuff, and even better when he had the time to create.

His writing exploits had rewarded him with several invitations to speak around parts of Central New England, but his ability to turn words into emotion and drive was also winning him higher profiled engagements and even requests to speak for honorariums.

Like Superman, though, Justin Ward had a weakness, a villain of arch-nemesis stature in the form of an ex-wife. Liz was pure Kryptonite for she had heard it all before and could remember what this once skinny college graduate was really like. She missed that guy sometimes, but she could always see right through the apparent big ‘S’ on his chest.

“Look, don’t waste your ‘betterment of man’ speech on me. This is my son were talking about and I’m not going to just let him go off to college at age eight.”

“He’s almost nine and I think I still have a say in this, too.”

“And I suppose you’ll just drop everything and take care of him? What about your writing?”

“I can switch things around. I’ll write in the summer and play dad in the winter.”

*Point-Six Percent*

“Oh? And I suppose you’ll just hang up the golf clubs again?” He frowned at this and Liz knew she got under his skin just a little. The Kryptonite was working. Golf was loaded with the stuff.

“Look, the deal I have with Parsec is for two more books and I have a few years to get it done. I can write during the summer instead. In fact, I might be writing this summer. I could also write while he’s at school and at night when he’s asleep, like I used to. This is an amazing thing and I think we should give Zack every opportunity to try even if it is totally new.”

The pepperoni, extra cheese pizza arrived at a very opportune moment and there was an immediate break in the negotiations. Zack leaned over to get a good whiff of the steam rising off the main course. He gave both parents a Roger Ebert-sized double thumbs up. Once everyone had garnered a share of the delight, Justin picked up at the point of stopping.

“Besides, I have a deal on the table right now to write one last book for enough money to set me for the rest of my life, and Zack’s, too.” Liz had a thing about money. She never had it and had taught herself that there was evil at its root. To some extent, that might have been true, but with Justin, no matter how hard she tried, she just couldn’t see any true rottenness. Still Liz was a little interested in knowing how much was enough for her ex-husband.

“Humor me with a number.”

“Well, it’s not just a book. The rights have already been sold to Hollywood and they’re planning on turning it into a Spielberg-type movie.” This did get Liz’s attention. Something deep inside her wanted to smile big and congratulate him for being the success he was, but that would be like giving in to his calling the shots again and she just could let that happen right now.

“So, you write movies now, too.”

“I don’t write ‘em. Someone else takes the book and turns it into a movie. I just get a boatload of money to come up with the original story.” She was staring at him and Justin knew from the look that he still had to finish saying more about it...like the price tag.

“It’s anywhere between two and five million dollars. Throw in the book sales and a huge box office and it could double.” She dropped her jaw. It was really hard to believe that the Justin she knew for almost twenty years was able to command this amount of wealth. He was talking

about ten million dollars. He noticed the surprise in her expression and tried to minimize the impact of the deal. "It's at least two million so long as I finish the basic storyline before the end of July."

Zack had perked up from his second piece of pizza in response to the sudden change of colors. His mother's green and black combinations let him know that she was not happy, and surprised while the reds and purples from his father meant he was satisfied with the conversation. Zack took this to mean Justin had prevailed in the negotiations and started signing about college. Justin held up his hands and motioned for him to calm down.

"Slow down, Zack." Justin was trying to figure out what his son wanted. It was clear he was excited, but he did as was asked.

"He likes the idea of going to college." It was plain to see and hear that Liz was being out voted, 2-1 in the matter.

"So then it's a deal?"

"Can we at least just visit the place, first?" She knew this was becoming a losing battle. Even Peter pretty much went with at least giving the experiment a try.

"Look, he wants to go and I think it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience. This can't be bad for him."

"It's not bad for him..." She was grasping for a reason when there was only the truth left for her to blurt out. "...it's bad for me. Me. His leaving like this at this age is bad for me...and I count in this, too." Justin stopped in mid chew to consider her outburst. Even Zack stopped for he saw the rapid change in color come across his mother. It was the deep blue of sadness and it made him sad as well.

"Okay, let's just see the place tomorrow and not talk about it anymore, tonight." And with that, the Wards of old broke bread in silence for what seemed like an hour.

Finally, as she was finishing her first piece, Liz took the opportunity to revisit the issue of selling books.

"So tell me how you get to write a two million dollar book? What fool is paying you this silly amount of money to tell a story that you essentially make up about the future?" Justin put down his pizza while contemplating the question. It was intended to ridicule his line of work and it did get his attention. He casually dispensed the details while Liz picked off a piece of pepperoni.

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“This guy in LA is a longtime friend of Adam’s and together they have been looking for someone to write about a certain topic.”

“So good old Adam had something to do with this...” Justin ignored her slight of their mutual friend.

“So this guy turns out to be some Hollywood big shot and he’s talking in millions for a book I haven’t even written so they can turn it into a movie and all of it if I can get things done by the end of July.”

“So you mean to tell me that you’re planning on writing for part of Zack’s summer?” Justin knew where this was going.

“Look, it’s two million dollars and if this Harvard thing works out, I can easily take Zack for as long as any special school or college would want him.” She had that look of disgust and Zack stopped chewing for the first time since the pizza arrived. That deep red color was back and that usually meant bad things.

“Tell me that you’re working for Steven Spielberg. Tell me you’ve been on Oprah a few times, tell me that this is not happening. I don’t want him to be that far away from me. Money isn’t everything.”

“Maybe not, but it sure goes a long way. I’m not ashamed of the money I have. Do I think I worked hard for it? No. But if a guy like John Pollex wants to hand over two million for words I write then that’s fine with me.” He settled back in his seat across from her. She had the distinct furrowed brow of confusion on her face.

“Did you say John Pollex?”

“Yeah...that was the name of Caster’s LA friend. He’s the guy I talked to last week.”

“Spell it.”

“I don’t know. Pollex; P-O-L-L-E-X, I think?”

“Describe him to me.”

“Six, six-one, thin...kind of wiry with deep dark hair. I don’t know...I’d say he was maybe in his early fifties. Why? Know him from somewhere? Old boyfriend maybe?” Justin was kidding with the last comment. Liz would never have known anyone like the guy he met that day.

“Probably not. Its probably nothing, could be just a coincidence. I met a guy by that name and who sort of matches that description, but it was back in high school. He would have to be almost seventy now. I’m pretty sure his name was John Pollex.” She didn’t think it was his name...she

*Steve Bantle*

*knew* it was his name. Her memories were allowing her to float back to that day when he spoke and then later told her about Daemen College. What a wild coincidence it would be if it had been the same one. Maybe he was related. “Hmmpf...maybe it was his son.”

“Look, there are probably a hundred guys with the same name running around out there, Liz. Liz?” She was back in a Worcester Pizza Hut, again, pulled from the blissful innocence of a high school memory.

“Yeah?”

“Were you listening?”

“Yeah.” For whatever reason, for the rest of the day, she couldn’t stop thinking about John Pollex, circa high school.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

At its core, Harvard is the quintessential epitome of what an antiquated New England college is supposed to look like. It has buildings as old as the freedom of the nation and money within its walls even older. As the Maserati made its way around the campus it was clear to Justin that this was not Buffalo State College and he might have really enjoyed being at a place like this. However, that being said, it was not the Harvard one thinks of when they hear the name, or picture in the postcards of their minds. This was the 21<sup>st</sup> century Harvard and the complex covered a few dozen streets while sprawling out over a section of Boston the size of a small suburb. Harvard wasn't the kind of place that was strolled from one building to the next in cardigan sweaters as one might imagine. This was the image Justin had in his brain, but that got shattered quickly as they crept through the main body of the campus in search of a place called Longfellow Hall. This was a Harvard that required bus transportation from dorms to classes and from classes to other classes.

"This place is huge." The awestruck words of the former Mrs. Ward were ringing in Justin's ears. He was thinking the same thing and was also beginning to rethink his insistence on Zack's being part of it.

"It should be right about here, somewhere. Adam gave me directions and I thought I understood them. The graduate school is supposedly straight ahead and that's where this place is."

"Men and directions." It was cliché, but in Justin's case it was also appropriate. He learned things by doing them and that meant things he hadn't done at least once before generally came tougher. Once he did something a first time, it was pretty much rote after that.

For the record, he had never driven through Harvard, much less attend there.

"You could ask someone."

"I see a sign and this is the right way to go."

Zack was also looking in amazement and felt a real sense of delight as they passed the places where some of the world's best minds were formed. Unlike yesterday, it was mostly sunny outside. However, it was still not warm enough to warrant air conditioning so the lone Ward child

was basking in the wind of the open window much like a puppy. It was a good place to be, he thought.

Justin made a left-hand turn and found the right building after touring both the entire Harvard Graduate School of Education and the parking lot a few times. They were expected and much to the surprise of Liz, well-prepared to receive Zack. The first person greeted him with a variety of quick hand signals, and Zack excitedly replied in kind. One thing about the boy, he was very outgoing and not to a fault. It was a temperament that won him friends very easily, not counting the Richie Bakers of the world.

There were several doctors and those with doctorates for them to exchange greetings with, and Liz was a little more comfortable knowing there was at least a semblance of a medical staff behind the project. The trio was escorted through a series of checkpoints before meeting up with the Moncton's – Rob, Melissa, and J.J., another apparent boy genius who surprisingly also had a handicap. Unlike Zack, J.J. was completely blind and had been from birth.

Rob and Melissa, it turned out, were both college professors at Pepperdine University. Rob's work had apparently appeared in various geological publications and Melissa was writing some kind of thesis on the evolution of a particular earthworm. Revolutionary stuff, thought Justin.

The Moncton's, on the other hand, were delighted to meet the author, especially since they both enjoyed reading his work. Liz decided to forego the clumsiness of explaining her different last name and just kept her introduction to a simple, 'Liz'.

She had begun to notice how there was a time when she used to read a lot, but once Justin became a bestselling author, she lost interest in books. It was probably when she started to lose interest in being Mrs. Ward, too.

“Follow me, folks while I give you the nickel tour. We were fortunate to have both of you here at the same time. You both have a lot in common, especially in that both your sons have amazing intelligence and with debilitating handicaps. It'll be a joy having them here.” This was the elder spokesman of the group, Dr. David Antares. He had a presence about him that made Justin immediately think of Caster and subsequently John Pollex. Dr. Antares had that swagger, built within a tall, thin, wiry

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frame. He moved with a confidence and had a certain charm with which he might easily persuade a Chevy salesman to buy a Ford.

The next few hours were filled with a myriad of informative discussions and answered questions at which the staff on hand seemed to possess major amounts of knowledge. Even Liz had most of her deepest inquiries explained in a way that seemed to satisfy her. The two families also seemed to have a lot of similar interests and as Justin found Rob Moncton to be intelligent and engaging, Liz and Melissa learned they had a very common upbringing.

As for the two boys, they immediately bonded, which was truly amazing seeing that J.J. couldn't see what Zack was signing and the other couldn't hear what the former was saying. At first, they used one of the assistants as a go-between, but soon discovered there were other ways to communicate. First it was through touch. Hand in hand, they were able to manipulate the fingers of the other to form a crude, but useful basic language.

But there were even more complex ways to interact. It wasn't too long before Zack could see in his mind what J.J. was thinking and realized that his new friend could do likewise. Liz noticed this first and then some of the staff began to feel there was something going on between the two.

Once the tour ended, the Monctons offered to take the Wards for dinner. It was nearing four o'clock so they agreed to the invitation. Since the Monctons were from California, Justin stipulated that he would buy since this was his town and they could return the favor the next time he was out West.

They talked before dinner, during dinner and for most of dessert. The boys didn't have to talk. They just enjoyed sitting next to each other and smiling or otherwise reacting to what the other was thinking. It was eerie to see J.J., as blind as he was, able to stare right at Zack as if he did have eyes. In a way he did. They were his inner eyes much like Zack's inner ears.

It was part way through a couple of pieces of cheesecake and something called a Fudge Brownie Surprise that the conversation took an interesting turn.

"So how did you two get together?" This came from the earthworm expert who had two glasses of wine with dinner. Until this point, Liz had made an extra effort to not identify the fact that she and Justin were no



longer a couple. Had it not been for the fact that she was enjoying the company of the woman, she would have not agreed to the dinner invitation.

“Well it was pretty happen-stance,” Liz calmly responded while flashing Justin the look. Justin knew to stay quiet and follow her lead. He had been doing as much for most of the visit. “We were fixed up on a blind date.” Justin smiled at her, but only because of the lie she was spinning. She had a little wine, herself and was getting imaginative. “I guess it was love at first sight.” She was clearly acting for the Moncton’s sake. Justin had to keep from laughing out loud at the inside joke. The lady professor was almost a little too ecstatic over that fact.

“Sounds just like Rob and me. With us, it was fate, I tell you. And I’m not a big believer of fate.” She was fumbling in her purse for what eventually turned out to be a picture wallet. “We had the most wonderful wedding. I was from the mid-west originally and so many of my old friends from home made in out to the big day.” She started flipping through the pictures while Liz casually looked them over as a courtesy. “We’ve been together for almost fifteen years and J.J. turned out to be such a little miracle for us.” The words she spoke along with a wedding party picture made the hair on the back of Liz’s neck stand up.

“Jay, take a look at that. Recognize anybody in this picture...say the third guy in from the left?” Jay wasn’t one to look too closely at a stranger’s wedding pictures. Sure they were good people, but he wasn’t about to saddle up to this California couple without really getting to know them first. He swung the picture around to see what celebrity was part of the Moncton’s life.

“Whoa. That looks like that Pollex fella I was telling you about.”

“It is John Pollex. Where do you know him from?” Rob had chimed in now in a very interested manner. “He’s been a friend of mine for almost twenty years. He was the one who set me up with Melissa.”

“This is the guy that’s buying the rights to my next book.”

“And that looks a lot like the guy that convinced me to go to Daemen College.”

“I almost went there.” Melissa was wide eyed. “I decided to go to Pepperdine instead. That’s where I met Robbie.” Liz new it wasn’t John Pollex’s son, it was *him*. And he looked a lot like the guy she met almost twenty years ago. She was positively sure of it.

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“He was my best man at the wedding. I met him at some student rally where he was recruiting extras for some film he was working on. Funny, I never got in the movie, but he and I became really good friends. He has the most beautiful house just down the road from us.”

Liz was throwing looks at Justin the way Ali used to throw jabs to Frazier’s head. Justin went from being wrapped up in the moment of coincidence to being overcome with a weird sense of abnormality. Coincidences are one thing, but this was really freakish in a scary kind of way. Both the Wards and Monctons found more than one thing they had in common besides gifted sons.

“Sooo, what made you *not* go to Daemen?” Liz was looking for a Pollex connection.

“Actually, I was going to go there because, like you, I was interested in nursing and this guy said it was a great place to go. They even offered me a scholarship, but then Pepperdine had this research program and...”

“So you knew John Pollex before you met Rob?”

“Oh no, I didn’t meet him until we moved down the street from him...about fifteen years ago.” Liz continued the query.

“So then who told you about Daemen?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” Melissa was nearly blushing for it was obviously an embarrassing story.

“Try me.” Liz’s pleasant smile was hiding the tiger inside, on the prowl and looking for the target.

“Well...I feel funny telling this. See, when I was in high school, I was a big fan of all the *Star Trek* shows.” This perked Justin’s ears up the way a cat reacts to hearing the electric can opener. He was a Pavlovian dog and Melissa quickly noticed so she directed the rest of her response towards the author. “That’s probably why I love your books so much. I know it seems weird, but I just love those shows.” Justin smiled and for the first time saw a beauty in her that he hadn’t noticed before. She had shoulder-length, reddish-brown hair but her smile was adorable and even the little giggle-laugh she had was just contagious enough to make Justin smile back.

“It’s not that weird. I’m a very big fan as well.”

“Yes, but I even went to a convention once in St. Louis. That’s where I ran into this guy who started talking to me and the next thing I know an hour goes by and I’m thinking seriously about going to this dinky little

college somewhere in upstate New York.” She had this wide-eyed look that bordered on embarrassment while Liz recoiled ever so slightly, especially on the word ‘dinky’. It was the place she spent four years of her life. “I know...kind of weird, but at the time, I really didn’t know what I wanted to do. I was good in school and could have gone to a number of colleges, but there were so many choices.” Liz was looking right at the woman with incredulous eyes for this was almost exactly her story minus the involvement of John Pollex.

Justin was also staring at this woman for this was almost his story, too, only it didn’t involve a college. Rob put an arm around his wife.

“What was the name of that guy at the convention, honey?” He was asking her for it was apparent he was told once, but at the moment, couldn’t remember.

“I think it was Adam. Adam something.” Justin started to say the word Caster, but before he could, Rob jumped in with the last name.

“Caster. Adam Caster, right?”

“Yep. That was his name. He was the guy pushing one of the new series at the convention and wouldn’t you know it, that show was on the air about a year later. Pretty weird, I know.”

“You have no idea.” Justin was looking at Liz who was sitting back in the booth seat with a wild look of astonishment. This wasn’t funny anymore, it was just plain scary. Justin knew the evening with the Monctons would be coming to an abrupt end and through no fault of theirs. Liz didn’t look too talkative anymore.

“Oh, hey, look at the time. Geez, we should be getting on the road. It’s an hour drive and I have to touch base with my publisher sometime tonight.” This wasn’t entirely untrue. It was late, almost six o’clock and Justin wasn’t fond of night driving, especially in Boston where construction was always the word of the day, everyday, and figuring out where to pick up the Mass Pike was an adventure even in the daylight. The check had already been paid so all that was left to do was exchange numbers, addresses, and well wishes before parting ways.

The ride home was like being in the eye of the hurricane. Justin knew there was a lot of wind out there and it would be coming, but how much and when was anybody’s guess. He just drove in near silence....waiting. It was Liz’s grandfather who gave them the advice on their wedding day: if you want to hash something out, get in the car together and start

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driving. Then, when you're far enough away from home, do your arguing. That way, no one can leave, and both sides get their say. It was pretty good advice and he and Liz had some great disagreements while in the car. The thing about arguing in the car is that because there is nowhere to go, you tend to ease off on the other side a little because you hope they'll ease off on you. Mutual respect for the other's ability to tear you to shreds made for a more civil debate. Justin was waiting for the first salvo, but it never really came.

Meanwhile, Zack was excited in the back seat for he really bonded with J.J. It was tough for Justin to make out what he was trying to say because he was also trying to keep some eye contact with the road, but he picked out that his son was really looking forward to seeing J.J. again at Harvard.

It was a good thing the conversation never really started because Justin might have just flat out agreed that maybe taking Zack away from Liz wasn't such a good idea. Still, in his heart, he knew the challenge would be terrific for his son and in turn, his son would be closer to his dad.

Liz still had that dazed look, still consumed by the recent turn of events. Occasionally, she would half mumble something to the effect that it didn't make sense or it couldn't be the same John Pollex. Justin was wondering if the back half of the storm would hit after all.

Just before they hit Worcester, Liz pulled out her notebook from the tour and flipped through some of the pages. There were other papers that she picked up in her travels and which were ready for her when she asked the appropriate question. She had been thorough; so much so that she even got the names of the parents of several other kids invited to Project Zero or already part of it. She stopped at that page with those names, marked it with a paper clip and put it back in her purse. All Justin knew was that she finally seemed at ease with the evening. Zack was also at ease, fast asleep in the back seat. He had a happy look about him and that also reassured Justin that Zack needed to be with kids who really understood him.

Once the boy genius was tucked in for the night, Liz took a moment to sit on the big sectional couch in the living room. The few glasses of wine at dinner had long left her system and she was getting as comfortable as possible in this cavernous dwelling.

She had changed into a pair of sweatpants and sneakers and was sipping on some Diet Coke found in Justin's refrigerator when he returned from the upstairs.

"I need to take a walk. You don't have a beach handy, do you?" There was a hint of the old Liz sarcasm in the benign request.

"Fraid not. But the guard is posted 24-7 so you don't have to worry about getting mugged." They both laughed a little. "Want some company?"

"Thanks anyway, I usually walk alone. It clears my head and I really need to do that right about now."

"Okay. The front door is always open. I'll probably do some writing or check out the Red Sox."

"The Red Sox. Now that is something I actually miss about being in Florida. All they have are the Marlins and Rays it's just not the same."

"Why not stay a few days. I think they're back at Fenway starting tomorrow night. I'm pretty sure I could get an extra ticket." He was being understanding largely because he could feel the trepidation she had over this Project Zero thing and especially after discovering those unsettling coincidences involving Adam and his friend Pollex. Justin had spent a great deal of the ride home kicking the facts around in his head, but it seemed like there were still just too many questions to come up with an explanation. Liz meanwhile, was smiling at the notion of revisiting Fenway Park. It had been awhile. Still, she didn't want to get too close to her ex and she needed to get to work on the rest of the names in her notebook for her impending investigation. She had taken most of the week off and that time would be used to track down some of these people, many of whom lived along the East Coast.

"I appreciate the offer, Jay. I assume you have tickets for the season?" Justin just nodded without needing to elaborate. "I have to be back to work. Besides, I don't want to leave Peter alone for too long...he might write a book or something." She couldn't resist digging him whenever the situation would merit. He just smiled while letting it slide. It hadn't been delivered with any real teeth in it. It was more a playful barb exchanged among friends and perhaps that was what they had finally evolved into...friends.

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“Thanks for the soda.” She held up the can to acknowledge having it and carried it with her as she headed out the door, into the dusk, to walk the poured concrete beaches of Birch Hill.

Justin retreated to his computer and sat reading some of the outline he had drawn up. He had fine-tuned the first half of the novel into chapter descriptions and was nearly finished with fleshing out the characters. This was his way of creating. It was like he was the director of a play and could mold the actors into whatever was required to make the story work best. The more he read, the more he realized that the coincidences laid out at dinner would be very effective in creating a mystery. That would be the new direction of the book – a mystery with a science fiction twist. It would be a little off his beaten path, but a mystery-thriller seemed like a real challenge and maybe Liz could dig up a few answers for him. In the meantime, he would certainly ask his neighbor about the discoveries at the next possible chance.

He tapped out a few chapter outlines and then pieced some of what he had already done into the new framework before the front door opened, signaling the return of Liz. It was also his signal to stop and save his work

“Nice neighborhood. The beach needs more sand. My feet hurt.” She lost the sneakers almost as quickly as she spoke and hit the couch for a breather.

“Need another one?” Justin was pointing to the now empty can of Diet Coke.

“No thanks. I want to discuss this situation, but not tonight.” This was a bit of a relief to Justin who really wasn’t prepared to battle with her. “I’m going to shower and sleep. Maybe I’ll see things clearer in the morning. Which room is mine again?”

“You have the green room. Take a left at the top and it’s the last door on the right. Zack is in his room just down the hall from you.”

“Okay. Goodnight. I’ll check for flights in the morning, too.”

“I’ll find out for you on-line. I have to check my e-mail anyway.”

“Do you get a lot of mail?” She stopped on the steps and seemed genuinely interested.

“Actually, I have a web site with one address and that gets a lot of hits or at least that’s what they say in the office. I never see any of that stuff.

However, I also have the more private e-mail address that only a few people know. I think I gave it to you last year, but I'll write it down for you again before you leave. If you ever have trouble getting through to me, just send off an e-mail...I check it pretty religiously and I answer everything right away."

"I'll give you the one I have at work. Remind me in the morning."

"G'night." As she disappeared into the upper tier of the house, Justin couldn't help but notice how pleasant the visit had actually been. It was about an eight on the scale to ten and that was as good as could be expected. Perhaps they had indeed become the kind of friends they weren't at the tail end of the marriage.

He returned to the computer, but not to the story. Although Cassie arranged all of his travel as a rule, he would check out flights from time to time to see where he might like to go for a break from the New England winters. So after a quick check of the mail, the author spent a few minutes perusing flight information for Liz. He also needed to check the answering machine for in the aftermath of the events at dinner, he had not remembered to do so. No doubt Cassie had called. It would be good to hear her voice.

There were several different options for getting from Worcester to Orlando so Justin printed a copy detailing all the available choices and then made a quick visit to his e-mail to find only one item, an invitation to double his money from some name he didn't recognize. He rapidly deleted it unopened.

There were two familiar voices on the answering machine. The first was old friend Adam Caster, who was just interested in how the day went at Harvard. Justin snickered at his recorded inquiry as he considered the irony, for it was he who had all the questions and hopefully his neighbor had some answers. There was also an invitation for golf later in the week for which Justin would likely accept.

The second voice belonged to the aforementioned Cassie Jones. She apparently spent the day arranging to move her office to Justin's house and that he had better be worth all the shit she was taking from her bosses. Of course, this was just Cassie, overplaying things as she had a habit of doing. Her boss was a relatively mild-mannered guy named Steve and as long as the books sold, and she did her job, it was hard to believe that she couldn't do it where she wanted to. Her voice sounded

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like soft vanilla ice cream on a very hot day. It felt good and Justin momentarily experienced a rush over his body as she ended her call with a “miss you already”.

His bed would be bigger than ever tonight, and for a little while to come.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I didn’t think you’d mind, I used your phone to make some long distance calls.” Liz was sitting at the kitchen counter with a cup of something in front of her and the ever-present notebook. “How old is this coffee?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Well, it isn’t all that terrible, I suppose.”

“Where’s Zack?” Justin was trying to shake the sleep out of his bones.

“Playing video games. I figured it was okay since he hadn’t been able to for a few days.” She had been continually staring at the notebook. “I’m not going back home yet.” This helped Justin to return to the ‘awake’ realm of existence.

“Oh?”

“I’m going to Virginia to see the Sheldons. They have a super-genius daughter who has limited hearing, but has written orchestra pieces for the local high school she’s been attending for the last year and a half.”

“A high-schooler is on your list?”

“Yeah, well, she happens to be all of nine years old...” Justin’s jaw froze momentarily. “...like Zack.”

“Like Zack.” Justin paused as he reached for some milk. He actually went to the grocery store before the ex and the son arrived so there would appear to be food in the house on a regular basis. For the most part, when Zack was up for the summer, there would always be food in the house, but once he got back to living single, Justin often bought what he needed on the spur of the moment.

“Look, Liz...you can dig into this if you want. I’m sure there is an explanation for the coincidences and the Monctons didn’t seem too alarmed by them.” He pulled the milk out and was about to take a swig right from the carton before realizing he was among company. He went for a glass in the cupboard. He thought about the Moncton’s and the fact



that they weren't surprised. They took the whole situation as being extraordinary, but they certainly weren't freaked out by it. "I'll have Adam come over and he'll probably put all this to rest."

"Do it now." In the poker world, she just called his hand. Justin was initially saying that to try and relieve her anxiety. Now he would have to make good on the statement. As with all the important numbers, Adam was on speed dial so it was only a few moments before the familiar voice of Frederick pleasantly answered.

"Hello?" Justin had the speakerphone on so Liz could monitor the call. He had already figured Caster to be on the golf course seeing as it was almost nine o'clock, but he was humoring his ex.

"Justin Ward here...is Adam available?"

"Mr. Ward is out of the house for the rest of the morning. Is there a message?"

"No Frederick. Just let him know that I called."

"Very good, Mr. Ward. I shall give him the message."

"Ward out." He clicked the speaker button to end the call while finishing the rest of his milk. Liz leaned on the counter and sighed.

"Well at least you haven't stooped to hiring a butler, Justin Ward." The butt of her slight nearly made him gag on his milk for he had been thinking about doing just that when Cassie moved in. With the increase in traffic around the house, Justin figured it would be appropriate. Plus he didn't want to think he was asking Cassie to stay so she could pick up after him.

"Yeah, I do okay by myself."

"You haven't dusted anything in a while." She was giving the room the white glove treatment with her eyes. Justin figured she may have already been through every corner of the house before he woke up.

"Remembering to dust is not a top priority. I do it on those rainy days when I'm stuck in the house."

"And just when are you stuck in the house?"

"How many times do you think I've dusted?" She just shook her head while Justin went searching for breakfast food. The sun was pouring through the window over the kitchen sink.

"I suppose there won't be any dusting today."

"Nope." There was an admission accompanying a chuckle of guilt in his voice. "Did you eat?"

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“It’s not my house. I had enough trouble finding this stale instant coffee.”

“Sorry, you know I don’t drink coffee. I’m still trying to figure out where that came from. I’ve got bacon and eggs, or I could make pancakes.”

“Whatever’s easiest.”

“Pancakes.”

“Maybe you should get a butler or at least a maid once a week.”

“I’ll think about it.” As he reached into the cupboard, remembering to buy pancake mix with the milk, eggs, and other things made him smile.

It didn’t take long for the boy wonder to bounder down the stairs, following the wafting aroma of dad’s pancakes coming off the electric griddle. He greeted him with a quick hug and a thumbs-up for what he would later declare in sign language to be his favorite breakfast. Justin had known this and while either choice he gave Liz would have been easy enough to prepare, he knew what pancakes meant to the nearly nine-year old.

Liz decided on a 12:15 flight out of Worcester and called to rent a car in Washington D. C., where her flight was going. A few calls later and everything had been arranged for her trip. First, to Maryland and a place called Woodbridge, the town the Sheldons called home. Then, there would be one other stop before she would find herself back in Ormond Beach. The trip would take her to the homes of two other prospective Project Zero candidates and their parents. The itinerary was neatly planned and Justin silently marveled at her efficiency. It had to be like watching Cassie work the phones in her office. He couldn’t wait to watch her do her thing in his house.

Then a confirmation of sorts hit him. Liz and Cassie *would* definitely get along just great.

It was a different kind of goodbye for them. The fact that it was a ‘goodbye’ was different. There hadn’t been a face-to-face in the relationship in almost two years as Zack was usually handed off via some airline. Liz normally put him on the plane in Orlando and Justin would be waiting for him in either Boston, for a non-stop flight, or Cincinnati with a changeover to Worcester. Justin would always take the first flight

out to Cincinnati so he could be there to meet Zack and not have to worry about him switching planes. Yes, the airlines were always good about those sorts of things, but being profoundly deaf meant that communication with this particular child might cause other unforeseen difficulties. It wasn't a big deal. Justin would simply book a round trip commuter flight and finagle the seating with the ticket agent in Cincinnati so he could sit with his son.

Last year, the elder Ward arranged for the two of them to stay for the day to catch a Reds game. Zack really enjoyed seeing baseball in a stadium as opposed to a park like Fenway. It was all part of Justin's plan to take a summer, when Zack got a little older, and visit every major league baseball facility; just hit the road with the golf clubs, the Maserati, and the MasterCard. The two could hit the links during the day and the baseball games at night. It would be a great trip, totally unplanned from one town to the next. But it would have to wait for a few years until Zack got older and now with Cassie coming in he might have to weigh things out a little more. Maybe it could be the three of them. Justin figured that kind of planning was still a few years away, and it wouldn't do any good to fret over details now. Still, it was a summer fantasy that was so within his doing.

Not this year, though. Not even a trip to Cincinnati this year.

As Liz boarded the plane for her investigative adventure, Justin and Zack headed home to play a little golf. The old man was excited about seeing how his son's game was coming along. They'd have just enough time before heading out to see the Sox face the Mariners in the first of a four-game series at the 'Fens'.

And so the summer began.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The sweet sounds of a virtuoso violin solo were distinct as Liz opened the driver's side door of the rent-a-car. She didn't even notice the monotoned beeping the vehicle emitted while the door was ajar. The strings from the house were mesmerizing, and Liz felt compelled to wait a few extra moments on the front porch for the right interlude, whereupon she might interrupt with a doorbell.

It turns out that young Savannah Sheldon preferred the violin because she could hear the music. Not just because it was closer to the better of her terribly handicapped ears, but because the vibrations of the bow racing across the strings helped her to feel the music the way she intended when she wrote it.

Savannah was just your average eight-and-a-half year old with a pair of very proud, everyday parents, William and Patricia, or as they preferred, Bill and Pat. Ironically, she liked her name just fine without any shortcuts. No Sammie, Sam, or Vanna...just Savannah, thanks. She put the interruption aside for a formal introduction before returning to her practice, which turned out to provide beautiful background music for the ensuing conversation between Liz and the Sheldons.

Liz had spent most of the thirty-minute drive from Dulles International Airport to this small rural town of Woodbridge going over the proper way to get to the real heart of the matter at hand. She couldn't just come out and ask if these strangers knew either Adam Caster or John Pollex, or both. Up to this point all the coincidences might be just that and she didn't want to come off like some crazy person.

Therefore, she worked up a plan. She would obviously lead off by asking what they knew about the school and play the concerned parent angle. This wasn't a stretch for her because indeed at this point in time, she was one. Once they got into a comfort zone, she would then shift into more personal questions and then eventually as to how the Sheldons met. She figured this would generate some stories and open right up to the page she wanted.

It was almost six o'clock when she found her way along the Jefferson Davis Highway to a small back road where the Sheldons resided. When she called from the Comfort Inn off I-95 in the same town, the family had just finished dinner, which made that stop for a salad on the trip

down from Washington a good idea. She would stay for as long as it took to get what answers she could and then head out in the morning for the Atlanta area. She could get there in a day and then be home for a little rest. There was hope that even a little bit of the week's vacation taken to handle the exchange of Zack might actually render a little rest near the end if things worked out right.

From the start, it was going to be very easy getting all the information she wanted. In fact, Liz figured the hardest thing would be to get out of there in a reasonable amount of time. It was apparent that both Bill and Pat were avid talkers especially when the subject involved them. Liz segued pretty quickly from the school to the personal after finding that all three Sheldons were really looking forward to Project Zero. Most of the talk about Harvard was accompanied by beautiful string music emanating from a room much farther down the hall in the big ranch house. Savannah was scheduled to appear next week at the White House with a group of high school students who were selected among the regions best musicians. Again, not too shabby for a kid who could barely hear and was a few months shy of her ninth birthday. She had been practicing over five hours a day and according to Pat, this was her third and final 90-minute session.

The music stopped right about the time Liz started easing into the more personal questions about how they have only the one child and what they do for a living. Bill was a lead engineer for an independent firm that was sub-contracted by the defense department. Liz wasn't too interested, especially after roughly ten minutes about diodes, transistors, or gyroscopic whatever that he was babbling on about. Pat happened to be a CEO for a small internet company that handled some sort of trading. Of course, Liz shared some of her stories about Zack and how they never expected him. The Sheldons concurred that Savannah was a terrific surprise.

“So you had tried for a while to have a baby?”

“Well, here's the funny part,” started Pat with a giggle and the hint of a drawl, either lost from a childhood much farther south or just gaining with the surrounding lifestyle. “We weren't ever really trying. We didn't want any children, so I had my tubes tied when we first got married. Then all of a sudden, it's about ten years later and I'm pregnant, but I wasn't mad and neither was Bill, here. In fact, we thought it was a

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special gift and it sure turned out to be that way.” The delicate frame of the virtuoso quietly found a seat on the couch next to her mother, her practice session now completed, while Bill got up to head into the kitchen. Liz took the opportunity to sign another greeting to Savannah as she had when she first arrived.

The girl smiled.

“Thank you for signing, but I can lip read very well if you speak slowly.” The speech impairment was noticeable, no doubt due to her deafness, but as she worked hard to pronounce the words, it made Liz realize that she might never hear Zack utter a word unless Project Zero had a way to bring that out of him. For a moment, lost in the thought of her own child, she began to consider the notion that her son should go to the college.

“Would you like something to drink?”

“No thank you.”

“Sure? Coke? Ginger ale? Something stronger?” Bill had a good-ol’-boy type demeanor and it wasn’t outside Liz’s realm of imagination to assume that he did indeed have plenty of stuff that would qualify as a ‘little stronger’.

“Diet Coke?”

“I’ve got that.”

“Thanks.” She returned her attention to the mother and daughter. “So how did you and Bill meet?” Just asking this made the first hour of the visit bearable as she was now getting to the bottom line.

“We were both at Georgetown together. We met at one of his fraternity parties. Mind you, I wasn’t one of those girls in school.” It was easy to see that this was one of those stories probably better told by Bill for Pat was undoubtedly uncomfortable with the details. Still, she pressed on. “I never went to any of those parties. Those Teke boys were always so rowdy, but one of my girlfriends was going and she said I should tag along so I did. Wouldn’t you know it, though, there was my Bill, just standing there, kind of alone and the next thing you know, were talking ‘til the sun comes up.” Bill handed Liz a glass and sat down in the recliner next to the couch. “He wasn’t like the other guys.” She looked affectionately down the end of the couch to the recliner.

“Ain’t that right, Bill?”

“You know it, babe.” He was sipping on a glass of something Liz could only believe to be ‘a little stronger’.

“Were you originally from the area?”

“No. Neither of us was. Bill, here, is from up north...Cromwell, Connecticut. And I was born outside of Durham...in North Carolina.” She recognized the name as being a hotbed of major college activity. Durham was practically home to Duke University, where she had dreamed of attending as a senior in high school. She also knew that both Wake Forest and the University of North Carolina were both really close.

“Wow. You had all those schools right there near home. What made you want to go to Georgetown?” Pat’s eyes twinkled a bit as she rolled them, fishing for the right words to say. She leaned in a half whispered her response.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” Of course, Liz had heard this before and a wry smile subtly rippled out across her face.

“You’d be surprised what I’d believe.” Pat rolled the eyes again and smiled back at her new confidant.

“Well, I was going to go to Wake Forest, but then I met this guy at some conference and he was saying that Georgetown would be a great school for business administration. I was planning on staying at home to save money, but when they offered me a full scholarship, it was Georgetown all the way. It sure turned out to be a blessing for me.” She eased back in personal satisfaction while Liz’s smile slowly retracted. She was almost afraid to ask the next question, for she was sure what the answer would be.

“And it all happened because this guy...what was his name...just happened to be at the right place at the right time?”

“It was John something; Pollen, or Poxel, or something like that.” Liz was staring straight ahead and not looking at anything in particular when she half whispered the word, ‘Pollex’.

“Yes, that’s right, John Pollex; Pollex with an ‘e’. You know I haven’t thought about that man in almost twenty years and I can still see him standing there. Say, how did you know his name was Pollex?” Liz was shaken from her mini-trance.

“Hmm?”

“Did you know John Pollex, too?”

“Did I say that?” Liz was trying to play dumb.

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“I thought you said his name.”

“I don’t remember saying anything.” Savannah blurted into the conversation.

“Your lips moved and it looked like you said something.”

“Now Savannah, you mind your manners.” Bill had chimed in as the lead parent.

“Yes, Daddy.” Liz knew she would either have to confess or cover her knowledge. She quickly decided that things were still too weird for the Sheldons to handle.

“Actually, I may have said something like it. You were fumbling for the word and I was just going through the alphabet in my head. I didn’t think I said anything, but maybe I did.” This was the only way Liz could think of to get out of the situation and it seemed to pacify any further queries.

“I’m sure that was all it was.”

“I bet it was a lovely wedding.” Liz was trying to move things in another direction.

“Oh, it was. We had it back in Durham and a lot of Bill’s friends made it down from Connecticut. But, did we have a scare, right Bill? When your best man, Adam whats-his-name, almost didn’t make it on time?”

“Caster. Why can’t you remember his name?”

“I don’t know. He’s *your* friend.” She turned her attention back to the guest of honor who was sitting in stunned silence by yet another coincidence. “He got hung up in an airport...”

“Boston.” The embellishment was neatly choreographed as if they had been rehearsing it for years.

“Boston...and he almost didn’t get here on time.”

“Yeah, but he did. And he’s going to be a big help to us while Savannah is in school.” He directed his comments right at Liz, who was still trying to take all of it in. Pat finished his thought about Adam.

“He just lives right outside of Boston...a place called Wor-chester.” She brutalized the name, which is traditionally pronounced either Wuss-ter or Wister, depending on what part of the state of Massachusetts one hails directly from, but Liz was going to let this go for she didn’t want to alarm the Sheldons with her knowledge of the area. She gathered herself and smiled while Bill corrected her.



“Its Wuss-ter.”

“Wow. I bet you were all relieved when he got there.” Liz had that fake morning show host voice going. She got just what she wanted for information and now she was looking for a piece of harder evidence.

“Well, would you like to see some pictures?”

“You know, I was wondering if you had a wedding picture, or something like it, that I might borrow. I’m thinking of putting together a little handbook for all the new students, showing them all the other families and where they might have originated.” This was one of the things she had practiced in the car on the ride over. Liz figured it was the best way to pry a picture away if indeed it involved one of the alleged conspirators. “If you want, I’ll take an addressed envelope with me and as soon as I make a copy, I’ll mail it right back to you.”

“Hey, I can make you a copy right downstairs in my office.” Bill was standing up to head that way while Pat did the same only in another direction, possibly to a bedroom or den. Savannah sat staring at Liz for a moment before signing a question.

*Why are you lying about the picture?* Liz’s eyes opened wide. *I know you are hiding something. I can feel it.* Her eyes nearly pierced a hole in Liz’s skull as she quickly responded, mouthing the words at the same time.

*I’m not lying. I need the picture to show someone. It’s important, but I can’t say how. How do you know what I feel?*

*I see it with my mind.* Liz felt a cold shudder at her directness. She wasn’t talking to a kid. This eight-year old girl was matured well past that of either of her parents; maybe more than any other kid her age.

And then for a moment she realized how Zack would always say what color she was and it almost always fit her mood. She had always thought he was just a perceptive little boy with a sense given to make up for his lack of hearing. Zack could also see what people thought, too. Liz came to this realization in that instant.

*Colors in your head?* The girl smiled a little and nodded. *Can you keep this quiet for now?*

*Why?*

*It’s a surprise.* Liz opened her eyes into a warm, inviting smile and the hint of a wink made the girl act her age for a moment. Liz also tried to think about a pretty color when she signed.

*Yes.*

*Thank you.*

Pat returned to the room with a large photo album that she plopped down on the coffee table nearly spilling Liz's glass of Coke. Bill arrived to announce that the copy machine was up and running just about the time Pat found the wedding section of photos.

"Here's a good one." She pointed at one picture with a very young Bill and Pat and the guy next to Bill was certainly Adam Caster. It looked like the same Adam Caster she last saw a couple of years ago; the same Adam Caster who spent the occasional Saturday afternoon at the old Ward house in Milbury; the same Adam Caster who was apparently an integral part of the three families Liz had knowledge of to date that had produced one single, unexpected, super-genius child prodigy. The same Adam Caster who, with his friend, John Pollex, have possibly altered circumstances or somehow patterned events to cause these families to come into being.

She took the copy and excused herself for the evening as being tired. She flashed the ever-reticent Savannah one last wink and a look of thanks, and headed back to the hotel for the night. Tomorrow, it would be seven-plus hours on the road as she would make her way to Georgia for what was likely to be another encounter paralleled to something out of the *X-Files*. Her destination this time was a small little town south of Savannah called Keller.

\* \* \* \* \*

Zack was always up early and things didn't change just because he and his dad were out late the night before. The Red Sox beat the Mariners in the first game of a series and Zack relished, once again, the catharsis of happy colors sweeping through Fenway Park when the home team picked up a pair of runs in the bottom of the eighth to steal away with a 4-3 victory. He got a team jacket courtesy of Dad, and on this day they're heading out to play golf before going back for game two. He loves Fenway because in the silence of his existence comes great emotion in his mind when he visits. Even when they lose or play bad, the emotions have a narcotic effect on him. He can't get enough.

It's six am. He will read a book in his father's library until breakfast. He had planned to use the morning hours to read everything in the collection of about a hundred books, including the classics Justin kept from his teaching days. Since the little blonde boy functioned fine on about four hours of sleep, he would continue to use the night hours to read in bed, as he had for the last year at home with Mom. He figured that by the end of the summer he would be able to knock off most of the books in his dad's house. The library at school had an encyclopedia that was older than he was, so the boy genius was excited to dive into the one on the computer his dad bought for him.

But this morning, he would start with a book on chess. It was a game the father had done well in, so the son was eager to learn.

Justin's alarm clock, known in most homes as a telephone, went off very close to the time it did nearly every morning...8:17 to be exact this particular day. Justin found the receiver without removing the pillow from the side of his head.

"Ward here. Good morning Cassie." It was slightly muffled by the pillow.

"Do you realize that normal people get up in the morning?"

"Did you know that I am not a normal person?"

"You're preaching to the choir. Get your ass out of bed, you have a book to write."

"I was writing...until one in the morning. Y'know, there was a time when I was good under a deadline. This wouldn't be one of those times." He rolled over and found the clock to confirm that it was what time he thought it might be. No dreams last night, but that didn't worry him. He had just about everything he needed in place and was able to bust out the opening two chapters before bed.

"Well, the good news is that I've convinced the higher-ups to let me work out of a new office in Worcester. The better news is that it can happen as soon as I pack this one up. You have to help coordinate this move, so here is a list of what I need." This was the Mr. Hyde side of Cassie. Her all-business demeanor was like talking to Liz again. In a way, Justin found it uncannily comfortable. Perhaps the only reason he and Liz became ex and ex was because she no longer could turn that part of her personality off. He was hopeful that Cassie could. She had proved it was possible on the road trip.

*Point-Six Percent*

“Whoa, cowgirl. Slow down. I’m really not awake enough to take a list. Why don’t you e-mail this to me *and...I...promise* that I’ll get started on it first thing this morning.”

“Hmmm...you and e-mails...you and e-mails.” She was weighing the two sides of the argument. “See, here’s the problem. Your track record with e-mails lately is pretty lousy.”

“I’m a changed man. Don’t make me write all this stuff down. I’m even worse at that than e-mails.”

“Well...”

“Pleeze?” It was a whine that would have done a three-year old proud.

“It’s already sent. Now get up and make breakfast for your son.” He had almost forgotten that Zack was with him now and bolted right up into a sitting position.

“Hey...thanks for the call. I’ll get to the list right away. So what’s your favorite color?”

“My favorite color?”

“Yeah. You get three choices...blue, green or gold.”

“Given those to choose from, I’d have to go with the green. Wait a minute, is it dark or light green?”

“Dark...hunter green.”

“Yeah, green works for me.”

“Then green it is. So when can you move in? I miss you a ton, already.”

“Same here, and as soon as you get that list taken care of. Now, go.”

“I’m on it. Ward out.” And indeed he was. Out of bed, that is, and off to the kitchen to start a batch of pancakes, preferred food of the only kid in the house. Justin took a peek into his son’s room, half expecting to see him asleep in his handcrafted wooden loft. The bed was made and the red rug was completely cleared of stuff meaning two things: his son inherited his mother’s penchant for cleanliness and he had probably been up for a little while.

Now it wasn’t like you could just holler for a response. Zack’s handicap presented unique communication problems, so Justin headed down the stairs to the kitchen and got the electric griddle going. The smell of pancakes would certainly attract the boy from whatever nook he was in, which would save the cook the trouble of rummaging through all

the rooms of the big house trying to find him. The first batter on the griddle evoked the proper smell and that in turn elicited the desired response for in moments, the smiling child genius was sitting at the table with a fork in hand.

And the more common form of communication, the signing with hands, began.

*Can you teach me to play chess? I have been reading about it.* Justin felt good that he asked this. He had always wanted to show him how to play one of the greatest tests of plotting and strategy ever invented.

*Is after golf okay?* Justin was not unlike most people who signed. He talked the words as he signed them and it was always a little slow at the start. He had been practicing a little to pass the time in the air during the book tour and he would be back up to speed in just a few days. The son just delivered a big smile and shoveled a forkful of pancakes into his eager mouth.

*We may have to get you new clubs. You've grown.* He raised his eyebrows as he watched Zack polish off the large three-stack and a big glass of milk.

"May have to write another book after all." Although this was said under his breath, Zack just nodded like he understood.

*Funny, Dad. May I be excused?*

*Yes. Rinse your plate.*

He had grown. Probably only an inch or two, but it seemed like he was a foot taller and so much more mature.

*What did you do this morning?*

*Read a book about chess, very interesting.*

*Which book?* He held up one finger to signal his dad to hold on and then he dashed off to the area of the den where Justin stored a bookshelf full of old texts and classics from his teaching days as well as some science fiction, and of course the entire Justin Ward collection in gold bound hard cover. The collection also contained the odd piece like the chess book Zack grabbed and headed back to the kitchen with.

It wasn't exactly a beginner book, but it did go over the basics before outlining several techniques and strategies commonly found in the game.

*You read this?*

The boy just nodded and smiled.

*You understand this?*

*I think so.* This time Justin held up the finger to hold the son and went off to the den to retrieve an old wooden set that he kept in a desk drawer.

*Let's see what you know.*

The first thing Justin noticed was that Zack knew where all the pieces went and that the board had to be turned for the game to be played properly. This was already impressive, since many novice players have trouble sorting the logistics out at first try.

Justin placed a pawn of each color in each hand and showed them to his son as he placed them behind his back for a moment so as to scramble them up in an effort to randomize the selection process. He held out his clenched fists. Zack pointed to the left and Justin revealed a black pawn.

*You white. You first.*

The elder Ward employed a very basic opening to start and the younger Ward was quickly up to the task. Six moves in and Justin found himself stopping to think while recognizing the defense the boy was setting up as being one of the more complicated. There was amazement in his eyes as he fell victim, several moves later, to a perfectly deployed sacrifice, which under the circumstances might have seemed like a childish mistake at first.

*Did you plan that?*

*Good?* The little genius was seeking absolution with his eyes as well as his signing. The father just nodded slowly while unable to suppress the smile that was growing at the same rate of the nod for it had finally dawned on him that his son was indeed this gifted intellect. It had been one thing for Liz to tell him and for him to repeat it to people in an airport, but this was the real thing right in front of him and kicking his ass in a game it took him many years to become even mediocre at.

*"Yeah...damned good." I've seen enough. I'll play for real later. Let's get some fresh air.*

*I want to finish.*

*Okay. We'll finish later. My move?*

*Okay.* The little boy stared at the board for a moment with his head resting on hands that were folded on top of the table. His eyes moved from one corner of the board to the next as he scanned the game into his memory. Justin figured that by ducking the issue, he might be able to regroup his thought process and reclaim the game that he was currently trailing.

It was another near-perfect day in Worcester with daytime highs expected to be in the upper 60s under mostly sunny skies. Justin figured he could take a hundred days like this one and not get tired of it. As the Maserati wove through the Birch Hill community, the driver wondered just how intelligent his offspring was.

When they played golf yesterday, Justin had noticed how Zack looked confident over the ball and although he didn't always make good contact, there were flashes of excellent play. This was something that stuck out even more as they made their way around the course on day two of the summer. Up until now, Zack, like most beginning golfers, didn't really play the game, but more simply participated in it. It was apparent to the father that his son's mind was starting to dictate how and where he hit the ball and that he was beginning to actually *play* the game.

The elder Ward spent most of the round asking about the books Zack had read and what his favorite stories were. The boy was looking forward to being able to read the ones Justin had written. The author informed him that there was a new book coming soon and if he was interested, he could maybe help. Justin figured it would be a good way of getting the work done and who knew...maybe Zack had the writer's touch as well. He was using a boy genius as the main character in the book why not use a boy genius in real life as a guide?

By the end of play, Justin had come to the conclusion that Zack would be just that character and that he, the author, might write himself as the teacher character.

He was, after all, trying to write what he knew and more importantly, what he was coming to know.

\* \* \* \* \*

One thing about renting a car south of the Mason-Dixon, it was guaranteed to have air-conditioning and that was a good thing, for the drive from Woodbridge to Georgia might have been unbearable without it. Liz was certainly thankful for the modern convenience and spent a good portion of the trip running various scenarios through her head. The most ironic of all of them was the consistent notion that Justin, Mr. Science Fiction, himself, was the one person who needed to be there to piece these facts together.

*Point-Six Percent*

Maybe he was right and there might have been a perfectly good explanation for the weirdness with the Monctons, but the same things with another family? She would convince him that there was more to this. Even he would have to see it. What it was, she didn't know, but a seven-hour drive is plenty of time to fuel the imagination.

As she crossed the state line, there was a new feeling sweeping over her. Was it possible for these people, the Durbans, to have the same connections? And if so, then there was a lot more to this story than she could ever possibly fathom. That notion scared Liz into a silence for many miles and to the point that she almost missed the turn off I-95 towards the little town of Keller. It seemed to fit right in with all the eeriness she had been through the past few days that this, her last stop, would be in a town with the same name as history's most noted deaf-mute. Although Zack was able to squeal with delight and occasionally anger, he was probably the closest thing to being that famous person as someone like Liz would ever get to know.

As Route 144 wound its way south, Liz considered just where Zack might fit in the scheme of things. How might his gift of intellect influence the future? Will he be able to survive outside the confines of the family of her and Peter, and Justin? There was a lot to think about and as any worrying mother might begin to wonder of the road ahead, so too, did Liz. But before getting any answers to her questions, the Keller town line nearly came and went as she made the right hand turn onto something called Belfast-Keller Road. Davis Road wouldn't be too far up on the left.

No violin concertos this time as she pulled into the wide driveway. It was attached to a three-car garage, which in turn, was part of a very large house and all Liz could think of was that the place would easily fit into any empty lot at Birch Hill. It was a symbol of wealth and Liz immediately felt repulsed by it.

The wave of indignation didn't last too long for the cutest little boy raced around from the backside of the house to greet her. His dark skin and finely curled ebony hair offset his perfect white smile. Liz smiled as she slowly exited the rent-a-car.

"And what's your name?" He didn't move a muscle. He just smiled right through her with his deep brown eyes, making the guest just a tad bit uncomfortable.



“What’s your name?” She was trying to smile through the question as thoughts of another coincidental deaf child began racing through her mind. She quickly signed the greeting. The little boy closed his eyes and pressed his lips together in a contorted form of concentration, then opened them with a smile even bigger than the first one. His first words had the cadence and ring of a child playing a game of tag.

“Now you know.” His infectious giggle was the only thing Liz remembered before being overcome with the word, or in this case, the name, Elijah. It blazed through her head the way a flashbulb temporarily sears the cornea of a person’s eye. The name, Elijah, was blinding the rest of her thoughts for just a moment and then, like the flashbulb, the affect slowly waned. Still, he was right. His name was Elijah...Elijah Charles Durban and somehow Liz all of a sudden knew this.

The mono-toned car door beeping finally brought her out of the semi-trance she had probably been in to find a much larger version of the little boy rounding the corner of the house. He was no doubt Elijah’s father for the facial resemblance was easy to pick out. He was wearing a striped apron and it appeared he was working the barbeque on yet another hot June day in the Deep South. Liz blinked a few times before he stopped and greeted his guest.

“You must be Elizabeth.” His smile was just another indication that the boy and the man were indeed closely related for it was widely genuine, as his namesake. “Charlie Durban. Welcome to the backwoods of nowhere.” It was a deep, yet gentle voice and the laughter made it plain to see that this was a man of some intelligence and not from this area for there wasn’t a discernable accent. He was a large black man and stereotypically one might expect a slow, heavy Southern drawl, but instead, the accent sounded very Ivy-league. Liz took the hand being offered and then realized Elijah had also accompanied his father.

“This is my son, Elijah.”

“We’ve met.”

“Elijah, get the door for Ms. Madsen. It is Madsen, right?”

“Yes...please call me Liz.”

“Very good. Hope you’re hungry. Your timing couldn’t have been better, Liz.” She hadn’t planned on it, but the smell from the grill was intoxicating and the interstate food she has for brunch was certainly no match for flame-cooked chicken and burgers.

“I have to admit, it sure smells great.” Her eyes stayed with little Elijah for most of the walk, which led the trio to a spacious yard. Next to the house was an in-ground pool and adjoining patio, whereupon sat one very large gas grill, billowing smoke from the vents in its closed cover.

“Whoa, better tend to that.” And with that, Charlie grabbed the tools of any great backyard chef and went to his tasks. Meanwhile, Liz found some patio furniture and sat watching Elijah, who had taken an interest in some action figures on the patio.

“Elijah, talk with our guest, please.” He was piercingly direct and Elijah jumped to his feet and sat at the table near where Liz was trying to relax. Over seven hours in the car was enough. She would be glad to be home...maybe even that night. It would only be a few more hours to Jacksonville. Maybe she would make the trip tonight and save a little on the hotel rates. Her thoughts were interrupted by Charles’ further instruction to his obedient son. “And I mean talk. Understand?”

There was something in the way he said it that piqued Liz’s attention for Elijah had already played a little trick on her in the driveway and she was now painfully aware of the fact that this was something the father had plenty of knowledge about as well. This was obviously the *something* that got Elijah into Project Zero.

“I will, dad.” He looked at Liz, closed his eyes tightly for just a moment and in her mind, as before, Liz felt his plea not to tell Charlie about what he did in the driveway. He had the sad puppy-dog eyes and although she could not understand any of this, Liz nodded. And with that, the little mindbender sat back in his chair and began normal conversation.

The first thing Liz noticed was that there was no Mrs. Durban around and as she recalled, it was Charlie that she talked to on the phone at Justin’s. The food was coming off the grill and salads were added to the spread from the kitchen. The host was efficiently quick with everything and it was certainly better than the highway fare she had dined on the past day and a half. Timidity was not something in Liz’s vocabulary, so she went about filling her plate, which made Charlie smile.

With Elijah, the talk was standard. How was school? How old are you? That sort of stuff. Once Charlie took a seat and joined in on the chat, Liz tried to move into more pinpointed territory, but it was plain to

see that Charlie had a knack for controlling things, including conversations.

“Now the way I understood you, Liz, you wanted to talk about Project Zero.” Liz simply nodded, unable to speak due to having an abundance of burger in her mouth. “Well, Elijah is very excited about it and I support just about anything that gets him excited.” The big man had a big laugh, which echoed through the backyard.

“Well, it’s just that I have some concerns and was wondering if you knew of any other schools that offered similar types of programs, closer to this part of the country.” Charlie started to snicker a little as he reclined a little in his seat.

“You are starting to sound like the late Mrs. Durban. She was not very happy with the idea at all.” The word ‘late’ begged another question from Liz who got an unexpected shiver at the relative ease with which he delivered the bad news. Charlie looked in the direction of his son who was greedily heaping potato salad on his plate, seemingly oblivious to the adults’ talk. “It’s just us now. Mariah had a fatal heart attack two months ago. I took a six-month leave from the firm to get things in order and now I’m considering a move back East. I schooled at Yale and really loved the area. It would also put me close to Elijah.”

“What is it that you do, Charlie.”

“I’m lead counsel for a private firm that oversees negotiations for several movie production companies. Basically, I’m an international corporate lawyer with a specialty for handling the film industry.” Liz stopped chewing while Charlie went on eating. She had easily put the pieces of this one together. Justin had dealt with John Pollex in regard to his book rights and here was the guy who likely oversaw the legalities of just that sort of deal. He had to be connected to Pollex.

“Been doing it long?”

“Let’s see...next year will make twenty. Yeah, twenty years. Graduated law school and pretty much fell into the position while visiting a good friend in LA. I met Mariah out there, too.” He smiled the way one does when reminiscing over good times. “That was a very good week.” Liz didn’t have to ask. She knew who the friend was, but she was still looking for confirmation.

*Point-Six Percent*

“It’s funny, my ex-husband is a writer and he just signed a deal for movie rights. His name is Justin Ward.” Charlie’s smile turned to a look of amazement. Elijah was into his second piece of chicken.

“Justin Ward?” Liz nodded. “That’s the deal I had reassigned just before...well, before I took the leave.”

“Some guy named...Pollex.” Liz was honing the blade of her inquiry.

“John Pollex. He’s the man who put me in the business.” That’s his deal, the Ward contract.”

“I think that was the name of the guy.” Liz had gotten very good at skirting her knowledge.

“He’s the gentleman I was telling you about. The friend I went to visit in LA. John is the one who got me into Yale.” Charlie rubbed his chin and without any prodding, started to weave the history. “I was a junior in high school...Allentown High in Pennsylvania. I met him after some conference where he was a guest speaker. He made me believe that I could actually get into a school like Yale.” Liz closed her eyes for she had not only heard the story before, but had lived the story before as well.

“Next thing I know, I’m going to the best school in the country and it’s all free. Full scholarship. I go out West to personally thank the guy and he sets me up with an interview and a date and both turned out to be golden.” He laughed at his wit. “Look around. Not bad for the oldest son of a steel worker.”

“And Elijah is your only child?”

“An unexpected bundle of joy.” Charlie gazed at him briefly while the little boy finished the last bit of potato salad on his plate. “He’s very special, y’know. Maybe that was why Maizie didn’t want him to leave. She was not going to let him go to Harvard. I have to admit, the thought of my son going to Harvard and not Yale...” He was trying to make a joke of the situation and chuckled at his wit once again. Liz, meanwhile, was sympathizing for what the late Mrs. Durban was going through.

“When she died suddenly, both Elijah and I talked things out and we decided to see what this Project Zero could do for him.” The big man was once again looking fondly at his son. Justin had that look at times when he talked about Zack. “He has a unique gift.”

“I think I know what it is.” Elijah shot her a look of despair and scooted down from his chair in a start for the house.

“Gotta go.”

“Freeze, little man.” Charlie’s sterner voice boomed and Elijah did as he was commanded. “What did I tell you?” It wasn’t so much a question as it was a directive.

“Sorry, dad.”

“You can’t go around doing that to people. We don’t know what it does to them...or you.”

“I’ll try.” He smiled at Liz and ran off into the house.

“He’s been told not to show off his ability. I have to tell you, it can be a little traumatic the first time he gets inside your head like that. I hope you’re okay.” He was sincerely apologetic and Liz could understand how he would be concerned.

“It’s okay, really. How long has he been...?”

“Since he was about two years old. At least that was when we noticed it.” Charlie was resting back in his chair and fingering the last remaining bite of hamburger. He would come into the room at night and just stand there next to the bed. Next thing you would know, a voice in your head would hear him and you would know that he was there and what was wrong. You know how sometimes a kid can be hurting and he can’t tell you why or what? Well, with Elijah, that was never the problem. We always knew because he *could* tell us.” He was pointing at his temple while delivering the last line. Liz pushed her plate away and got to her feet.

“I really want to thank you for this terrific meal. Can I help you clean up?”

Liz had all the information she needed. On the outside, Elijah was as normal as any eight-year old. On the inside he could do things with his mind that was as far from normal as could be imagined.

“Oh no, Elijah will be out to take care of this with me. Do you have to leave?”

“Yes, I think I’ll try to get home tonight if I can. It’s only another few hours.”

“And where is home.”

“Ormond Beach. A little south of Jacksonville.” He nodded acknowledgement of the area she was describing.

*Point-Six Percent*

“And was this visit helpful to you?” She didn’t know what she was thinking except that she wasn’t going to send her son to this Project Zero.

“Actually, it was. I really want to thank you.”

“Well, the reason I ask is that Mariah had done some checking as well. She talked to people on the phone, went to their houses...all people who had experienced Project Zero in some way or another. She called me on the road to tell me she wasn’t going to send her son to that place and I never did get to find out what caused her to feel that way. I was on business at the time and she died before I could really talk to her. I was just wondering if you were feeling the same way and why.”

Liz sat back down and looked into the dark eyes of a stranger whom she felt she knew a long time. His expression was sincere and the lawyer in him was taking a back seat to simply discovering what it was about Project Zero that made his late wife upset. Liz still didn’t have all the information sorted out yet, but this was an opportunity to compare notes.

“How well do you know John Pollex?” Liz leaned forward in her chair. Charlie did likewise.

“I’ve known him for over twenty years. He’s like an uncle to Elijah.”

“Yes, but what do you know about him? Do you know where he came from? What he did before you knew him? His life outside of your friendship?” Charlie held up a hand to stop her and placed his hand over his chin in contemplative thought. She was thinking about how Adam Caster was like an uncle to Zack.

“I know he’s never been married and before he ventured into the movie business, he did motivational speaking for a company he ran or owned or something like that; it helped rekindle the idea that college was the right thing for anybody.”

“Would it surprise you to know that your story about Yale is similar to my story about going to a small private college in Upstate New York, including the part about John Pollex?” The host took a deep breath through his nose as if he were cleansing his system.

“I would consider that...coincidental...that you also heard him speak.”

“I received a full scholarship in the mail a week after I talked to him personally.”

“Hmmm...I’m sure there are others with the same story.”

“There are. I’ve talked to two of them in the last two days and they both have a single, unexpected, child genius slated to start at Project Zero this fall.”

“I get the idea that you are finding out things my wife may have. I also get the idea that you aren’t going to send your son to Harvard.”

“No, I’m not. And, I wish I had the information your wife did as well. I don’t know what to think about the other coincidences I have run across. Does the name Adam Caster ring any bells for you?”

“I’ve never heard of him.” There was a distant ringing of a phone somewhere in the house and Charlie reached over to a ledge near the grill for a cordless, obviously attached to the one beckoning inside.

“Charles Durban.” The tone of the greeting was all business. “Yes. Oh no. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” He was getting out of his chair as he was finishing the call. Liz also rose to her feet. It was easy to see he was upset by something on the other end of the phone.

“Charlie? Is everything...?”

“It’s my mother. She’s had some kind of stroke. I...we...we have to go. Please see yourself out.” He was heading towards the house. “Elijah!” The word had urgency to it. Liz was trailing behind. Elijah opened the patio door and his father stopped to look into his eyes. They didn’t speak, but within moments, the little boy was running off to his room. Charlie turned around to front his guest.

“I’m sorry I can’t be of any more help right now. My mother is the last living member of my family. Mariah had no family, so this is it for Elijah, too. We have to go back to Pittsburgh.” He politely, but purposefully slid the glass door shut, separating them. Liz noticed a small tear in his eye as he turned away and headed down the same hall that his gifted son had just traveled. Liz stood stunned at the turn of events and with her own empty feeling. She knew there was a reason for all this, but what it was...that was still far from her grasp.

She headed back around the house and then headed for home.

About the same time, Bill Sheldon answered the phone to hear the familiar voice of Adam Caster. The visit by Liz Madsen was quickly brought up and the caller found an even quicker excuse to remove himself from the call after the details were disseminated.

*Point-Six Percent*

Not long after, a ring emanating from the inside pocket of his suit jacket interrupted John Pollex's meeting with a studio executive.

"Pollex. Yeah. Okay, let's monitor the situation. Can you take care of things on your end? Good." He snapped the compact phone shut and had it back in his pocket in a matter of a brutally efficient second before turning back to the business at hand. "Now...Justin Ward's new book..."

Liz spent the final leg of the trip coordinating all the information she had gathered from the two visits and was ready to spill it all out to Justin when she got home. There would be a long hot soak in the tub for the sun would have already set on the beach, but that would come after the call. She had pictures and more stories of eerie ties between Adam, John Pollex and every family she had talked to sending a lone child with superior intelligence to a place at Harvard University called Project Zero.

Tonight, the Red Sox happened to be hosting the Seattle Mariners in game two of a three-game series at Fenway Park which meant that Justin Ward and son were in the writer's season-ticket seats. It was about the 4<sup>th</sup> inning when the call came in to the house on Cherry Valley Way.

*You've reached the number you were dialing, but no one here is physically able to answer the phone. Doesn't that suck for you? But do leave a message and as soon as someone is physically able to answer it, that someone will.....beep.*

She had heard the message before, in that smug voice. There was no accent conducive to the New England states for Justin had been weaned on pronunciation through years of working in radio and living as a child in Western New York. Still it was frustrating not being able to talk to him for she wanted to make sure he didn't blow her off as he was prone to do every now and then. He certainly had plenty of money, she thought. Why can't he get a cell phone?

*Justin...it's Liz. You have to call me back. It's important. I found Adam and John Pollex involved deeply with every family I talked to. It's like they all have the same story we do. This is way too freaky, Jay. I'm thinking seriously about calling the police or the FBI. There is no way I'm sending Zack to this place. Call me when you get this*



*Steve Bantle*

*message. I've got some really weird things to tell you...and buy a cell phone, dammit, it's the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.*

The message was recorded in an almost complete emptiness. There, sitting in the dark bedroom by the phone, drinking a glass of scotch was a wiry, thin man. He paused for a moment after the call ended to pull out his cell phone and blindly punch in some numbers. It was only when the mystery man arose from the chair did the face of Adam Caster reveal itself in the pale afterglow of a street light, streaming through the window near the bed.

“There’s a problem. We need to proceed with an ‘S-M red’ on this end. Yes, I’m sure of it. Yes, I can take of it from here.” There was calm in his voice. It was obvious he had run this course of action before for he requested the ‘S-M red’ like he was placing a pizza order. With the same curtness displayed by his LA counterpart, he stashed the phone back in his suit coat before efficiently erasing the message and then seeing himself out the door.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

While Zack had fully appreciated the Aurora Borealis illuminating his brain, the Red Sox were busy dropping a heartbreaker to the Mariners in ten innings. All of this had been mere distraction to Justin, who was having trouble concentrating on baseball. Chess, and life, and the meaning of stuff were all weighing a lot heavier than a three-two count in the bottom of the ninth with the bases full in a tie game.

On the way home Justin figured that perhaps the Sox centerfielder was also thinking of something else for he was completely frozen by the pitch that struck him out and sent the game into extras.

The only thing to greet the father and son when they returned home was a note from good friend Adam Caster indicating that he had dropped by to say hi, see about golf sometime later in the week, and to see how things went in California with John Pollex. Justin hadn't seen Adam at the club the last two days and figured he would just give him a ring in the morning.

Zack took one last look at the chessboard, still frozen at the moment they halted play, and smiled. He reminded the elder Ward that it was his move and then headed up to bed. He would read more before actually sleeping a few hours when he would get up to read some more. The father waited for the son to disappear up the steps before moving into the dining room for another look at the game in progress. He was surveying the board for the right answer to the situation presenting itself. After fifteen minutes of studying, and a quick look at the book from which the younger Ward had apparently taught himself to play, Justin wrote a move down on paper and left it on the table for Zack to find in the morning. Satisfied that he had at least made a decent recovery, he also headed for bed.

The morning came quick to find more clouds than sun and the threat of rain. The call at 8:24 wasn't from Cassie, adding to the embarrassment Justin felt when he answered the same way he had the morning previous.

"So...who's Cassie?" The man's voice wasn't completely familiar.

"Uh...sorry, thought you were my publicist...she calls every morning."

"It's John Pollex in LA and it's Wednesday." He was politely direct.

"Yeah...I...uh...guess it is. Umm..."

“I said I would call to see if we had a deal.”

“What it is...like 5 o’clock in the morning where you are?”

“Almost five-thirty. So, do we have a deal?”

“We do. Send me the paperwork and I’ll sign it. I have a great story idea...”

“No can do with the paperwork. You have to come here and autograph it in person. We’ve photographers and all that stuff lined up for tomorrow morning. I’ll have a car pick you up at your house today at 2 o’clock. Everything else is taken care of and I’ll have you back home late Thursday. Oh, and Adam says he’d be happy to watch your son while you’re gone. It’s Zack, right?” Justin was still trying to clear the overnight cobwebs from his head.

“Uh...yeah, Zack. Say, do I get any say in any of this?”

“Not if I’m going to pay you a couple million dollars.” There was a pause on the Ward end of the phone.

“Alright, I suppose that’s fair enough. Adam said he’d watch Zack?”

“It’s all taken care of.”

“Well, uh...great. I’ll see you later, I guess.”

“Oh, Justin. Bring your golf clubs.”

“Sure.” The invitation got an arousal from the writer.

“Two o’clock. Be ready.” He heard the click and knew that meant the call was over. It was business with an air of civility.

“Ward out,” he said to himself before cradling the receiver and heading for the bathroom. He found Zack in the dining room, writing on a piece of paper he probably ripped out of a notebook somewhere in the house. The boy looked up as his father entered the room. It was like that with Zack. Since he saw what people felt, he always knew when people were around. It was like a built-in defense mechanism. One might think it would be easy to sneak up on or startle a deaf person, but not with Zack. He actually did not give the appearance on the surface as someone being totally without hearing for he was able to acknowledge a person’s presence the moment they came into his area of concern and always before they ever spoke.

Zack always knew when he wasn’t alone.

*Did you move?* The boy nodded then rubbed his stomach indicating he was hungry.

*Pancakes?* Zack shook his head and signed back.

*Eggs.*

*Eggs? Sure. How about an omelet?* The cook had to spell out the French word. *Cheese and mushrooms?* The boy glowed with a big smile and wide shining eyes. Perhaps it was at that moment that Justin realized that his son loved food almost as much as he did and luckily, seemed to metabolize it a lot faster.

Justin started pulling stuff out of the fridge while Zack went back to work on the paper. By the time it was ready, the paper was gone and the boy was instead looking over the chess game again.

*Where did you move?* The younger Ward showed his placement of a knight, retreating to a rook file and Justin could see where his opening might come. It had been the anticipated move he worked out in a series of four plays that should have put him in a position to win and so far, the young genius was playing into his trap. It took twenty minutes for breakfast to be eaten and in that time Justin found that although he had thought the board out four moves ahead, it was at least two moves shy of where his opponent had gone with his play. Six moves from the night before found the author in a hopeless situation from which he could not escape and he had actually played into the prodigy's trap as opposed to vice-versa.

He never saw it coming and the son consoled the father three moves later when checkmate became inevitable.

*Sorry, dad. I like this game. Thanks for teaching it to me. Can we play again?*

He was still staring at the board and didn't initially see the consolation or the request to play again. Zack touched his dad on the shoulder and then repeated the signings. Justin smiled and nodded.

*After...I have to brush up a little first.*

*I know a good book.* He tapped his temple and smiled as if to indicate that the book he recently read on the game was somehow stored, in its entirety, in his brain. The truth of the matter was that it probably had been and although Justin laughed at his son's developing sense of humor, he could also see that the boy wasn't just being funny.

Then Zack reached into his pocket and unfolded the piece of paper he had been working on before the game was resumed.

*I have something that might help you with your book.*

Justin was obviously startled by this.

Steve Bantle

*My book? Which one?* He was figuring that perhaps the little genius had also managed to ingest one or more of his actual bestsellers, copies of which were also part of the collection of books in the den.

*Your book...about the teacher and the student.* To the best of his knowledge, he was the only one who had any kind of access to the story to this point because it was stored on his computer or on a thumb drive.

*How do you know about the story?*

*I read it.* Justin sat in frozen silence. It was obvious, yet again, that his son could do many extraordinary things and hacking into PCs was probably just something else on the list.

*Sorry.* Zack had sensed the confusion, pride, and disappointment that his somewhat bewildered father was going through and leapt to the remorseful confession. *I wanted to see what you were writing about.*

*No more getting into my things.* He was trying to be stern, but it was hard to do so while at the same time marveling over his son who was so much smarter and capable than he was or would ever be. He felt a sudden sadness that the boy would never be able to hear and was therefore somehow robbed of being even greater than he already was. Zack sensed the feeling as well.

*Okay, dad, no more into your things.*

*Thank you.* The boy put his arm on his fathers shoulder and got his attention.

*He is like me.*

*Who?*

*The boy...in the story.*

*Maybe.* Justin didn't want to alarm his son with the prospect that the character he had created, seventh-grader Miles Vernon, was very much like Zack. In fact, the chess game had been a little bit of an inspiration and was going to find its way into one of the earlier chapters.

Zack held out the paper and Justin stood up to take it. At first he didn't recognize what appeared to be a wild combination of letters:

***N = N(\*) f(p) n(e) f(l) f(i) f(c) L***

*What is this?* The son looked puzzled at his father's question. He looked at the paper and then at Justin before answering.

*Drake formula.* He had to spell out Drake.

*Point-Six Percent*

“You mean Drake’s formula?” This was spoken aloud as was most all of Justin’s end of the conversations he had with his son. He didn’t sign this time and still, Zack knew what he was saying without taking his eyes off the paper. The boy, meanwhile, stood motionless, but confident as the father plopped back into the chair to further study the scribbling. A few moments passed before he peered over the piece of loose-leaf to look at his son. He put the paper down on the table.

*You know what this is?*

The boy nodded.

*You know what this means?* He grabbed the paper again as his son eagerly nodded in affirmative then shot up and headed quickly to the den where the elder Ward was sure there was at least one old astronomy book kicking around from his college days. Some books he had refused to sell back to the bookstore in those times. Partly as a snub to the ridiculously low prices they were bought back for, and partly because he had convinced himself that they might prove useful somewhere down the road.

Today, that road was a right turn just up ahead.

He had remembered that Drake was some professor at some Ivy League school and had devised some formula that theoretically broke down the viability of the existence of life on other worlds outside of Earth. At any rate, there were a lot of variables, but simplified, it was a mathematical way of explaining how it was theoretically possible that we were not alone, as von Daniken had also suggested.

There it was; page 448 of his old astronomy text in the chapter on alien life in alien worlds. It was Frank Drake’s formula and it was nearly identical to the one his son put on paper. He read it over and was refreshed as to what it meant. It was obvious that this would go a long way in his book. Instead of teaching the kids crackpot theories from the wildly ridiculed von Daniken, the teacher character, Mr. Riget, could instead profess Drake’s formula, which is just that, a formula. The beauty of it was if all the variables weren’t accountable for, then it would only prove there was no life outside of us. It was used by both sides of the eternal argument and therefore respected among more scientists than with von Daniken.

Steve Bantle

On the other hand, the author was now incredibly eager to see where his son came up with this knowledge. He closed the book and pointed to it.

*Did you read this, too?*

*Not that one. One like it at school.*

*They have this book in school?*

*In the library. I read all the books there.*

*You read the whole library at school?*

The boy nodded and smiled.

*You remember everything you read?* Justin was suppressing a big smile as he signed his observation. Of course, Zack was not fooled by any emotion displayed or hidden so he smiled, for the both of them, with his eyebrows raised as he nodded his agreement to what was asked. Justin put the paper on the coffee table and motioned for Zack to come look. He pointed to the first symbol. The son peered at it for a moment then signed: *number of stars with planets*. He had to spell out planets for there was no real gesture for it that he could use to make his father understand. Justin repeated as it was being signed then pointed to the next variable,  $f(p)$ .

This time, the young genius picked up a pencil and wrote something on the paper:

**1 0 0, 0 0 0, 0 0 0, 0 0 0**

He pointed to the first symbol and then to the number. He then scratched out the last zero and pointed to the next variable. Justin looked a little puzzled.

*Ten percent of all stars.* He pointed to the second variable. He lopped off the last two zeroes and pointed to the next variable.

*One percent of those planets.*

He continued to scratch out zeroes, one or two at a time, until he got through the last variable where he was left with 10,000. He smiled and righted himself. Then signed that this was the number of planets that could possibly have life like us. Justin was beginning to see where this was leading. He had never had it explained to him quite like this and not just because the professor in this case happened to be his not-quite-nine-year old son.

*Point-Six Percent*

The lesson was not over yet. Zack held up a finger to suggest there was more, and used the finger to point to the last symbol...L. Up to now, Justin was simply astonished to know his son, who at nearly-nine, was teaching a concept that most seniors in high school would have trouble wrapping their minds around. What happened next took him to a whole new level.

*This means the length of the smart life on the planet. The little teacher shook his head. Not right. Our sun only half as old as the other suns; suns with this life. That life would be smarter. A lot smarter. 'L' needs to be changed. Your story could have the boy doing that.* As he was signing this out for Justin, who continued to be amazed by how much more intelligent his son had become even since Christmas, he was eyeing the paper, still on the table. He took the pencil and scratched out the small case letter 's' in parentheses after the 'L' and held it up for his father to see.

$$N = N(*) f(p) n(e) f(l) f(i) f(c) L(s)$$

*This is better.* He smiled with success at his addition. Justin continued to stare dumbfounded at the paper and the addition made to it by his super genius son.

The opening of the front door snapped him back into a more familiar world filled with the equally familiar voice of Caster. Normally, Zack would be ahead of the game and know there was another presence in the room, but he was never able to read Uncle Adam's emotions. It was a little odd, but he had also experienced the same feeling in the restaurant when he first met J.J., the blind boy who was also going to Harvard in the fall. Zack noticed that J.J. allowed him to see what he wanted and in turn, could see what Zack wanted him to see in his mind.

Still, once the father knew there was someone, Zack knew it too...through him.

Justin jumped up, grabbed the paper with the formula, and greeted his guest in the foyer.

"Hey Jay, waddya say?"

"Caster...you have to see this. Did you know just how smart this kid is?" He was talking excitedly fast and Adam just looked past him and



towards Zack, who gave him a wave and wink in reply to the same he received from Uncle Adam.

“He kicked my ass at chess this morning and now he’s explaining Drake’s formula to me. It’s unbelievable. This kid has got to go to Harvard.”

“Well, good morning to you, too.” Adam grabbed his friend’s arms with his hands as a way of shaking him out of his dazed state. “Harvard sounds like a great idea and we’ll talk more about it later. First, you need to get ready for another trip to the West Coast and I’m here to take young Mr. Einstein into my personal custody.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s right. I didn’t even tell Zack yet.”

“If he’s that smart, he probably already knows.” Again, Caster was displaying his irascible wit while Justin looked at Zack with a new wonder.

“Do you think?”

“I was just kidding. How could he?”

“Right about now, I wouldn’t put it past him. I wouldn’t put *anything* past him.”

He signed that he was going to go away for the night and that Uncle Adam would be in charge. He was going to be back very late tomorrow night. The boy smiled and nodded. It appeared that he didn’t have any precognitive notions as to his father’s trip and that brought a sense of ill relief to Justin. He would definitely pack the laptop for there would be plenty of writing and rewriting to do. He also needed to call Cassie.

“So, you want me to take him now. I was going up to the club to play a little golf and he could certainly tag along. I hear he’s been hitting it pretty good these days. I’d like to see that up close.”

The elder Ward signed to the younger if he would like to go with his Uncle Adam now and the smiling nod was indication enough that he would be very comfortable with the situation.

*Get dressed for golf.* Zack lit out for the stairs and flew up to his room.

“I take it from the call I got this morning that things went very well with my friend John.”

“I’m beginning to develop an appreciation for what celebrities go through and I can also now understand why some guys try so hard to stay out of the limelight.”

*Point-Six Percent*

“That good, huh?”

“3-5 million by the time it’s all said and done; could even be a lot more.”

“And how is the story coming along?”

“The pages are pouring out of me. If you take Zack, I’ll write for three hours before getting on the plane and I’ll write some more going to and from and even in LA. Its incredible how this thing is coming to me and now my son is getting a writing credit, too.” Caster looked a little perplexed.

“Come again?”

“You’re as much a sci-fi fan as I am, but do you know Drake’s formula inside out?”

“Who’s Drake?”

“Never mind.”

“I want to see what you have. I’ll be consulting on the script anyway so it’ll give me a head start.” Justin headed over to the computer and then realized that Zack managed to read it so he must know how to access it. He paused and then laughed.

“Just ask Zack to show you where it is. He found it this morning all by himself and I’m sure he remembers just how to do it.” He fished around his desk to find a spare thumb drive and handed it to Caster. “Know how to copy a file?”

“I think I can handle that.”

“Then you’ll have a copy of what I have up to the time I leave. Limo’s getting me at two. What time is it now?” Caster checked his watch as Justin instinctively peered out to the grandfather in the hall. Both men deduced roughly the same time of 10:15 as Zack thundered down the stairs to greet them in a nice pair of dress shorts, a matching golf shirt and the ever-present Red Sox cap.

As the two headed out the door, Justin snatched up the loose-leaf paper filled with his son’s brilliance and made a beeline to the computer. It was a no-brainer to figure that Zack was indeed correct about using Drake instead of von Daniken. Not only that, but the way he described it would translate very well into the story. The teacher would get the lesson from the student and be astounded. He needed to weave a few other things into the plot. The child would have to be special in some way. Perhaps he could even go so far as the Second Coming. The new

Jesus...a seventh-grade kid with an advanced sense of purpose. As he started typing, the words struck like a southpaw's jab. They were subtle, but with meaning. Each word stacked on the next and each sentence built like a combination with an eventual knockout as the ultimate goal. The kid in the story would certainly deliver a stunner at the end.

And the character, Miles Standish Vernon, was certainly becoming a lot like young Zachary Taylor Ward.

As a character, Miles would be a human of alien blood so as to take a little of the von Daniken theory, but that alien blood would be very old and far beyond that of what we know as intelligent. The character would be everything to everybody and nothing to no one at the same time. His existence would be mysterious and the fuel of lore for eons after. Society would try to cage him up, but he would be immune and all the while, his one friend would be this teacher, who took him under his wing only to find the reverse happening when the teacher really needed it the most. The author typed as if he were working under a printer's deadline and only realized how late it was when the grandfather in the hall hammered out a single ping at one o'clock.

It wasn't that he didn't hear the eleven or twelve pings when they pealed at their respective times, but that he dismissed them as being unimportant. The lone chime at one reminded him he was a mere hour from being chauffeured to the airport, which one, he didn't even know. He still had to call Cassie, take a shower and pack a few things, including his golf clubs. He was making mental notes all over his saturated brain as he saved the work, locked down the laptop for transport, and headed up to the bedroom. He would first call his love, for she must have been very busy not to have already dialed him by now. He wouldn't bother with Liz for this was just a quick overnight trip. She might read it in the papers if what John Pollex said was true about the photographers and all.

The call to Cassie yielded nothing more than a message from her machine, but he obliged and sent a couple of kisses as well as a regret that she couldn't be with him in LA. He reminded her that the last time he was in the City of Angels he was truly visited by one and had the greatest single day of his entire life.

He remembered his golf shoes this time. Now that he had two pair, he would keep one at home and leave the other ones at the club where he had a locker. The packing was quick as everything found its way into the

*Point-Six Percent*

travel golf bag except for the laptop, which went into the carry-on bag. It was the usual routine only he wouldn't necessarily have to buy clothes seeing as he was only going to be there the one-day. He packed enough digs to get him through the whole ordeal and he finally resolved himself to the thought that it was the golf, and not the millions of dollars, which was making the whole trip worthwhile.

A couple of 20-dollar bills accompanied the note left on the kitchen counter for Adam and Zack...apparently to pay for dinner at Pizza Hut or somewhere of their choosing. The ride, which was the now somewhat customary stretch limo decked out with every conceivable gadget and a fully stocked bar, was right on time.

It had been a while since Justin had flown out of Boston. The ride to Logan Airport was somehow less stressful when traveling by limousine and he hardly noticed the three different traffic jams they encountered on the way through the Callahan Tunnel to the Hub's Back Bay area. The tunnel had a way of washing off the city. One entered by leaving behind the grime of skyscrapers and then emerged, a mile or so later, into a flat, ocean view, filled with seagulls and boats and eventually one of the world's largest airports. The beauty of the sun often went unnoticed on the city side of the tunnel while the bayside was as bright as Easter Sunday.

The passenger hardly noticed any of this on this day for he had pulled the laptop out the moment he knew it was going to be Logan and worked feverishly until the driver pulled into the terminal. He never gave the fact that there was a second passenger, riding in the front seat with the driver, a second thought either. As it turned out, the flight would be non-stop and that, in itself, was very good news. No layovers or changing planes in Pittsburgh or some other common metropolis used as a weigh station for commercial airlines. Now all he figured he had to do was stay anonymous for the entire five hours in the air. The last thing he wanted was to be recognized. First class accommodations were one way to deter a lot of that, but it didn't always work as evidenced by his Worcester to New York adventure just the week before. Even the stewardess was in on the disruption for that flight.

There was the usually scrutiny before entering the gate area, especially with a non-stop cross-country flight, and Justin hardly noticed that the front-seat passenger went right to the entrance checkpoint with

*Steve Bantle*

him before parting to make a call at a nearby bank of payphones. Justin wasn't sure if he should tip the guy seeing as the ride was arranged for him, but he was never concerned with that type of protocol so a ten-dollar bill was his way of covering himself. He might, after all, get the same escort on the way back and that could make for a long ride home.

It was straight to the hospitality room for him upon picking up his ticket. Justin wanted to get right back to work and he had over an hour to kill before his 4:40 flight.

\* \* \* \* \*

Things were usually quiet on the golf course in the late morning hours during the week. Weekends created a different story, but for the purpose of traversing the course with a nine-year old, playing through the high noon hour was traditionally perfect. The hot sun was good for the soul and since Uncle Adam always rode via electric cart, the round was less strenuous. For Zack, he was always happy to play, and did well for his age. He was able to hit the ball forward with every stroke and managed to putt very well. His average scores rivaled those of some of the high handicapping regulars. He even managed to break 100 once.

The most important thing about playing with Uncle Adam was that he always understood Zack, and in turn, was easily understandable. He also always had something for him to work on; either it was a puzzle or problem rooted in math – something to test and develop Zack's higher brain function. Caster understood what Zack was and what he could do. Today proved to be even more special as the two played through the front nine and took a little break for lunch. Zack often wondered why Uncle Adam never signed well for him when he was in the presence of anyone. He always saved his perfect signing for when they were alone. And he was an excellent signer; better than anyone else Zack had met. It was like he had been doing it forever.

*How can you sign so well? You never show anyone but me.* The question came from nowhere as the waitress in the club's grille room placed cheeseburgers and fries in front of each of them. The place was empty except for a couple of older women having lunch. Adam slid back in the booth and signaled for his protégé to do likewise.

*Point-Six Percent*

*You and I are very special. Do you feel special?* The boy nodded slowly as he answered.

*I feel there is a great thing about me. I am going to do something.* The pseudo-uncle smiled.

*Yes. Yes you are...great things. But first, you need to be normal and I am going to make it that way because I'm special, too.* He reached out his arms and held the boy's head in his long fingers, placing the index finger of each hand into the ear of the young genius. His eyes closed briefly in concentration and the boy felt a warm sensation in his jaw and up and down the Eustachian tubes. It filled his circulatory canals and moved over the hammer, anvil, and stirrup on its way to the eardrum. It made Zack's head rise slightly in conjunction with his eyebrows. He was not scared, but the new feeling in his brain was definitely weird. Uncle Adam removed his hands after only a moment or two and the young genius smiled.

*Welcome to the world of sound, Brother Ward. It will take a couple of days...maybe a week, but you will begin to notice sounds and noises. Do not let on that you can hear. Not yet. Use the time to relearn the language. It is different when spoken.*

Zack's smile grew and he held his hands over his ears while moving his jaw around in an attempt to crack it somehow. He was trying to get accustomed to the new feeling. Caster bit into his cheeseburger.

He winked at Zack who was now tearing into his lunch. The boy caught the gesture and returned a wink of his own. *Why now? Why couldn't I hear before?* The smile of intimate knowledge raced across the pseudo-uncle's face and he leaned in to get closer to his understudy.

*Not being able to hear let you develop your very advanced brain.* The boy smiled even bigger than before.

*Feels weird.*

*You get used to it. There's a lot for you to learn. I will teach you when the time comes. Finish your lunch; we've got a back nine to play.*

As the afternoon wore on, Zack found a new sense of balance as he played. He felt as if he were able to swing harder at the ball without fear of screwing himself into the ground. The scores were the same as always – right around one hundred, but there was a definite change in his attitude about his ability. He would read more about golf that night.

By the time the 767 rolled onto the runway at LAX, Justin had pieced together almost a third of what was coming together as easily his best work to date. Nearly 150 pages of intrigue and wonder about a boy who has abilities that surpass all humans and the people who gave him those abilities, hiding in the shadows and manipulating the young minds of the general public. He has interwoven a couple of secondary plots and littered the work with suspense designed specifically to keep the reader turning pages. He didn't even blink at the in-flight movie, ironically enough the new *Star Trek* film, and the ideas were still flowing through him as he folded up the laptop upon the urging of the stewardess during final approach. Justin couldn't wait to get to the hotel and continue with the story. He was as engrossed writing it as a reader might be in absorbing it.

As expected, yet another limo was waiting to whisk him away. Enroute to the same Wilshire he stayed at just a few days before, he talked with Pollex via the hired car's cell phone and received a rundown of the next day's activities. First, there would be a formal signing with studio dignitaries and yes, there would be pictures taken for promotional purposes. Justin acted as his own agent on this one so he was ready to sign on the word of Adam Caster that the deal was good and there were no loopholes. It was Adam who brokered his first two books and helped with the language on his most recent contract with Parsec. The neighbor had winked his approval of the deal before he left and that was good enough for Justin.

After all that, there would be time for golf, another round at Riviera, followed by a late lunch with some script people before the return flight to Boston. He wouldn't get much time to write and would surely sleep most of the way home. Jet lag and first-class seating could do that to you.

Therefore, the author simply ordered room service and settled in to produce another thirty pages before calling it quits just before midnight. As Thursday took shape on the West Coast, back in Worcester, Massachusetts, a little genius was experiencing a new ability to hear certain sounds. The grandfather clock in the hall chimed and it drifted softly through his ear in a tubular way. He could count them: one, two, three, four, five, six. It was as if a debilitating harness had been lifted off

his head. Considering how intelligent he already was, removing any obstacles to learning would only prove to rapidly increase his abilities.

Young Zack was eager to get a book on phonetics. He was going to try to learn to speak the words he knew he would soon hear. The point about remaining silent was not without merit for Zack knew why he had to keep yet another secret. He needed the time to have people talk and sign at the same time so he could learn to mimic the sounds to reproduce the words himself someday. He would practice in his room once he knew how to control his vocal chords.

*Good thing Dad has a real good dictionary,* he thought

He was anxious, however, to hear the sound of his own voice. He figured there would come a time, fairly soon, when he would be able to hear his own words. For starters, he would hum occasionally as a way to test the vocal waters.

Whenever he took watch over Zack, Caster would usually bring his pseudo-nephew back to his house. On this occasion, he chose to use one of Justin's guestrooms in an effort to maintain an important presence. Besides, he explained to Zack, the pool wasn't up and running at his house yet and he didn't have any video games even though Zack hadn't really spent any time with those in the last few months.

Although the Sox were wrapping up a series with the Seattle Mariners at home, Caster also convinced his young protégé that staying home on this evening would be wise. It turned out for the better because Zack came down with a very bad headache after eating. The restaurant had been as fun as any place was where there were people and emotions, but with the addition of minimal hearing, he became a little queasy after a couple slices of pepperoni and pineapple with extra cheese.

The ride home was painful and Zack thought he would hurl, but Uncle Adam just winked and put his hand on his shoulder as they drove along and that helped to steady the pounding in his head. Upon arriving home, Caster directed the boy into the kitchen.

*I will make it better for you.* He produced a bottle of scotch from Justin's liquor cabinet and mixed a little in a glass with a lot of Seven-Up. *Drink this. It will make the pain go away. Plug your nose.*

Zack did as he was told and although the concoction was horrible tasting, within a few minutes, the pain dulled. Ten minutes later it was gone.



Steve Bantle

*You had a brain overload. Caster was not joking when he said it. Your brain works thousands of times better and faster than most people's brains. When you started to hear things, it caused a small overload. This will happen every now and then and give you bad headaches.* He held up the bottle. *This is scotch. It's one of the best ways to get rid of the headaches. Most humans can't drink a lot of this, but you and I can. Our bodies and brains can handle it. It's medicine for our headaches.* The boy solemnly nodded. He knew that what Uncle Adam was saying was important.

*As you get older, you will need to drink more and more of this, but that will not happen for a long time. You will outlive all of your family and friends. You might live for hundreds of years...just like me.* The little genius smiled at the idea of living for a long time. He knew the average life span was about 75 years and something about knowing you are very special made him very proud of who and what he was.

*If we had gone to Fenway tonight, your head might have exploded.* This time Caster was showing his nearly perfect teeth and a wide smile. Zack squealed his laughter, but with a perceivable definition to it. It wasn't the same uncontrolled wail. Instead, there was a hint of a laugh in it...a genuine laugh and both the master and the tutor knew it was now just a matter of time.

*Headache gone? Zack nodded. Good. Ready to try a little experiment?* The boy smiled and continued to nod. It was time for another one of Uncle Adam's puzzles. *Let's play Hide-n-Seek. I'll hide and you find me. One thing, all the lights will be off so you have to use your brain. Trust what it tells you. You know where everything in the house is and you can find me by concentrating.* Zack nodded as his smile turned into a confident grin. He had already begun to experience a sensory perception outside of his head. This would be fun.

*Close your eyes and count to fifty.*

The boy found him in less than a minute.

He could see where he was in his mind and he could almost see where the furniture was even though there wasn't a light on in the place.

They played a few more times and Adam found even more remote places to conceal himself each time. And each time it took the wonder child less and less time to locate his target.

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As he went about returning light to the Ward house, Adam beckoned his student to follow as his trail led to the den where he pulled the chess book out.

*Did you read this?* The boy nodded. Uncle Adam flipped at random to a spot in the middle somewhere. *Page 144.* It was a command more than a question. Zack closed his eyes for a second and opened them with the same confident smile as he displayed before Hide-n-Seek. He then started signing furiously, rattling off the detailed moves of a game between Boris Spassky and Bobby Fischer from 1972. It was like he was dictating the page back to his mentor. He stopped briefly at move 12, a cautious pawn play, to comment that this was Spassky's downfall for Fischer's next move opened the way for a bishop attack that would ultimately lead to a victory in the board's center. He knew the whole page, and the ones before it, and the ones after it.

Uncle Adam smiled and closed the book.

*Twenty-four thousand, eight hundred ninety six times itself.* Again the boy closed his eyes for a moment, moved his lips, brightened up and then produced both the answer and the same grin as before.

*Six hundred nineteen million, eight hundred ten thousand, eight hundred sixteen.* The babysitter smirked with delight.

He flipped his cell phone open and instinctively punched a familiar series of numbers. He winked at Zack and sent him off to get ready for bed. It was just after eight on the West Coast.

"Phase three is complete. This is definitely our boy – he's the one." He paused to take some direction. "Uh huh. Yes. That will be taken care of tomorrow. I'll call you when it starts." He snapped the phone closed and after a detour to the kitchen for his own glass of scotch, proceeded to the owner's bedroom. During Hide-n-Seek he had noticed that the answering machine was flashing two messages. He lowered the volume and checked the offerings.

*Jay...it's me again. Honest to God, I'm buying you a cell phone. Please answer this message...I have a lot of things to tell you about this Project Zero place. Adam and John Pollex are not to be trusted. There's something really weird going on and I'm going to get to the bottom of it. Please call me back right away. This is not a joke and I'm serious about not letting Zack get involved in this.*

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There was definite urgency in her recorded voice and he calmly sipped from the heavy glass while nodding during the message as if he were expecting it. As before, the message was quickly deleted before pressing on:

*Hi Justin. Sorry we can't reenact last week in LA. I'm sure it'll be lonely for you. I'm almost ready to move in...maybe another day or two so let's shoot for this weekend. I've arranged for a mover to take the office stuff I need and some of my stuff from the apartment. Oh, yeah, I have someone willing to sublet my place so I won't give it up totally. Hey...just in case. We can talk about it when you get back.*

Caster raised an eyebrow at this message and saluted the machine with his glass.

“Way to go, Jay,” he half whispered to himself. Then in a swift gulp, he finished off the drink and disconnected the receiver from the phone, leaving it off the hook before easing into the next room for a quick three to four-hour overnight nap.

\* \* \* \* \*

Getting back to work was a welcomed distraction for Liz Madsen. She was waiting to hear from Justin, the ex-husband and placed another call to the answering machine during lunch. She also forged ahead with some other related phone calls including a message left with reporters from the Boston Globe and the New York Times. She pulled as much information as she could about Project Zero and pieced together all her pictures, documentation, and notes. If she didn't hear from Justin by the time she was ready to leave the office at three, she would e-mail it all to him so he could read it for himself. All the photos, the list of coincidences, and the most supernatural kids she had ever met, all in the past two days, were in the file she had created and stored on both her personal computer and the one at work.

Following another meeting on staff development and a quick tour of the construction on the new maternity wing, Liz returned to her office to finish off a Thursday's work by sending the e-mail to Justin as she had promised herself before lunch. She would try calling him again at home

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after dinner, which tonight would be something special seeing as it was Peter's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday.

\* \* \* \* \*

While it had been pretty muggy in Northeast Florida, it had been another decent day in Central New England's Worcester County, with temperatures topping out just above the expected high of 74. The possibility of some humid weather moving through the area wasn't going to affect the plans of the day as any shower activity wouldn't happen until much later in the evening. Golf was certainly part of the plans, but first there was the matter of breakfast for Zack and Uncle Adam, both of whom had been up since the first stretches of sunlight over the morning horizon.

*You do not sleep much?*

The boy shook his head and signed that it was about four or five hours a night. The mentor nodded. *That is normal. I only sleep 3-4 hours a night, but sometimes I take a short nap in the afternoon.*

*Dad sleeps a lot more.*

*You are more like me than you will ever be like him.*

*Why?*

*I'll explain on the way to Fenway Park. I have a surprise for you.* The boy's eyes lit up just the same way they do when Justin makes pancakes without notice. *Get ready for golf and you get to pick where we go for breakfast.* The boy started for the stairs when he felt the urge to stop and look back.

*First, show me your father's latest book.* Zack looked down. He wanted to help, but he told his Dad he wouldn't go into his stuff anymore. He started to sign his regret to Caster when the latter stopped him with his hand up. *Dad says you should show me. I can find it later. Go on and get ready. I have to go home to change, but I'll be right back.* The boy quickly pounded up the stairs hitting each step louder than the first because for the first time, he could actually hear the sound the foot made instead of feeling the vibration of it. But not just loud things were coming through...soft noises were also filtering in. Noises like the birds that sang to him as he was waking up this morning and the hum of the

fluorescent light in his bathroom were taken note of for the very first time.

As the boy absorbed the newly discovered sounds, Uncle Adam headed off to retrieve the information from the computer. He also took a moment to scope out the e-mail section only to find one old message from a Cassie Jones. He left it alone and slipped out the side door.

\* \* \* \* \*

There's a place in St. Augustine on Ponce De Leon Boulevard that Peter Madsen always liked to dine. It didn't have the look of anything fancy and rather held the ambiance of a big southern house with an interior as folksy as the people who ran it. But Marty's Seafood and Steakhouse Restaurant has been in business since the late 50s or so it said on the placemats, and they offered a unique taste that Liz's husband just loved. They discovered the place by accident one Friday afternoon after a meeting at the School for the Blind and Deaf where Zack spent his first two years of Florida schooling and what immediately intrigued Peter was something called Minorcan clam chowder, a house specialty.

Peter had lived a good chunk of his forty years on Earth in New England and specifically, Central Massachusetts so any clam chowder dishes not indicative or conducive to his area of origin would naturally pale in comparison. Still, upon reading the menu that first visit, over two years ago, he was intrigued about the fact it was a local favorite and tried it more to dispel it as anything but a watered down version of the real McCoy.

He was pleasantly surprised.

Oh, it wasn't New England clam chowder, but it wasn't trying to be, either. Minorcan clam chowder was different...and it was good. As a history teacher, Peter had prepared for the move to northern Florida by brushing up on the cultural beginnings of the region. The Minorcans literally founded the city of St. Augustine, and as the country's elder statesman as far as cities go, the place had plenty of heritage; Minorcan food being just a small part of it. Generally meat and rice dishes featuring corn and tomatoes, Minorcan food, it was discovered by the teacher, was often combined into a casserole and utilized various peppers and salts for flavoring.

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The noticeable difference in the chowder was that it had a meat and fish taste and was sweeter. It turns out that sugar is often used in the dish. And so it was with Marty's Minorcan clam chowder. Therefore, it was on those special occasions they took in the aromas, tastes, and atmosphere of this particular eatery...sometimes for more than one bowl of the local delicacy.

For this night, Liz even went so far as to make the reservations and instruct the hostess that she was bringing along a birthday boy so that the event might be detailed with a surprise cake for dessert.

A few hours before the Madsens were pulling into the restaurant to start their evening of celebration, the wraps were being placed on yet another whirlwind day in the life of Justin Ward. Golf was once again terrific and John Pollex turned out to be almost as good a player as Adam. Between the two, however, the course record was not in jeopardy on this day for there was plenty of talk about business, including the possibility of using a previous Justin Ward book for yet another project down the road. No monetary figures were tossed around, instead the two talked more about which book would work best and how a story might be adapted to better fit the Hollywood ideal for a movie.

Justin listened with intent especially since he was seriously considering taking a major hiatus from writing after this latest work was finished. Selling the rights to a book he already wrote would be another easy way to make money and not work...and that certainly had the author's attention.

Of course, they talked at some length about the book-in-the-works and John was very pleased with the story line as was told by the writer. Some additional suggestions were bandied about and Justin accepted them with particular enthusiasm, even to the point of writing them on the back of an old scorecard he had in his golf bag, for they were all very creative and workable ideas.

It was as if they were on the same wavelength, even more so than he and Caster had been on at times. Overall, between the hoopla at the contract signing and the golf at Riviera, Justin was indeed wiped out as the driver pulled up to the curb at the terminal. He would be there and back almost before the jet lag could take effect. It would be a five and a half-hour plane ride, but with the time difference, he would be arriving in

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Worcester around midnight. He would try to sleep most of the way. His trusty laptop was at the ready in his carry-on bag just in case.

A skycap was good enough to tote the golf bag travel case all the way to the gate entrance just as the guy in Boston had. Justin handed him a twenty as he got in line to pass through security. He tipped his hat and headed straight for a bank of pay phones, unbeknownst to the author.

\* \* \* \* \*

As for Zack, he and Uncle Adam were living it up at famous Fenway Park and what a surprise it was. Not the game, for Justin had season tickets, but the way they got there...via limousine. Although he had seen a bunch and watched his dad get into a few, Zack had never been in one before, never mind for an hour ride. It was a very important hour though, for young master Ward found the answers to many questions in the back seat of a white stretch limo on this night.

*This is how you go to the game in style.* Zack just giggled with even less of the normal squeal he had only a day ago and took in the velvety seating and the gadgetry. He was enjoying his first trip in a big car with a driver. We have a lot of things to talk about. *First...how is your hearing?* “Can you hear me speak?” The boy nodded.

*A little. I hear loud sounds much better.*

*It will take some time, maybe a week or two, but you will be able to hear even better than other kids your age by the time it is over. A lot better.* Adam reached for a couple of glasses and poured a dribble of scotch in one glass while filling the other. He then filled the first glass with Seven-Up and handed it to the child.

“Drink this now,” he said aloud as he put his glass down. *Keep your head from exploding.* The boy genius giggled again and drank the entire glass as Caster sipped his own.

*Did you read the book I gave you last night?* The child nodded. *Understand it?* He gave another affirmative nod. *You know what DNA is and how it decides the way a person develops? You see the difference between you and other humans?*

*I think so. Are you and I both different?* This time, the mentor nodded.

*We are the future, correct?* He nodded again. *There are many of us?*

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*Yes, but you are the most special. Soon, you will meet another like us who was very much like you when he was your age a long time ago. He is like me and we are both coming to a time, in a little while, when we have to move on to other things and you will be left to lead the rest.* He paused to take a sip of his scotch. He could have gulped the whole thing down with relative ease for the taste no longer affected him. His sipping was a learned reflex that he had been using for so long that he naturally just sipped it when in the company of people.

*Do you ever feel surges of energy in your hands?* The boy thought for a second and nearly mouthed the word yes as he signed it. He then told the story of the baby at the Cunningham's and the incident with Richie Baker. Caster sat back and took in the first story while smiling at the second.

*I bet the look on his face was funny.* Zack cocked his head to the side in thought before nodding as largely as he was grinning.

*Hold out your hands.* Uncle Adam took the palms in his and closed his eyes in quick, quiet concentration. Zack felt an amazing rush through the veins and capillaries and the sinews of his muscles. It shot right through to the top of his head and down to the nails on his little toes. It stunned him for a moment and then he knew things. He knew what he was and what he was designed to do. It was as if his programming had just been downloaded. He took a moment to get his bearings and then opened his eyes with a new purpose and a different type of smile.

This one had an inner arrogance. It was the kind of smile a district attorney gets just before asking the perfect question to get a hostile witness to break down and recant.

It was the kind of smile that one fighter got when he knew he had the number of the other guy. It was a notch or two above 'confident'. And it was a smile he would keep from that moment on.

Caster smiled, too.

*Now you know most everything.*

"Yes." It wasn't pronounced perfectly, but it was spoken and it came from the mouth of the little deaf-mute genius, now only a mere shadow of the boy Justin Emerson Ward called 'son'.

*You must remember to conceal your abilities as I have. No one can know that you can hear and speak. Not yet. You know you can do other*



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*things, too. Only do them when necessary. The trick is to act normal and be normal.* Once again, the young student acknowledged.

*I will be around for a while to get you through things. There is a lot more to learn, but know this: you and those of your age will be the ones to finally join this world with those out there.* He raised a finger to the sunroof as if to point to the sky then used it to tap his temple a few times as he smiled. “You will make them all understand.” *It will all come full circle then.*

“Drake.”

“Drake.” It was an affirmation of what the child had slowly pronounced. The inner arrogance returned to the boy’s face and he held out his glass for a little more of Uncle Adam’s liquid pain reliever.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marty’s does a pretty good business most Thursday nights and this was no exception. The reservation Liz made turned out to be a blessing in disguise. A convention of sorts over the weekend had brought a lot of travelers into the area and Marty’s was packed by 7:15 when the Madsens arrived. Needless to say, the cake was almost as good as the clam chowder and the steak that came in between was also done nearly to perfection. He was about as happy as a guy could be and yet, there was something missing. He missed not having Zack around. For the last few days, it had actually been a little lonely. In the years before, it was almost a relief for the stepson to be gone because he was a handful and Peter did have to bend over backwards more than once to accommodate all the things he required. There were the daily trips to the special school, which wasn’t so bad because it was on the way to his work, but still, it would have been nice to sleep the extra fifteen to twenty minutes every day.

Then there were the specialists who conferenced over every little change or detail, and at first it was a chore to take him to the park; the park was where Peter could get his exercise. But he also knew that he loved his wife and she needed a break from Zack just as she gave him his break every Saturday afternoon. It wasn’t easy the first year or so, but as Zack grew, he became more of a son and less of a burden and in turn, Peter felt more like a father than he ever imagined possible. Sure, he was

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a teacher, but not having kids of his own, he never really understood the attachment that a father and son could have.

He thought about testing the waters with Liz on having a child of their own, but not tonight. Tonight, he was going to enjoy his clam chowder, cake, and the fact that he was pretty happy for a guy at about the mid point of his life.

Upon leading the way to the parking lot, he couldn't help feeling that you only live once and you only get one 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. He didn't feel old. In fact, the thought of trying to convince Liz to have his baby was giving him new vigor. He was so engrossed in thought that he nearly walked right passed the metallic blue Mustang he had been driving for the last three years. Liz had to steer him back. They each had a couple of cocktails, but he knew he was driving and he stopped after his second beer, before the food ever arrived. Forgetting where he parked was an easy mistake to make because there were a lot of cars in the lot that night; a lot of cars, including a rented black Lexus with Georgia plates, which pulled out behind the Madsens as they started out for home.

Somewhere along A1A, the very recently replaced, and badly worn, right front tire of the Mustang lost its anticipated will to continue and the resulting blowout sent the car and the Madsens into a hard spin to the right. The collision with the girder that followed quickly after sent the vehicle tumbling headlong like a racecar at the Daytona 500, hurtling over itself several times before coming to rest across the right lane on what was once the hood of the auto.

The driver of the Lexus, wearing a hat and a high-collared jacket so as to perhaps hide an identity, was trailing the action by about an eighth of a mile and nearly reached the scene by the time gravity had settled the Mustang's forward momentum. The car slowed to merge with several other motorists who had veered left to avoid the wreckage. While passing the mishap, the driver of the Lexus held up a small remote control and pushed the button whereupon, a split second later, the Mustang exploded into flames.

The black rented car moved on with the slowing flow of traffic and eventually disappeared into the night as other cars stopped to assist the doomed passengers.

*Steve Bantle*

Somewhere high over the plains of Nebraska, Justin Ward jerked out of the first nightmare he had experienced in over two years, startling the woman seated next to him in the first class section of the plane.

“Are you okay?”

“Uhh...yeah. I...wow...I just had a really scary dream.” The flight attendant also inquired as to Justin’s present condition and asked if she could help in any way, but the author rubbed his eyes and only requested some water. He then opened the laptop. The adrenaline rush made the author as wide-awake as you could get, and his heart raced in congruence with his trembling fingers while punching away on the keypad.

It was the bottom of the third in a 2-2 game when a similar wave of emotion ripped through Zack’s brain. He froze as a fly ball to deep left center field was tracked down by the visiting team. He tugged on Uncle Adam’s sleeve to get his attention.

*Something bad has happened.* Caster looked deep into the boy’s eyes.

*I know. It was something that had to be done. You’ll understand soon why it had to happen.* The boy nodded and moments later, heartily joined the crowd in cheering the stand-up double off the Green Monster by the hometown nine as if nothing had ever happened all the while the Florida State Police were beginning an investigation and reconstruction of the deadly accident on A1A south.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As a child, Justin had a love of flying that most kids his age shared. There was a sense of glamour and excitement that went with the notion of a huge steel contraption actually getting off the ground and staying airborne for long periods of time, whisking its passengers away to exotic places or tropical paradises. The pale winter could become a warm, breezy summer in just a matter of a few hours via a plane ride. It had amazed him then and still did even as an adult who wrote more about space travel than earthly ventures. The author usually enjoyed air travel, but by the time Flight 12 from LA had landed safely in Boston, Justin Ward had had all the flying he could stand for awhile.

The same escort who aided him the day before was waiting for him as he arrived in baggage claim to retrieve his clubs. He called home to let Caster know he would be there within the hour. They talked briefly and Justin said he'd explain it all when he got home. He hadn't slept after the troubling nightmare on the plane and thought about taking advantage of all the room and comfort afforded by the limo. Perhaps he would sleep on the ride home, but sprawled out across the seat, with his eyes closed, he once again envisioned the horror of his first nightmare in a long time.

He vividly remembered a boy, older than Zack, but not Zack. However, it seemed in his dream like it was his son. The boy had used his mind to make things fly around the room while reciting pages of exact text from *Hamlet*. Maybe it was a place to eat because there were a lot of people in the room and strangely enough, Justin felt in his dream that he knew them all. There were toasters, and napkin holders and plates and utensils of all kinds floating above everyone as they all scurried for cover under tables and benches. All except Liz, who was standing, defiantly, in the middle of things telling the boy to stop. The conjuring kid then closed his eyes for a moment and two large kitchen knives suddenly descended quickly upon his ex-wife, who never moved as they pierced her body like a ban saw takes to a piece of fresh-cut pine. Liz wheeled and looked right into the dreamer's eyes. She had that look of utter despair for the knives had gone right through her and she stood there in apparent shock, unable to cry out. As she opened her mouth, the knives made a final pass at a horizontal angle, taking the head of the victim off.

Justin sat up and shivered with fright as he had on the airplane. Not as badly this time for his brain had viewed the scene just a few hours before. He was exhausted. The fear was unnerving, but his body simply slid back to a prone position allowing him to finally nod off to a quick, but deep sleep.

It felt like only minutes passed before the big car eased into the short driveway. The beeping of the driver's side door is what roused Justin from his slumber. Caster was already in possession of the golf bag and waved the rider off when he fumbled around in a daze for a tip for the driver.

"Already took care of it, Jay. You look wiped out." Justin sleepily passed him on the porch and entered the house ahead of his guest who placed the carry bag of golf clubs up against the wall near the door. "Either it went really well, or really bad, but I don't think there's an in-between here." The good friend was trying to be courteous, but the author was in no shape for witty repartee.

"I haven't been this tired in a long time, my friend," he said as he plopped onto the couch in a position similar to the one he had in the limo.

"I can tell." Caster took a sip of his ever-present scotch and moved around to the other side of the couch.

"Any calls?" the weary traveler asked through a yawn.

"One. Your secretary said something about seeing you this weekend and I was supposed to tell you that she wished she could be with you on the trip to LA." Justin tried to sit up a little as Caster took a seat nearby. "Not my business, Jay, but are you getting cozy with someone?" Justin chuckled wearily.

"No, it's not your business, but yeah...I'm getting attached to someone who is bright, beautiful, and quick as a pistol. You've never met Cassie, my publicist?"

"Has she ever been here?"

"No, I suppose not. Sorry, dumb question. But you will meet her soon. She's moving upstairs. Her office is going to be the green guest room and her bedroom will be the same as mine." He laughed at his own play on words.

“Good for you. I think it’s about time you move on in that direction.” He finished off the rest of his libation. “Who knows, maybe I’ll settle down one of these days, too.” To that remark, Justin cackled in a loud incredulous burst. Caster winked, smiled and got up to leave. For as long as Justin had known the man sitting across the living room from him, he had never known him to ever be seriously with a woman. There had been talk of his sexual preference perhaps being ‘closeted’, but Justin had never really cared much what Adam did in his very private life. As far as he was concerned, Adam Caster was a helluva guy, his best friend, and one of the finest men he’d ever known. There was nothing that could be said about him in public or otherwise that would have changed that thinking.

“Y’know...Zack is a great kid. I really enjoy looking after him.” He paused for a second to ensure that his audient was paying attention before continuing. “And I’d take him for you anytime and for any amount of time. I really feel like a true uncle to him.”

“And I’m grateful for all that you’ve done for him...and me. Just don’t make me get on another friggin’ airplane for a while. If this is jetlag, I can do without it.” He got up to escort his guest out. “Oh, who put in your pool? I’m thinking about having one put in now that Zack is old enough.”

“A pool, eh? For Zack? Really?” He raised an eyebrow as if to question the move. Justin knew where his neighbor was going with the inquiry.

“Okay, okay. I promised Cassie I’d put one in if she came to live with me.” Caster laughed and turned away for home.

“With a hot tub, I suppose.” He was almost mocking the homeowner.

“Yeah, that’d be a nice touch.”

“I might have a couple of reliable contacts for you.” He took a few steps and turned back to Justin. “Golf tomorrow, or should I say, today?” He peeked at his watch for confirmation of the time.

“Sure. 9:30ish?”

“Sounds fine. And bring that nephew of mine.” Caster resumed his short walk home as Justin headed back into the house.

“I suppose she’s a Yankees fan, too.” He half-shouted over his shoulder. Justin stopped for a moment to contemplate the irony of the insight.

*Steve Bantle*

“As a matter of fact...” It wasn’t necessary to finish the rest of the response, returned at a similar volume. Caster simply dropped his head and started shaking it in disbelief by the time Justin uttered the words. A thought rushed to his head just prior to closing the door. “Hey, we have to talk about something.” Caster merely waved over his shoulder as he continued on through the hedges towards his house which in effect, brought the curtain down on the evening.

Thankfully, as far as Justin was concerned it did so with a little tired laughter instead of a nightmare.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the phone blared a second warning, Justin wished more than ever that his son could hear and answer it. 8:16. He noticed the clock while instinctively reaching for the phone.

“Ward here.” He decided against inferring that it was Cassie for that had caused a minor embarrassment just a few mornings prior. Another good choice thought Justin, as the distinctively deep voice of a man bellowed back.

“Justin Ward, please.”

“You got him.” The cobwebs on his vocal chords were still pretty obvious.

“Sorry to wake you Mr. Ward. I’m Sergeant Jeff Silvestri of the Florida State Police.”

“Florida State Police?”

“Yes sir. I’m calling about a Mrs. Elizabeth Madsen. Are you related to her in some way?”

“Liz is my ex-wife. She’s the mother of my son, Zack, why?”

“And do you know where Zack is right now?”

“Yeah...he’s with me for the summer. Is there a problem?”

“Sir, I’m afraid I have terrible news.” Justin had reached a sitting position in bed and was waking up quickly. “We believe your ex-wife and her husband were both killed in an automobile accident last night outside of St. Augustine.” Justin went numb. The idea of either he or Liz ever dying had never really crossed his mind. Once, years before, they talked about buying cemetery plots, but the morbidity of the discussion

had so turned Justin off that he filtered out most of the conversation and never revisited it.

“Dead? Are you sure it’s Liz?”

“There was a fire in the aftermath of the crash, Mr. Ward, but we were able to piece together identifications for both the victims, an Elizabeth Ann Madsen, age 39 and a Peter Steven Madsen, age...well apparently he would have been forty years old today; both residing on North Beach Road in Ormond Beach. We found your name on documents at the residence. We had to conduct the search for locating potential next-of-kin.” The voice on the phone was almost apologetic for the apparent personal intrusion.

“Wow...” He hadn’t even processed the term, next-of-kin, when the voice continued, now rather matter-of-factly. “We found evidence that there was a child living in the home. Now you say that child is with you?”

“Umm, yes. Yes. Zack is with me.” Justin was very relieved to be able to say that because his only child could have very easily been a third casualty had he not come to stay with him for the summer.

“Sir, I have to say that I’m glad to hear that. And if you could just answer a few more questions?”

“Sure. What can I do to help?”

“Has anyone placed any kind of threat against you or your son in the last month or so?”

“No, why?” This was not the question Justin was figuring on answering.

“Can I ask where you were last night?”

“What’s going on here?”

“Sir, we have reason to believe that this was not an accident. Now where is this number I am calling?”

“Not an accident? You mean someone *murdered* my wife and Peter?”

“There is a concern of homicide here, Mr. Ward. Where are you right now?”

“Worcester, Massachusetts and I haven’t seen my ex-wife in a couple of days.”

“You have seen her recently?”

“Yes...she was here several days...do I need a lawyer? Is this a joke of some kind?”



“No joke sir.

“Alright, this is all so hard to believe...” He had thrown the covers off and was rolling out of the bed.

“Sir, again, I must ask where you were yesterday.”

“I was either in an airplane or on a golf course in Los Angeles. I got in very late last night.”

“What time was that?”

“After midnight...and why are you asking me these kinds of questions?”

“Sir, try to understand. Anyone in connection with the family has been asked to verify their whereabouts yesterday. This is strictly procedural; no one is accusing you of anything.” Justin slipped a t-shirt over the phone and his head and returned to a sitting position on the bed.

“Fine, but I’m not crazy about answering any more questions like that. Is there anything else?”

“No sir. We will need someone to officially identify the body. Is there anyone in the Florida area related to the deceased?”

“No...I’m pretty sure I’m the only family Liz has anywhere.”

“Well, sir, is it possible for you to identify the body? Again, this is procedural and I realize an inconvenience as well, but it is necessary before we can release the deceased for proper burial.”

Justin sighed heavily into the phone for the situation was finally sinking into his clearing brain.

“I’ll be there as soon as possible...I don’t know when...I’ll call when I have made arrangements.”

“Thank you for your cooperation. In the meantime, if we learn anything more, myself or someone in this department will contact you. Again, I’m sorry for the loss to you and your son. If you have any questions or can remember anything that might help, please feel free to contact me. Once again, my name is Sergeant Jeff Silvestri.” He passed along a toll-free telephone number that Justin scribbled on the everhandy dream pad on the nightstand. He couldn’t be sure all the numbers were right, but he wasn’t going to ask for it again. The normal processes of his mind had already been inundated by a flood of images that his imagination had been providing. Although it was certainly different from what really happened, the author couldn’t help but visualize what the

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fatal accident looked like and he couldn't get the images out of his head at the moment.

He heard a final, "good bye" and pushed the receiver away from his ear. Blowing out a slow, cleansing breath to go with a silent, 'wow', he finished the call with a similarly silent, "Ward out."

Now the hard part...telling his son the awful, earth-shattering news.

Before he could entertain what approach to best take in that endeavor, the phone beckoned yet again.

"Ward here." It was soft and hoarse to the point where Justin recognized it and tried to recover with a second attempt. "Ward here." This time it was much clearer, but also less friendly than the first time.

"Is that a sexy man on the other end of the phone?" By her tone, Cassie represented the complete opposite mood that Justin was in now.

"Hey, where ya been?" It wasn't a question of concern as his tone was noticeably subdued; something the caller picked up on it instantly.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

"Well...where do I begin?"

"It's about us, isn't it? I knew it. I knew this would happen. I just knew..."

"Calm down. It's not about us. I like us a lot and I still can't wait for us to be us all the time." You could almost hear the blood pressure of the high-strung woman on the other end gradually dropping.

"Phew. Sorry I jumped off the ledge there, it's just that this is a big step for me and I..."

"I need a plane reservation for two for either Jacksonville or Orlando...oh, and keep the return open. I don't know when we're coming back. And I need them as soon as possible." There was a moment of dead silence. He was so dreading even the thought of getting back on an airplane and the idea that bad things happen in threes as well as good things was also starting to creep into the outer reaches of his psyche.

"What happened?"

"Liz is dead. She and her husband were in a car accident last night somewhere in Florida." He wasn't going to get into any more detail than that.

"Oh my word. I'm so sorry. Does Zack know?"

"No. And I have to go tell him now because I just found out a few minutes ago."

“Hey, I’m sorry, really I am. You two were together for a long time, right?”

“Yeah...I guess we were.” He really wasn’t thinking back to any of that stuff...not just yet. There would be time for reflection later and besides, Justin Ward was not the type to get overly sentimental, especially upon the death of a friend. He had always been of the mindset that love and death were selfish in their own regards. Love being selfish in that people pleased themselves through the acts of pleasing a partner and therefore, ultimately felt the most rewards, while in death, they felt sorry for a loss while the soul of the deceased had gone to a seemingly much better and higher plane of existence. But telling a child that his mother is gone is something no one is ready for, and Justin was drifting away from the caller in contemplation of just that.

He was, however, still replaying his imagination’s version of the accident.

“Hey, I was planning on moving in Sunday, but if you want, I can wait until you’re ready.”

“Uh...no, no. In fact, I’ll let my neighbor know you’re coming and he’ll get you settled in if we’re not here.”

“I have a better idea. Why don’t I come up tonight and meet Zack before you go.”

“That might not be a bad idea. Let me think about it and call you back, okay?”

“How ‘bout I call you when I have the flight information.

“Deal...and thanks.”

“Anything for you, loverboy.”

“Same here, baby doll. Gotta go deliver the bad news, Ward out.”

It had just dawned on him that he was probably still the executor of Liz’s estate. As part of the divorce agreement, each allowed the other to be their executor in the case of death so as to ensure that Zack would always go to the surviving parent along with any assets. It was one of those things that a person rarely thinks about, like death, and his thinking about his ex-wife’s will was right on the money. He was still the executor of her part of the estate and now the sole surviving parent of Zachary Taylor Ward, a little boy who was about to have his world rocked.

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As was always the case with Zack, the boy knew right away that something was wrong. What it was, he couldn't tell, but a nightmare did enter his dream state last night and it did involve vividly disturbing images of his mother. That he had any dreams at all were very unusual for him. He didn't sleep for more than four hours a night, but he slept deeply when he did. He spent the first part of his early morning trying to find a book on dreams among the texts in the den. When that turned up nothing he resorted to the internet, but that produced little actual knowledge. The final resolve was to dive into another one of his father's books, the second one he wrote, *Sci-Fi High*.

He was just about midway through it when he sensed the elder Ward heading his way from the foyer.

*What are we into this morning?* The boy held the book in a way that the inquisitor could see the cover.

*Oh...a real classic.* He was trying to be clever and had tried to punctuate the comment with both a smile and a laugh, but the latter was merely a hoarse shadow of a chuckle. The son wanted to join his father in the spirit of the laugh, but was continuing to fight urges to pop off with his own voice. Even his father's voice was starting to pierce through the original, intended obstructions in his ears. He had tested his semi-virginal vocal chords while Uncle Adam was watching him and was gaining confidence in his ability. Still, he would do his mentor's bidding and hold off announcing to the world, in his very own voice, that he could indeed hear and speak.

He merely returned the smile of his father and unconsciously closed the book, putting it down so he could return sign language, even though he felt it would be unnecessary in just a matter of time.

*I like reading what you wrote.*

*You're going to lose your place.* Justin was pointing to the book in a fatherly advice kind of way. The boy looked at the book and then looked at his dad. He smiled and brought an index finger to his head where he tapped the side of his temple a few times.

The elder Ward just nodded in concurrence, knowing that the little genius had no doubt remembered exactly what page he left off at. In fact, it wasn't a stretch to think his son knew all the words on that page and the ones that came before it. *What do you think of it?*

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Zack may have been unique in very many ways, but he was still an eight-year old boy and like such, could be honest in an innocently brutal fashion.

*It could never happen. Too silly.* He didn't mean it as hurtful; he was answering the question. Being a child, his opinion was rarely asked for so when it was, he did what any child would think a parent would want...to answer truthfully and from the heart. Justin's smile turned to a near pouting frown.

*You don't like it?* He held out his hand, palm faced down, wavering it to signal indifference. *It's okay. New one – better; much better.* The writer's frown upturned a little to reveal that same smirk of pride he had been showing off ever since his son was diagnosed with a superior case of intelligence. He held that look for a moment before the tiny alarm in his head reminded of the real reason for seeking out the little genius in the first place. The father bent down to get eye level with his precious son.

*We have to talk.*

*I know. Something is wrong.* They stared at each other for a few moments. Justin had no doubt that his son could sense his burden. He just wasn't sure how he was able to do this and yet, he really didn't question the near omnipotence that flowed from his son's fingers and hands as he gestured his knowledge of some problem his father had just learned about ten minutes before. *Something is wrong with mom.*

*Yes.*

*She is gone.* Justin wanted to ask how on Earth he knew any of this, but the mystery surrounding his son had grown to such seismic proportions the last few days that he was now to the point where doing so would only cause a cascade of aftershocks. The ensuing revelation was sure to bring about no less than a dozen new mysteries. Perhaps someday they would find out just what level of genius he had.

*There was a car crash. Both Mom and Peter were killed.* The boy's normal silence was muffled further by the look of despair in his deep, dark eyes. No tear, however. Instead, it was as if there was a steady resolve, like when a general loses his first-in-command in battle. It hurts, but the war is still going on and someone still has to fight. The eyes steeled up for a moment and then his hands moved deliberately as he was obviously picking his words.

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*Just you and me.* He didn't exactly put it to Justin in the form of a question. It was more of that resolve, a statement of fact to which Justin simply nodded. He had wondered how his son would take the news and expectedly, the father was surprised with the courage he was seeing.

*Do you want to go back – to get anything?* The boy slowly nodded with deliberation. *Are you going to be okay?* Zack reaffirmed his steady nod.

*Can I see her?* Justin thought for a moment over the question. According to the officer on the phone, there was a fire. He knew that seeing her might not be possible. Breaking news like this was definitely not the everyday fare for him and he had not anticipated any particular responses save for the crying that never came.

*Maybe. She will look bad.* The boy again nodded slowly with conviction as if there would be some purpose behind it. Maybe it would be his way of closing the episode and moving on. A college course in child psychology that Justin once ambled through wasn't exactly paying huge dividends right now, but he was willing to let his son do whatever he wanted to get him through the ordeal. He turned away to leave when the clap from his son stopped him.

That was the way Zack got people's attention. He would simply clap his hands together and the varying hardness of the clap would indicate the urgency of needing one's attention. This was a gentle clap and Justin willingly turned about-face.

*Yes?*

*Pancakes?* His question was solemn and the elder Ward felt as though the young genius was fighting his true feelings.

*Yes. Pancakes.* He then crouched down and put his arms around his son who looked deep into his father's eyes. Justin thought about what his only offspring would be like in five, ten, twenty years. For a moment, he imagined a six-foot dirty blond with killer dimples and a confident smile. Maybe he would be a writer like his dad. Then he figured the boy would turn out a lot better than that.

*I'm going to be taller than you.* He flashed a little bit of that infectious smile. *I can go to Harvard?* The father nodded and the boy gave him another quick, hard hug before pulling away and bounding down the stairs to the kitchen. Justin took that to mean it was breakfast time. He stood and headed down in slow pursuit, shaking his head at how quickly

the boy brushed off the death of his mother. Maybe the pain would set in later, he reasoned.

The ringing was like a bell, sounding the end of breakfast for it came as Justin was swallowing his last bite. Zack had already wiped out a four-stack and was off to other parts of the house. A mix of clouds and sun had greeted the father and son as they ate on the back porch. Justin had hinted to his son that there might be a pool off the deck by the end of the summer and Zack really liked the idea. The writer was worried that introducing Cassie to him, especially right after his mother's death would do a lot of psychological damage to Zack, or at least make the change a very difficult one for all of them. He had thought about breaking all this to him over breakfast, but the timing seemed somehow wrong.

"Ward here."

"Hey. Got the flights figured out...No arguing about this...I'm coming up tonight and I'll tell you all about it." He was going to put up resistance to the idea, but she was in her business mode and that meant she was not to be swayed.

"How's Zack? Did you tell him yet? I hope everything's okay." One thing that Justin had already found out about Cassie was that she rarely waited around for the answer to one question before asking another or even going so far as to, herself, answer the one she asked. Justin patiently waited for her to take a breath before interrupting.

"Time out."

"Sorry. I talk too fast sometimes. That doesn't piss you off does it? I hope not. It's just that all the thoughts come into my head and I..."

"Cassie?"

"Yeah?"

"Just shut up for a moment." The way it was presented, he could have substituted the words, 'I love you', instead. He was sweet and quiet and she became the same.

"Sorry."

"It's okay. It's actually kind of funny listening to you ramble on. And I'll be here whenever you get here." In his radio days, he could spread aloe with his voice, soothing the roughness of airwaves and rounding out base tones. Those were the qualities of a good announcer and he had been described as such on more than one occasion during a six-year

tenure in the business. Since a telephone is essentially a microphone, he could practically melt the receiver on the other end and do so unwittingly. Of course, so could hundreds of other guys and only the real lucky ones could get into big money radio. It was one of the reasons Justin stopped doing it; that, and the corporate buyout of the family-owned station he worked for. Downsizing became a household word to a lot of station employees and although Justin was one of the last to go, he was also one of the first to realize that what the new owners promised about staffing was not what would eventually happen.

But he still had the ‘voice’, and Cassie Jones wasn’t the first woman to find it sexy.

“I’m leaving here at about five so I should be there by what...eight?”

“Closer to nine and do you know where you are going?”

“Well, I have the address and I have the internet and you’re going to tell me exactly how to get there. See, that’s why I called.”

“Okay. I’ll tell you what...I’ll sit down and tap things out on my computer. Then I can e-mail them to you. If you get lost, just call and I’ll come get you.”

“Rescued by a knight in shining armor.”

“No...just me in the Maz.”

“Same thing to me, loverboy.”

This was obviously going to be Justin’s new pet name. He had often called Liz, ‘babe’ or ‘honey’ and she in turn had always called him Jay and ‘jaybird’. He wasn’t sure if he liked being called ‘loverboy’, but he did like the way she said it.

What he didn’t know was that his son could now hear nearly every word and had already deduced that he was about to get a new woman in his life. It was something that Zack had figured all along. He had sensed a difference in his father from the moment he got off the plane for his summer visit. At the time he thought it was the thrill of having him back for awhile. Maybe it was that in part, but there was something else and now he was sure it had to do with this lady named Cassie. Something else was now clear to the little genius...his father’s latest story had more punch than the others because it had also hinted at a great romance underlying the overall story. In Justin’s previous books, there were interludes where the heroes of the stories got their girls in the end, but not like this. This new novel had a romance built in from the beginning.



And Zachary Ward was definitely seeing some amazing parallels between the current book and his own life.

The teacher in the story is enlightened to the notion that the next jump in evolution is perhaps already walking among us, in human form, born from humans, but advanced beyond anything human. His young, gifted student, with abilities that transcend mortals, details in a science fair project that a step back in evolution to the chimpanzee is a point-six percent decrease from the DNA that humans have. These chimpanzees are very human like, but obviously inferior. In comparison, he theorizes that the point-six percent might now go the other way and that humans are slowly becoming the chimps to a new breed of far-superior creature. He then shows his teacher just how inferior he is. It's a concept that Zack was finding very intriguing and he made a concrete mental note to discuss the point-six percent variation with Uncle Adam the next time he saw him.

In the meantime, the younger Ward would now have to set his sights on going back to a motherless home to pack those things he really wanted to keep. He hadn't cried at all over the fact that his mother was gone, partly because he knew that a piece of the life cycle involved death of the body. He would always feel his mother's spirit, but he did want to see her again. He sensed that if it wasn't too late, he could still let her know that he would miss her.

As usual, Justin became sidetracked with a dozen little things including letting Adam know that golf would not be possible as planned and why. The good friend promised to drop in later. And there was also a desire to have the house looking nice, so he and Zack actually dusted the place, an undertaking that consumed most of the morning and reminded Justin that he would definitely have to look into hiring a maid. It was something Cassie could handle once she settled in. In the absence of such, the father and son worked side by side with only necessary communication. It was as if each were using the manual labor to work out individual frustrations while clearing the mind of grief. At least that is what Zack was doing with his time. Justin was using his to seek the right moment to broach the subject of Cassie and her visit. The pair had neared the end of the chore by the time they circled around to the green

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guestroom. Zack broke his long period of personal reflection and gave Justin the perfect opportunity to open the lines of discussion.

*Why are we doing all this?* Despite his amazing abilities, Zachary Taylor Ward was still a kid and eventually he would want to know for what purpose all his labors had been. It was a natural question and Justin had wondered why it hadn't come much sooner. What would have floored him was if it had come straight from the vocal chords as it almost did, for the young genius had almost forgotten his promise to Uncle Adam. The son's standard handclap stopped the father who was polishing the dresser and he turned his attention to the clapper, who had just finished the bedposts.

*We are having company. It is something else we have to talk about and I am sorry for not doing it sooner.* Zack had seen the grays and dirt browns in his father's mind. He knew there was something worrying his dad, but there were also many flashes of bright oranges and yellow and that had him confused a little.

*Is it bad company?* Justin simply smiled as he placed a vase back on the dresser.

*It is a woman that I met. Her name is Cassie and she is very nice. I like her a lot and she is coming to stay with us for a while.* Zack couldn't help but notice the grays disappearing almost in rhythm with the words he spoke especially when he had to stop and sign the name Cassie in individual letters. Now that he could actually hear most of what was being said, his senses to colors were sharpened to different levels. Even the slightest variations had become easily detected. He knew in an instant that his father not only liked this mysterious woman but in fact, loved her. It made him happy to see his father glow and he would do most anything to make that glow stay with him.

*Will she like me?* Justin had anticipated a lot of questions from his son upon breaking the news, but this was certainly not one them.

*Will she like you?* The boy nodded solemnly. Justin closed the gap between the two and dropped to a knee so as to look the boy eye-to-eye. He smiled and Zack felt the warmth of his bright colors in his mind. *She cannot wait to meet you.*

*Is she like mom?* This question Justin had anticipated.

*No one is like your mom, and Cassie cannot replace her, but she is special, and I think you will like her a lot.*

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Zack already knew that he would. Anyone his father liked this much had to be someone he would like, too.

*When is she coming?*

*Soon. Tonight.*

*I should clean my room.* Justin put a hand on the boy's shoulder. They never really touched a lot because Justin always found he was using his hands to communicate. This was one of those rare moments when a little nod was all the answer required to say what he had to. The younger Ward returned the gesture by putting both his hands on his father's shoulders. Zack had avoided touching anyone because doing so amplified some of his mental prowess like possibly forwarding his own thoughts. As a little boy, he could not always control this. At this moment, however, he wanted his father to know that everything was all right with his new girlfriend and he should not worry about how anyone else felt. Getting a message of this magnitude through was a lot easier to do with the use of touch. In a moment, the rest of the dirt browns and grays were gone and Zack knew his father would be happy.

*Tell you what...we both go clean your room and then we go for lunch. You pick the place.* The ever-present appetite inside the boy genius liked that idea a lot and gave the idea's originator two thumbs up and a huge grin before racing down the hall to his room.

As he started to follow his exuberant son, Justin stopped at the doorway of the green guestroom, soon to be the office of Cassie Jones and smiled. The house at times had been very large without a family within its walls. As sad as Liz's death had been, the bright side for the author was that his house wouldn't seem so lonely any longer.

\* \* \* \* \*

McDonalds is one of those perfect places for a father and son to bond. First off, no one complains about the food and the franchise located on Burncoat Street also boasts a very intricate array of plastic tube tunneling and slides in something known as the "Playland". By the time the burgers, fries and Cokes were gone and all the climbing a kid could stand had found an end, it was nearly two o'clock. The day had started out rocky and within a matter of hours, things had turned rosy for Justin Ward. It advanced to the point where he caught himself thinking that had

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he known how wonderful his life would have been without his ex-wife in the picture, killing her himself would have become an option. The author lightly scoffed at the idea and then envisioned a short story that would work well along that theory. All this was occupying his thoughts as his son wove through an assortment of mazes that strung above and around the entire “Playland”.

Justin wondered for a moment what had happened to his own youth. As a child, a tree fort was the greatest thing in the world and you and the other children in the neighborhood would spend a week building one out of whatever wood and materials that could be scrounged up. Kids in the next generation will be ordering them on the internet, already assembled in a number of colors and complete with molded, kid-safe, industrial-strength plastic.

It wasn't just a far cry from the monkey bars...it was more like a primal scream.

There were three messages when the duo returned home. The first was from Adam who was just checking to see if everything was all right. The second was from the Florida State Trooper with the Italian last name...Silver-something or other. He had a few more details about the accident and left a number that sounded like the same one given earlier, but he wasn't going to worry about it yet. The third call was from Cassie who was wondering where the hell the directions were. Those were her exact words although spoken like an angel, with a sweetness and foreknowledge of Justin's penchant for forgetting things that some people think are actually important. Before the message had even ended, he was heading over to the computer to get on the task at hand. He would ignore the fact that there was a message reminding him to do it and just pass it off as his being very busy with Zack all day.

Maybe she would feel bad and then call to say she was sorry. Before the writer could turn his PC on, Adam Caster came through the front door, creating another interruption.

“Hey, Jay. Thought that was the green ghost pulling into the driveway. Just popping over to see how...things are.” He stuck out a hand and the host gladly accepted it with a smile. Zack, who had been down the hall in the den, heard the commotion and headed into the foyer

area to see what was up; he figured it was Uncle Adam because there were no colors to go with the sound of a now familiar voice.

“Zack and I are fine. In fact, he took the news really well. I knew he was sad, but he’s so mature for his age, Adam; a lot more mature than I was at that age.”

“Well, from what I’ve seen, he’s a pretty exceptional kid. And there he is now.” The blond boy raced to his Uncle’s outstretched arms. “Hey, there’s my favorite boy.” He looked at the child with friendly, piercing eyes and fumbled with some signing.

*Sorry about mother. You okay?* Zack nodded and smiled. It was getting increasingly difficult to keep up the charade.

*Dad and I are going to see her.* Adam looked at Justin.

“When are you leaving?”

“Monday. I know...another god damned plane ride. I am so sick of traveling.” Caster cracked a slight smile.

“I know what you mean, amigo. I spend my share of days in the air.”

“Yeah, I suppose you do. Want a drink?”

“You read my mind.” He flashed a purposeful wink toward Zack as the two men headed into the kitchen with the boy right behind. He was battling an urge to shout out loud that he could hear and talk. He had been practicing, silently, in his room every night and in the mornings before Justin got up and he was gaining confidence. It was that stare he got from Uncle Adam that reinforced what he had told him about not revealing his ability yet. That quick glare sent the message loud and clear and he knew that there would be a time, soon, when he could be as normal as everyone else.

“The usual.”

“Absolutely.”

“How about a soda for my little friend here?”

“Sure, why not. Can you get it for him, I’ve got to run to the bathroom for a minute.” The neighbor gave a wink and a nod and Justin headed past the foyer to an auxiliary bath off the main hallway. Adam grabbed a bottle of ginger ale from the fridge and filled a glass, three-quarters. After peeking to see there was no other eyes on the situation, he then added a few splashes of the scotch he was sipping and handed it to the youngster. He whispered to the boy.

“You’re doing great. How’s the speaking coming?” The boy whispered back.

“How is this?” Caster’s eyes lit up as he nodded and rechecked the hall for intruders on the conversation.

“Just a little while longer, okay?” He accompanied the request with a finger over his lips. “You can’t tell your dad. Not yet.” The boy nodded approval. “Any more headaches?” Zack moved his head from side to side in a show of indifference. The flushing of the toilet signaled the end of the chatter. “A little of this will clear things up. Take a taste on your tongue when you get up in the morning.” More nodding from the pupil.

“And what are you two up to?”

“We were discussing dinner plans. You up for something to eat...my treat tonight.” Justin looked at his son and then at his friend.

“To tell you the truth, we just got back from lunch and we’re expecting some company later on.”

“Oh? Someone I know?” Justin went through the routine again of looking at Zack first before answering.

“Cassie, my publicist, is moving her office into the house. She’s coming in tonight.” Caster suppressed a wry smile and gave Justin one of those winks of knowledge that said more than a hundred words ever could.

“Oh...I see. Well, the invitation stands for another time. I’m dying to try that new seafood place on Exchange Street, where the Firehouse Café used to be.”

“Wasn’t that the old Legal Seafood?”

“Yep...now it’s a new place called Neptune’s...received a very good review last week in the *Worcester Magazine*.”

“Sounds great. We’ll take you up on it when we get back. Unless I have to fly somewhere else that I don’t know about.” He threw his hands up in mock exasperation. Caster finished his drink in one big swallow. Zack had gotten through most of his ginger ale concoction and imitated his uncle by swigging down the remainder of his as well. There was a bit of a frown on the young face as the last of the drink was swallowed. Caster averted the host’s attention.

“Thanks for the drink. Have a good trip and...enjoy the company.” There was no wink this time, but the implied one was nearly as obvious. Justin practically blushed as he walked his guest to the front door.

“Hey. By the way, are you ever going to play golf, again? Some of the big shooters at the club would like to see what a course record holder does for an encore.”

“Yeah, yeah. Some of us have families and jobs.”

“Oh, so now it’s a job?” He was needling his friend.

“You know what I mean.”

“Sure do. By the way, the latest handicap sheet came out; congratulations, you’re officially a scratch golfer.” There was a hint of disdain in his voice. “Now I suppose you’re going to try and qualify for the pro tour.” Justin laughed with his friend, but deep down, the feelings of trying to accomplish just that in another six years were still bubbling to the surface.

“Either way, Jay, I’ll still take you as a partner. It wouldn’t hurt if you’d shoot in the upper 70s once in a while, though. Get that handicap back up to where I can really use it.” He headed off the porch and onto the walkway, leaving behind the wink that adjoined the last remark. He waved a hand while not looking back as if he were in a parade, waving to the crowd in general and no one in particular. Zack joined his father on the porch and the family watched Caster disappear through the path in the high hedges before heading back inside.

*Can we go play golf?*

*Cassie is coming.*

*She comes later. We have time.* Justin thought for a moment and then checked the time. The hall grandfather was showing almost three o’clock and Cassie wasn’t coming until nine, so they did have plenty of time.

*I have to do something first.* The boy smiled and nodded. *Go change for golf.* The son headed up the stairs while the father headed back to the computer.

His e-mail was holding several messages, which wouldn’t be common except that he hadn’t checked the mail in a while. This was not his website e-mail so fans wouldn’t be using it to contact him. Cassie monitored that site. This particular address was strictly for personal use and almost no one had it. Any mail would have been either junk, spam, or from Cassie. That meant most of the mail would no longer be current. He quickly flipped through the headings to find he was correct on all counts save for one, a lengthy message from one Liz Madsen, since

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deceased. He remembered that she took his e-mail address when she was there.

The initial reaction was to simply delete it, but it was a large file and it was the last thing she ever did in the way of contacting him. He'd pan through it some other day and for the pure sake of nostalgia, he socked the whole file away in another folder labeled, 'Lizlast' which he promptly sent to the C Drive.

He would maybe check it out after getting back from Florida.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

She came with a carload of suitcases that were considered the bare essentials. Justin couldn't help but comment on the weight of each one and Zack could only manage to carry one of the six that came from New York City with Cassie Jones.

Then again, this was not just a weekend trip for the curvaceous blonde. She was planning on staying for a long time and the threat of a lot more stuff coming was imminent.

However, before the moving process could officially begin, there was a quick peck of the lips between Justin and the guest and then another one for the younger Ward, who blushed a little and then smiled. He was right in thinking he would like her. She had some very charismatic qualities. He noticed, right away, that she emitted greater waves of brighter colors than he had ever experienced. He likened the difference to staring at high beams as opposed to regular headlights. It was almost blinding, but not in a debilitating way and he was able to adjust himself almost immediately. Yet, he couldn't help but notice the energy she put out. It made her a very likeable person and the peck on his cheek was reinforcing for he felt a great comfort by it.

It was almost like Mom.

What also surprised Zack a little was her attempt at sign language. She had obviously rehearsed for the greeting, but otherwise handled herself well with his simple responses. Now, more than ever, did Zack wish he could be the normal little boy he was slowly becoming, but the connection he had with Uncle Adam was important to him on a level beyond that of family. Although he didn't exactly know why or how he felt that way, he would keep his promise.

There was no talk of the accident, but they were scheduled to fly out Monday morning. A room was booked at a hotel in Orlando, near the airport and they would check out the house upon arrival Monday afternoon. Justin had informed Sergeant Silvestri when they were coming in and when they would be able to meet. Cassie would stay at in Worcester to wait for the movers who would be arriving the same morning. In the meantime, there were a few more phone interviews to schedule in an attempt to make up for the time lost on the Florida

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excursion. Justin still needed to talk up the last book. This is what Cassie did as his publicist.

As his executive secretary, she would also be touching base with Jim Dendler, the attorney who handled Justin's divorce as he was now interested in knowing what his responsibilities were as apparent executor of Liz's estate.

It was promising to be a busy first half of the week.

There are plenty of advantages that go with knowing sign language. For one, you can easily keep a third party out of the conversation and say things about them, or in regards to them, even while they are right there in the room.

Such was the case during that first evening. There they were, the two bachelors, one young and one older, sitting in the living room watching the Red Sox play the Anaheim Angels. Under normal circumstances, they would have gone to the game, but the coming of Cassie, or Miss Cassie as Zack so named her, left them the only other option...watching it at home and that is what they were doing when the headlights from her car flashed in through the windows, signaling her arrival. It was the top of the sixth inning and the Sox were ahead 4-2 when the suitcases started coming through the door. It was the bottom of the ninth, and the Sox trailing 5-4 when the three of them finally settled down to watch.

Of course, Cassie cheered a little at the score, seeing that the Sox were losing.

This garnered an immediate response as father and son suddenly caught each other's eye. Zack's quizzical look drew a sheepish smile from the elder Ward. He spelled out the word 'Yankee' and then pointed at Cassie in a way that she could not see. Zack rolled his eyes in fake despair.

*You like her?*

*Very much.*

*But she likes the Yankees.*

The two were now in full-blown conversation and Cassie finally took notice. It had literally been going on behind her back.

"What are you two up to?" She had taken to the house with relative ease and displayed the headlong attitude that Justin had made her somewhat notorious for. He jumped in to explain.

“Zack was just telling me how it will be lots of fun having a Yankee fan in the house.” His tone was over-dramatically sweetened for her only another set of ears also heard the spin-job put on about the father-son talk. Zack’s mouth gaped open and for a split second a sound burst from the normally silent chords deep in his throat. In his earlier childhood, it was not uncommon for him to impulsively squeal with anger or delight, but those were incoherent wails. This almost sounded like it had substance. There was the faint hint of a word on the end of his miniscule outburst and Justin couldn’t help but notice the difference from his normal shrieks. He straightened up as if there might be more to come.

Meanwhile, Zack instinctively decided the best course of action was to ignore it and move on with his hands.

*I did not say that!* He was adamant in a playful way and the extreme hand gestures almost made Cassie laugh.

“I don’t know what he’s saying, but I know he’s not too happy.”

“Oh, he thinks the Yankees have a really good team...maybe even better than the Red Sox.”

This sent the boy into an animated state of denial with arms waving and clapping for attention. Justin was interested in knowing how he picked up on a conversation he couldn’t hear. It was the first time that the author had taken notice of the fact that Zack had not been using his EEAR device for most of his visit to this point and certainly wasn’t using it now.

*How do you know what I said?* Zack paused for a moment in the realization that he had been using a skill that was supposed to be concealed, but recovered very quickly with a satisfactory answer.

*Lip reading. I am getting much better at it.* Justin smiled and looked at Cassie who was still trying to figure out what was going on.

“You two are not going to do this to me all the time, are you?” Justin and Zack looked at each other and each raised an eyebrow of consideration.

“No promises, but we’ll try not to.”

Zack nodded and threw a silly smile her way.

“I can see this is going to be an interesting summer.” And with that, the boy interrupted the guest with a loud handclap. Although this was his means of gaining quick attention, he also used it to show the same kind of happiness as normal children would with a laugh. There were also

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times when he used it in place of the equally stifling ‘shut up’. This was one of those moments as the Red Sox’ David Ortiz had just lofted a 2-2 pitch toward the ‘Monster Seats’ in left field. Justin had already left his seat as if it would help compel the ball on a TV set to go far enough. The son had not only joined in standing, but was moving toward the set and it got quiet enough for announcer Don Orsillo to exclaim, “...high and deep to left...and gone!” A loud, gleeful positive wail from the elder Ward and a high five from the younger blocked the rest out as the Beantown nine won the game in a walk-off flash. The capacity crowd of over 33-thousand went wild as did the two males in the Ward house as the cameras picked up number 34 rounding second base and then shots of the crowd celebrating and players waiting for the night’s hero at home plate.

Cassie just shook her head while suppressing a smile that comes naturally to people when they are happy for others having a good time.

One of the first thoughts that ran through Justin’s head was how the Fivers down at Paulie’s would have had a lot of fun with a game ending like that. Despite finally winning a World Series or two, Red Sox fans still learn at tender ages to take their victories when they can. If it weren’t for the baseball ineptness of a certain team from Chicago, Bosox fans would likely be the most insufferable of all in professional sport.

Justin decided he would take Caster up on his offer to watch Zack so the Fivers could meet their potential newest member the next evening.

Zack usually went to bed at ten or ten-thirty, even though most nights he would read until one or two in the morning. The Red Sox victory was perfect timing for his customary exit.

*Brush your teeth.*

The boy casually waved off his father, but stopped to give him a quick hug. He paused for a brief, uncomfortable moment as his eyes met with those of the guest. Her smile was inviting and Zack felt certain warmth as he gave her a hug. Her arms enclosed him and there was comfort in them. A hug for dad was one thing, but a genuine hug from a woman was always better. He felt her colors rushing through him as never before. Deep down, he was glad she was there, especially now that Mom was gone.

As he ascended the stairs, there were thoughts, while looking back down at her, that Miss Cassie might even be better than Mom.

He shook off that feeling and climbed into bed. The bright lights of her aura were still tingling through his wiry body and he couldn't seem to wipe the smile off his face. He didn't want to read. Instead, he whispered to himself, reciting the letters of the alphabet front to back and then in reverse order a few times, something he could do with relative ease. There was a brief pause when he realized that someday, he would speak and probably astound some people. Unfortunately, his mother wasn't going to be among them. The other thing that settled in his brain was the fact that he never heard her voice. He closed his eyes and imagined it as similar to Miss Cassie's...deeper than most women but not husky. It had the kind of roundness that his dad's voice had. No reading tonight, he just laid in bed in the dark, slowly drifting off to an unusually early sleep.

"Justin, he's absolutely adorable."

"He's had a tough day, emotionally. First he loses his mother and then he gets a housemate. I suppose it could be confusing for him." Cassie, who had not taken her eyes off the little boy all the way up the staircase, continued staring out towards the foyer even after Zack had left her sight. She didn't even acknowledge Justin as he started to speak, but answered with a soft confidence when he was done.

"He'll be just fine. He's wonderful. You say he's some kind of genius?"

"You play chess?" Cassie didn't directly understand the correlation.

"Why, does he?"

"Not until a couple of days ago. Now he's kicking my ass all over the board and I'm a better than average player." Justin now looked upward toward the bedroom of the little wonder. "You'll see things from him that will surprise you. He's going to Harvard in the fall."

"Harvard? The prep school?"

"Nope. The real thing." Justin had to hold back the smile that was creeping into the corners of his lips.

"Thee Harvard?"

"Yep. I thought I told you about all this." Now the smile was no longer repressed.

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“Maybe you did. Still, he’s just a little kid.” There was genuine awe in her expression.

“Yeah, you try beating him at chess.” The awe changed to a perplexed look of non-understanding. It was a look that Justin was getting used to. He knew she was very bright when it came to doing her job, but he knew there would be times when his superior sense of wit would likely cause her to look like an inferior animal, confused by some modern gadgetry.

“They have this special school for just these types of kids.” He continued, “They’ll challenge him, and they’ll allow him to explore all those things a grade school or even a high school couldn’t begin to. Who knows...he could be the next Einstein.”

“He sure is adorable.”

“Yeah...I just worry about him. I know he’s this kind of super genius, I can tell that, now. I couldn’t see it before, but I see it now.” He was getting lost in the idea that all this happened so fast and apparently under his nose. “He does things that blow me away...and the way he’s handling all this is scary...”

“He’s going to be just fine.” She turned slowly to face him and her words were even more reassuring. She reached out and placed her hand on his and flashed the same smile she had for Zack all the way up those stairs. Like the son, the father felt the rush and his heart became warm. Her touch was soothing and invigorating at the same time.

“Let me see the bedroom again,” she said with a sultry tone and a raised eyebrow that beckoned him out of his seat.

And while the son slept more soundly than ever, the host and the guest took pleasure in each other for some time into the night.

\* \* \* \* \*

Another unusual occurrence greeted Justin as the sun peeked through the clouds of Saturday morning. It was 7:04 and he was wide-awake. Normally, it took an hour to get the sleepiness out of his muscles and head, but this wonderful Saturday morning, he was popping out of the bed with a whole new attitude. Before throwing off the covers, he stopped for what may have seemed like an hour to stare at the beautiful woman next to him. She practically glowed and Justin thought for a long time how lucky he was to have found her. He remembered that first time

when he was perhaps too nervous about his very first book to notice her. She had changed since then. A loss of weight and a change in hair color was like magic for her and the writer hoped that would never change.

He softly stroked her hair and let his hand slide down the covers along the outline of her body. She smiled through her sleep and Justin left her to her dreams. A quick check of the downstairs produced no signs of the normally early-rising child, which was perhaps more shocking than his own vigor.

He also noticed about this time that there had not been even the slightest hint of the nightmare that had plagued him the other night. He had an intuitive notion that the knowledge of Liz's death had forever put an end to it even though he knew in the back of his mind it wasn't coincidental that he had the original nightmare almost in conjunction with his ex-wife's demise.

He felt like he had a lot of writing to do this morning.

Figuring his little boy was just reading in his room, Justin headed straight to the computer and by 11 am he had banged out nearly two dozen pages. If not for the looks of hunger coming from not one occupant, but now two, he would have likely punched out another dozen.

"Hey. You two look hungry. How about breakfast?" Zack chimed in first with furious hand motions.

*Lunch.* Although he was getting used to the idea of Zack reading his lips, it was just another uncanny thing that his son was able to do. He went with the flow.

"How about either or both?" Zack and Miss Cassie looked at each other and then nodded in agreement without any form of communication out of their eyes.

"You two seem to have formed a little bond." Cassie, in her comfortably revealing shorts outfit, smiled and offered a kiss to her man, subtly slipping her arms around his neck.

"We've had a little time this morning to get to know one another."

Zack nodded as his hands let fly again.

*She is good at "Frogger".* If nothing else, Cassie was remarkably hip to the modern generation. More so than Justin, who used to be as a teacher, but had since fallen out of most pop culture circles. One nicety of having a totally deaf son was not being forced to listen to vulgarity-filled lyrics once the school day was done. As talented with a phrase as

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some modern-day musicians are, most of the pop offerings weren't Justin's cup of musical tea.

"I know this place where they have everything."

Zack had his fingers going before his dad could spit the words out.

*Breakfast all day?*

Justin smiled for he knew the power of food and it was perhaps his son's only weakness. He loved food and ate lots of it.

*Everything and anything - anytime of day.*

The little boy smiled big and hungry and he gave his father a quick hug before heading out to the garage and eventually the front seat of the car. That in itself caused a little embarrassment because Zack always had the front seat of the Maz, but there was a new kid in town and she was going to take over the role of riding 'shotgun'. It was only uncomfortable for a moment as the couple emerged from the side door. Almost as quickly as Justin made eye contact with Zack, waiting there in the front seat, did the small genius jump over the seat and into the back. There was no remorse even though he had gotten used to the front. He knew, without a word, that he was in the backseat. He knew because without speaking, his father told him. As was starting to happen more often, Zack was beginning to know people's basic, dominating thoughts almost as quickly as they were having them.

It would be something else for him to ask Uncle Adam about. If the call made on Cassie's cell phone during the trip to the restaurant were any indication, he would get the chance to go over all kinds of things that were happening to him with the only person in the world who seemed to understand. He was growing. Not just physically, but mentally. He could feel thoughts reaching out and touching others. He did not hear what the caller was saying, but he knew it was to Uncle Adam and that it had to do with keeping an eye on him that night. He also knew the deal was made because his father was nervously excited after finishing the call.

As they communicated over pancakes and club sandwiches, Justin decided to give Zack the option of going to Florida or staying with Cassie. He explained that it would be a tough experience going into the house for the last time, but Zack politely declined the invitation to stay as he helped Cassie polish off her cheeseburger; this coming after a three-stack of chocolate chip pancakes replete with whipped cream. He wanted to stay so he could keep close to Uncle Adam, a mild compulsion that



*Steve Bantle*

was simmering in his psyche, but the experience that awaited him at his former winter home was pulling him much harder. There were a few material mementos and things in Florida that he knew could not be replaced and, if possible, he was hoping to feel his mother's presence perhaps one last time.

Lunch was topped off with a trip to the Newport Creamery, an ice cream stand of some note just north of the hub and worth the drive. It also gave Justin a chance to show off his city to a girl who clearly understood the nature of the biggest of the bigs when it came to city life.

"Nice little town you got here," she proclaimed over the wind that whipped through her blonde locks as the top-down excursion hit 70-mile-an-hour speeds common to Interstate 290. The view for Justin was never more glorious. She was quite correct. It was a nice little town – sprawled out over, through and above the seven hills of Worcester. The sun glittered off the glassy Mechanic's Tower and the train was just emerging from the main building of something called Med City. New York City had plenty of things to see, but certainly not a hospital built around a fully operational set of train tracks. The complex itself was a sight to behold as it covered several city blocks and abutted the newly refurbished DCU Center. It was a merging of old and new, done with a grace only New England could furnish.

She would get the whole nickel tour as the trio drove around for nearly two hours, making stops here and there. They spanned most of Park Avenue where the campus of Worcester Polytech provided a wonderful 'old-school' atmosphere with its 200-year old buildings. It prompted a conversation on Harvard and Zack's upcoming challenges. The boy was excited to walk through the side streets that housed those esteemed classrooms. It was obviously off-season for college, but there was knowledge all around him and he sensed the remains of the thoughts the students had as they took their final exams a few weeks previous. Calculus, Quantum Physics, Nuclear Thermo-dynamics, it was all being absorbed into his hard-drive-like engrams as the trio stopped outside a structure named Stratton Hall.

Unlike other prodigious eight-year olds who could perhaps remember and recall all this information like a top student in the class, Zack was beginning to understand much of it. He wasn't a trained poodle with a

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superhuman memory; this stuff he was sensing had meaning to him beyond just the words that were streamlining through his brain.

He could comprehend Einstein, Fermi, Pascal, and Euclid – not as if he read them, but as if he *were* them. It was coming in waves of information and every detail of four different types of math and space-time relationships were focusing in his mind.

The touch of the hand on his shoulder cut the mental cords feeding the boy so abruptly that he blurted a curt scream of surprise.

*(Everything) Okay?*

The elder Ward was looking into the almost hazy eyes of his son. The boy looked like he had been sucker-punched by his first puppy love kiss and a sheepish smile was holding court on the bottom half of his thin, dimpled face.

He nodded as the smile collapsed a bit.

*You were dreaming?*

The little genius nodded quickly.

*Okay?* The elder Ward was showing a genuine concern and was crouched down to address his son at eye level. He flashed a look at Cassie who simply shrugged her shoulders. Zack recovered quickly from his trance and put his hand on his father's shoulder to gain his attention.

*Thinking about H-A-R-V-A-R-D*

Justin stood up and rubbed his hand over the boy's blond hair in a gesture of fatherhood and understanding. As they walked back toward the Harriman Lot and the car, the boy couldn't help but flash a look back towards the stony cathedrals of learning with a touch of wonder.

It was only early summer and yet, for Zack, it could no longer end fast enough.

The clouds that threatened during the visit to WPI had finally turned into the predicted rain as Justin and his lady took refuge in the backseat of the limousine after sprinting from the front porch.

"It's really coming down out there," said Justin as the driver closed the door and dashed around to his post, up front.

"Wow. I'm like soaked." Cassie was laughing as she said it.

"It's okay. Where we're going, it won't matter."

“Oh, so it’s a real fancy place, is it?” She was mocking him. In his feigned pain, he rolled his eyes, sighed and turned his attention to the ever-patient driver.

“Do you know Paulie’s in Millbury?”

“Are you talking about the little tavern on 122?”

“Yeah, just past the high school.” Justin noticed the hesitation in the driver who was no doubt contemplating the notion of taking a hired ride like this to a dumpy little bar like that. He shook his head as if to brush off the logical question he wanted to ask and instead, went on to his duty.

“I know the place; that where you want to go, Mr. Ward?”

“Make it so, number one.” Justin’s words came in a mock flourish of the British accent familiar to the Star Trek character Captain Jean Luc Picard. The driver half-smiled and without hesitation, tended to his job with a disbelieving shake of his head. Close inspection would have seen him actually mouth the words ‘whatever’, but instead, he returned the customary response of the employed.

“Yessir.”

Justin fiddled with the button that closed off the driver from the back until he succeeded in creating some isolation.

“Normally, I just take a cab, but my son thinks I should take limos all the time. What do you think?” He was finding it so easy to charm her. Cassie, meanwhile, returned his wiles with an enthusiastic smile of her own before turning the expression off.

“This is a fully functional limousine, right?” Justin wasn’t sure where that line was going, but he was willing to take her bait.

“Fully in every way. Why?”

“I’d like a drink, then.”

And so the 17-minute ride in the rain went.

Paulie’s was typically busy and although Cassie and Justin arrived just after seven, many of the more regular Fiver’s were still filling up tables and pitchers towards the backside of the bar, in the “Fiverville” section with its showcase table.

“I’m not overdressed, am I?”

“I wouldn’t let you out of the house if you were.” She entwined her arm in his, allowing him to ‘escort’ her into the room. Her jeans covered her curves with creaseless efficiency while the white blouse revealed just

a hint of her near-perfect profile. Not underdressed, not overdressed, she was just perfect for the place, for the time, and for the Fivers.

Meanwhile, the limo had barely made the right hand turn out of the driveway when Zack was testing out his vocal chords on Uncle Adam.

“A...thing happened to me today.” The words were carefully chosen, softly spoken, but correctly enunciated.

“Oh?” Caster was heading toward the kitchen for a refill as the boy trailed.

“We went to a place called...” The boy struggled for a moment with the lettering. He was using his hands at the same time as if he were acting as an interpreter. “...WPI. Dad said it was a college for...en-gin-ee-ring.” It wasn’t so much that he struggled with the word, but that he was handling it phonetically. “I was outside a big stone building...then all of this math and science started filling my head.” Caster stopped at the specific cabinet and turned slowly to face his protégé.

“Really? Any of it still there?” He could be amusingly smug at times with rhetorical repartee, but his tone had a genuine ring of inquiry as he returned to the original task of filling his glass.

“Yes, all of it. All of what I got. Some of it does not make sense yet. I am sure if Dad had not interrupted the connection, I would have gotten all of it.”

“You get information in connected streams?”

“Yes. Streams. Information comes in streams.” He was genuinely enthused about the description and his fascination with the word streams as a description was something to be noted. “It comes in waves when it is about emotion.” The little genius was becoming ever so comfortable with words, something that was not unnoticed by the uncle-mentor.

“Someone’s been into a dictionary already, haven’t they?”

The boy smiled sheepishly and nodded an affirmative.

“Good boy. Remember to keep things suppressed until it’s time to surprise Dad.” He purposely chose the word ‘suppressed’ as a little test and the child reacted to it with a smile of understanding.

“Now, tell me about this information you have gotten?” Adam’s question was poignant. The boy paused in momentary reflection.

“Einstein was like me, right?”

Uncle Adam returned the bottle to the cabinet before slowly returning to the boy. He dropped down to look him in directly into those big dark browns.

“Close your eyes and direct your thoughts into mine. I’m going to allow you to see some things about me.”

The little blond obeyed, and before he could spell his name, the trance from earlier in the day was again upon him only this time it featured images and thoughts from the very man he had spoken of; Albert Einstein. And now it was all filling his head. For more than a moment, he felt again as if he was Einstein; he was thinking like him; thinking his thoughts and formulating his ideas. A clap of hands and the boy blinked back to his own reality.

“Wow.” The words were faint, practically mouthed, but as distinct as never before. Adam had a look of business on his hardened face.

“That’s enough for now. Here, take a little of this, you’ll need it.” He handed the child his scotch and fished a soda out of the refrigerator. Without a word, Zack opened the can, emptied a little and replaced it with some of the alcohol. This was now part of his routine since Uncle Adam first introduced him to ‘headache medicine’.

“Things are going to change for you soon. Whatever happens, remember that you have a much greater destiny in your future and nothing in the here and now can interfere with what must come to be.” There was a direct and immediate understanding from the boy who had started to feel what the neighbor had been telling him about. He did indeed know that there was a greater purpose for him. What it was might still be a little hazy, but he would do as instructed. The mentor headed for the front door and beckoned the boy to follow. “Let’s test out your abilities.”

As usual, the street was quiet and especially with a steady, even rain falling. Adam found a golf umbrella near the front door and casually stepped out to the sidewalk. The mentally endowed youngster followed a half stride behind and unbothered by the rain. Occasionally, he would catch up to escape the drops, but would venture back for the cooling rain felt good in his face. A few hundred yards from the house, the mentor stopped. He took a sip of his scotch and fixed his eyes on the Ryan house across the street from the stopping point as Zack jumped underneath the cover of the umbrella alongside.

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John and Maggie Ryan, a childless couple, moved in a year after Justin. She was the daughter of a multimillionaire real estate mogul and spent 60-70 hours a week running his company. Mr. Ryan was steadily making his way up the ladder at a local brokerage firm. They were hoping to someday fill the fourteen-room house they got as a wedding gift from Daddy with his grandchildren, but to date, no conceptions.

Adam stared at the house, which was lit up enough to indicate to the untrained mind that someone was home.

“Close your eyes and tell me whose home and what room they’re in.” The mentor’s tone held the same seriousness as with other recent sessions between the two. The boy nodded and again, obeyed. It was only seconds before he could feel his mind zeroing in on Mr. Ryan. He was in the kitchen preparing something...a meal of some kind; it was a sandwich; roast beef, cheese, and pickle with both mustard and mayonnaise.

“I see him.”

“That’s right; you *do* see him. What’s he wearing?”

“A bathrobe.” Zack smiled at the thought of ‘seeing’ this man in his nightclothes. “A green and dark-blue bathrobe.”

“Good. Now where is she?”

“Hmm...” His head moved slightly up and to the right as if he were actually following a scent or a signal that was becoming seemingly stronger as he moved. “Upstairs, bedroom.” His hand rose with the index finger pointing directly at the room in the house across the street. There was no sun setting over trees this evening so the clouded skies had darkened considerably over the last ten minutes and night had fully engulfed the man and boy as they stood like statues on the rain-covered sidewalk. “She’s lying in bed watching television. Wow. I can even see the screen, but I do not recognize the program.”

“It’s just the last few minutes of a *Jeopardy* rerun.” Caster said this without taking his eyes off the house and with a tone of nonchalance concurrent with ennui. Zack recognized the notation in his Uncle’s voice and shifted his concern and concentration to his elder.

For a sudden moment, the young boy had inadvertently caught the old man off guard accidentally grabbing a stream of his exposed consciousness. Both the umbrella and the glass of scotch slipped through his fingers, as did the Coke can held by the boy who also fell into a short,

deep trance. While the umbrella breezed gently away, gravity brought the glass to the sidewalk with a crash that ended the split-second entanglement. The break caused Zack to tumble back onto the wet lawn while Adam Caster dizzily dropped to a knee on the sidewalk.

It was a few seconds more before either was able to bring any sense of present reality to bear with the boy bouncing up first and in conjunction with a few other lights going on at both the Ryan house and the Montgomery's, whose lawn Zack had landed on.

"What happened?" the boy said.

"Shh!" Caster, still on a knee, closed his eyes tight and remained motionless while a pair of figures, one in each doorway peered out across to each other. Both Caster and Zack were in the middle, but somehow, undetected, even in the light glow of the streetlight. Both the Ryan and Montgomery men gave waves to his counterpart and retreated back to his respective house as if nothing happened. The whole process took a little over a minute and Zack felt like he didn't breathe the entire time. Once the front doors closed and the porch lights went out, the old man tried righting himself. The boy grabbed the umbrella and managed to get a shoulder under him to help him to his balance. He was like a first-time ship rider attempting to establish his sea legs underneath him. The boy's shoulder was aiding in the recovery. What's more, the neighbor was apparently bleeding as the result of falling into the broken glass.

"Whoa. That hasn't happened to me in a long time." He stared at the boy who caught enough of the glimpse through the shadows to know the uncle would be just fine.

"I need another drink," the man said with an uncommon half-hearted laugh. "How about you?"

"Yeah." It was said more in compliance than desire. As the two began to head home, Zack noticed that Adam Caster was starting to look old. It was as if the episode had taken life from him - not a lot, but noticeable to the super-observant child.

"Hey, you're starting to pick up some slang."

"Slang?"

"The word 'yeah' instead of 'yes'. Sing language could never account for slang. Contractions don't work too well either."

The man and boy headed back towards the house.

"Uncle Adam, I'm hungry."

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“And you’re all wet, too.” The snappy retort afforded a laugh from the boy and a silent sigh of relief from the neighbor. The pair finished the walk arm on shoulder and arm around waist.

By the time they reached the front door, two things had happened. Adam was walking normally again, and his bleeding had stopped. The tear in his pants was quite obvious under the brighter light of the porch, and Zack quickly noticed where there had been a deep cut on the lower half of the left knee. It was the kind of cut that would normally have bled a lot and might have even taken a few stitches to close, yet there was no further bleeding as Adam stopped to roll the soggy pant leg up for a closer inspection.

“You see any glass in there?”

The boy strained his extraordinarily keen eyes but was unable to locate any.

“Good. Run in and get me a wet towel. Not a good one.”

As the boy took off into the house, Adam Caster again softly closed his eyes and placed his cupped hand over the damaged knee. There was a short wince in his face before a quick smirk of success maneuvered its way in. Slowly he removed the hand from the joint to reveal a thin scar where the incision had previously been. The skin had been rejoined.

Zack returned with the ordered towel and Caster gingerly wiped the remaining blood away.

“How about that drink?” he pulled himself up and headed into the house. “Mosquitoes are coming out, time to head in. Feel like pizza tonight?”

The idea of food always got young master Ward in a happy mood.

“Dominos?”

“Sure, only let’s try another experiment. Let’s see if you can place the order before you call.”

The boy smiled for he already knew what was next.

“Okay.”

“First, you have to picture the store in your mind. It’s only a few blocks away from here so you should be able to ‘locate’ it with your thoughts. The boy closed his eyes and after a few moments of concentration, began to smile with success at accomplishing the first leg of the assignment. Caster saw the boy was locked in and continued with the instruction. “Now, you have to let your mind sort of ‘fly’ around in



there.” There was fun on the face of his student as he unconsciously grinned in the direction of the proprietorship.

“Apparently you are.” Caster was easing back in the recliner with his scotch and continuing with the directions. “Now find the one who is answering the phones. Male or female?”

“Ummm...girl.”

“Name?”

“Name...”

“It’s on her tag. Can you read the name tag?”

“Deb-bie. I have it, her name is Debbie.”

“Good. Now just...talk to her with your mind, only use slow deliberate words to start. Try just feeding her the address. It might take a few minutes, but eventually she should start to get the message.

“I think it is working. She is scribbling on the paper in front of her. It looks like our street name.”

“Very good. Now tell her what kind of pizza you want. Keep repeating it over and over until her lips move a little. That’s usually a sign that they have it in their brain.”

The expression on the boy’s face grew confident and determined and it was about a half minute before he finally smiled.

“Yes, there. There. I have it. I saw the lips move for no reason.”

Caster raised his glass and continued.

“So, what are we having tonight?”

“Half everything and half Hawaiian.”

“Ugh. You eat the weirdest stuff. Send Debbie the message. When you are sure she has it, go ahead and make the call. I’ll listen in on the extension. She’s going to be a little confused so just be patient.”

Within a minute, the boy was racing for the phone. He punched the number three on the speed dial. Dominos wasn’t the only food delivery place that had found its way onto the Ward speed dial feature. There were two Chinese restaurants, a taco place, and another Italian joint that did other things besides pizza.

“Thanks for calling Domino’s Pizza, this is Debbie. May I have your phone number?” Zack could barely contain his giggle. It was also the first time he had actually used the telephone for anything much less to place an order for food.

“Hello?”

*Point-Six Percent*

“Hi. Thanks for calling Domino’s Pizza, this is...”

“Debbie.” The boy excitedly finished the greeting for her. “Guess what kind of pizza I want tonight?”

“Well, what kind do you want?” The girl was a bit put off. Saturday nights are generally pretty busy and she wasn’t necessarily in a customer service kind of mood, especially with the voice of a child on the other end.

“I want whatever pizza you’ve just been thinking about.”

“Whatever I have been thinking about?”

“Yes. You were just thinking about a certain pizza and that is what I want.”

“You don’t want the pizza I was just thinking about...it’s nasty.”

“I happen to like half everything, and half ham and pineapple?”

There was an extremely awkward pause on the phone and Zack looked over to Adam who gave a short but direct nod of approval.

“Wow...okay...that was exactly what I was thinking of. How did you know that?”

“Oh...I was just guessing.” As before, the boy could hardly contain his outward glee. “Now you need the phone number, correct?”

“Uh, huh.”

The control of the conversation had just shifted from Debbie to Zack and his confidence was slowly being replaced by a touch of arrogance. Caster took another sip and slipped in a faint smile as he hung up the receiver; his services in this matter were never needed after all.

“Write down the first three numbers you think of.” This went on for another few minutes before the order was accurately placed without Zack having to say anything except that she had indeed every correct number, street name, and cost. It was as if she was under a light spell and he could have planted anything in her mind at that moment. He realized his ability for the first time. He was hardly a little boy anymore.

One thing about Adam Caster, he was not in the habit of laughing or even smiling much for that matter, but as he sipped the scotch, there was an admiring glee in what he was witnessing in the little genius.

“Since the Sox are rained out, let’s play another game while we wait.” The uncle was always entertaining Zack with new games and puzzles. Every time he watched the youth for Justin, it was another test of his protégé’s developing mental abilities. At five years of age, a Rubik’s

Cube was a three-minute snap, by six, Zack was able to easily handle any Mensa-type exercises Adam could find, including those little games that were sold in those specialty shops for genius minds. By the time he turned eight, he was finishing off 700-piece jigsaw puzzles in a matter of two to three hours. And just recently, he was tackling crossword puzzles as a way to develop his newly discovered vocabulary. The Sunday Times offering was getting polished off in less than an hour; all of which would take place only when Uncle Adam came to baby-sit and under a veil of complete secrecy. He always put the puzzles back in his carry bag after Zack finished them and always long before Justin returned from whatever engagement he was attending. Only recently, was Zack 'allowed' by the mentor to reveal a little of his abilities to his dad and the outside world. Adam pulled out a sheet of paper and quickly wrote out a series of complicated mathematical logarithms.

"Solve this problem." Zack eagerly reached for the paper. "Before the food gets here."

The boy nodded, grinned, and with attentive eyes fixated on the paper, took the problem to the kitchen table. Domino's was good for 20-minute delivery times to the Ward house. Those ten-dollar tips were always an inspiration to any driver.

"Uncle Adam? Explain 'point-six percent'."

"I'll bring you a book to read next time."

\* \* \* \* \*

As Justin had expected, it was the usual fare at Paulie's on another Saturday night. The Fivers had a few hours head start on him and his shapely date when the limo dropped them at the side door. None of the regulars ever used the front door to the establishment. It was a front door only in that it opened out towards the street. The place was simply too informal for a front door and virtually demanded of its regulars the use of the seedier side door for everyday traffic.

The driver had originally pulled up alongside to release his human cargo, but Justin advised him to use the parking-lot entrance. Within an hour, Cassie was fast becoming the life of the party and Justin, having missed a few 'meetings' was more than happy to make it up to the admiring membership by supplying a nearly continuous flow of beer.

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Admiring was the word, too. On several occasions, Justin found himself spotting a discreet ‘thumbs up’ or a mouthed “wow” from various parties to the Fivers. He could only sheepishly smile when Big Mike leaned in, put a meat hook of an arm around his shoulder and whispered into his ear: “Maybe I should write a book.”

Mike was the eternal bachelor of the group. At a skinny six foot-nine, he quickly stood out in a crowd, yet he held an unassuming manner. The women trouble for Mike was that he had a real hard time with commitment. Twice he had found himself in potential marriage situations and both times the brides found themselves left at the altar. The last was Maria, a former Fiver with a lot of emphasis on the ‘former’ part.

“So...how serious is this, Penn?” Being terminally single didn’t mean that Mike was insensitive to others’ love lives.

“I don’t know big fella, but I am going to enjoy this as long as I can.” The author could barely contain his happiness.

As nine o’clock approached, every male Fiver had spent his share of quality time with the curvaceous blond. By ten o’clock, Cassie knew enough about every Fiver in the place, male or female, to call them a friend and as eleven neared, it was if she had always been a Fiver. This came in part because as a group, the Fivers were very inviting, but a lot of it had to do directly with Cassie’s forward personality.

Thinking about his earlier conversation with Big Mike, Justin was beginning to see that this truly special woman might very well be the one for him for the rest of his life. It was only after Froggy accidentally mentioned Liz’s name that the author even thought of her. In the past, when another woman even tried to get close to him, he would naturally compare the prospect to Liz, and none of them stacked up; until now.

Now he was sure that Cassie Jones was the one.

As she freely carried out an animated, but friendly discussion about the evils of the designated hitter with Scoop at the corner of the bar, Justin wondered if she would ever try to take up golf. He chuckled to himself and stared at her for few moments as she wrapped herself in the conversation with a warm charm that seemed to have poor Scoop at an unprecedented loss for words. She had done this with everyone else in the crew and with the innocence of an inquiring child. When she asked Jill a question about her makeup it was sincere and requiring of an honest answer. She could segue a conversation from body spray to basketball

with the ease of a carpenter changing nails for a different job. All poor Scoop could do was nod in agreement. Justin figured it was time to rescue his buddy, so he nudged into the fray with a peck on her cheek.

It stopped her in mid word and she returned his peck with a big smack on the lips, catching her man by surprise a little. Justin wasn't used to that, but he sure did like it. She gave him that sexy smile and turned right back to the ails of the game of baseball with Scoop when Justin, recovered from the quick, hard kiss, gave her the traditional tapping of his wrist to indicate that it was soon time to go. She smiled again and playfully waved him off.

"Soon, babe," he reiterated vocally.

"Why do people do that?" She was directing her eyes towards Scoop, but the words were clearly intended for Justin. "Why do they point to their wrists when there is no watch there?" She was sincere, but with simple sarcasm. "I'm supposed to know this means something to do with time?" She mocked him and all people who do inherently tap their wrists when telling someone its time to go. Justin sheepishly smiled at Scoop who was throwing a look back to him that suggested he answer the lady's question.

"Hey, I have a deaf son." The line was pure inspiration. And indeed, it was the signal he had used for indicating time to Zack. Cassie closed her eyes and slightly bowed her head in concessionary agreement. Scoop gave a similar tip of the glass to his friend for having achieved what was often referred to as the 'snappy comeback'.

"We have a ride to catch."

"We could have one more, right? For the road?" She was having a good time and so was he for that matter, and the ride could easily wait, seeing as he was paying for it.

"Sure...one more..." He chuckled in disbelief over her cliché usage and even repeated it out of respect of its cleverness. "...for the road."

Perfect, seeing as neither was driving.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sunday afternoon found the Ward boys and their special guest in the company of 34, 475 at a place the pair frequented often - Fenway Park. The Sox and the Angels would be playing a day-night double header

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after the rainout Saturday. Caster had let Justin use his tickets and since they were in the same row as Justin's, it wouldn't be a problem switching things around to have them all sit together. That was the thing about Fenway, or 'friendly Fenway' as it had come to be known, it was just that...friendly. The fans were understanding of the fact that they watched a game in the oldest and smallest facility, but wouldn't change it for anything. The ambiance provided by its coziness more than compensated for the close quarters. The whole experience was a game in itself. Most people had a special routine, even when it came to parking for there was never enough space around the inner city venue built in an age before congesting cars. Before Zack came along, Justin used to park behind Great Scott, a college bar on the corner of Commonwealth and Harvard Avenues. He knew the owner through Liz so he'd stop, say 'hi', have a beer, and ride the 'T' down to the park. Basically, it was parking for the game for less than two bucks...a lot cheaper than the fifteen or twenty they were getting across Lansdowne Street, opposite the backside of the 'Green Monster'.

It was an understanding crowd that knew its baseball. They soundly booed the visitor's best player, but tipped their caps to him when he hit three homers in a game. They loudly cheered their boys in white, but let players know when they were shirking it out there and not hustling. Lack of hustle would always result in a player getting showered with boos by the hometown crowd.

It was also an understanding gathering that realized it was easier to just pass the money halfway down an aisle to the hotdog vendor and then pass the food back without even the thought of helping themselves to a little. Efficiency was the key to creating only minimal interruptions to the real action on the field. It took years before the Fenway faithful would even consider doing a 'wave'. That detracted from the watching the game. These were baseball scholars and the game unfolding in front of them was like a nightly presentation of a senior project.

Cassie had never been there to see a game and so, all the way, Justin imparted plenty of this kind of wisdom on his guest. One other positive was that it had turned out to be a great day to drive and so the top came down on the Maz. Cassie had looked fabulous in the front seat with her blonde medium-length locks blowing in the breeze as they headed east on the Mass Pike. The author had taken great pains to explain the

difference between a stadium and a park. The Yankees, he argued, played in a stadium – a round building without any real character. Oh sure, he consented, many greats of baseball had little shrines in the outfield there, but Fenway Park, a *park* he emphasized, had distinct asymmetrical personality, allowing the unpredictable to happen at any time. He reminded her many times that she was in for a real treat. On one occasion, as the author ranted forward, she looked back to Zack who was very busy with a book. It was Peter Golenbeck's *Fenway* a 432-page history of the shrine they were traveling to. Justin had it in his collection of books. Zack had read several in just the first week. It was an hour ride to Boston and the book was completely scanned and mentally digested by the time the car exited onto Storrow Drive - the last leg of the trip.

The lad had taken his can of soda with him on the drive and had made sure to increase his dose of 'headache medicine' for the day. Adam had suggested it when seeing games at Fenway the first few times because of the boy's newest ability to catch both emotion and thought simultaneously. It could prove to be an overwhelming situation. Therefore, a double shot of scotch in the can of Coke would take care of things for the day. The trick was to keep adding more soda, or water, to the can after drinking the first half prior to leaving. That way, he could hide the fact from his father, something still necessary for the time being according to Uncle Adam. Only the smell of the alcohol needed masking for even as an eight-year old, his superior brain easily handled the libation's nature to retard activity in the central cortex. Two pieces of spearmint gum seemed to do the trick.

The Sox wore their special red jerseys for the opening game and Cassie was genuinely impressed with the surroundings. Justin's description hadn't done the place justice.

"Someone said I have to have a hotdog and a beer when I'm here. They said there was no place better than Fenway for either of the two." Cassie was leaning into him as they walked the concourse with Zack a step or two behind. She looked back and winked at him.

"Who told you that?"

The woman just pointed her thumb over her shoulder to the boy.

"Zack?" She nodded and smiled.

"He's a great kid." The elder Ward looked back at the boy who now returned the smile.

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“He’s the best.” The man’s right arm hooked his son’s shoulder and brought him into the middle of the two adults. He then dropped his hands to use them.

*Hot dog?* The boy’s eyes predictably lit up. He raised an inquisitive eyebrow and held up two fingers that were aped by the author in response. “Two?” The boy eagerly nodded and the man just shrugged and threw out his arms in mock exasperation. “Two.” He put his left hand on the belly of his skinny son and patted it humorously before thrusting his own out and pretending to be fat. The boy almost laughed out loud, but clapped his hands instead to get his father’s attention. Then he imitated the father while shaking his head as if to indicate that he won’t get fat if he eats two hotdogs.

“I’ve got to admit, this is a great hotdog,” said the blond as she raised the plastic cup of Budweiser to her lips.

“I figure, after the first game, we could go get a nice meal here in Boston and come back for game two.”

“Are you sure you want to watch two baseball games in one day?” There was apprehension in her voice. If there was one drawback to this woman it’s that she didn’t want to sit through a doubleheader. It was sort of a litmus test on the relationship. Liz had been somewhat to blame for Justin’s love of the Sox. Growing up in Western New York, he had been a half-hearted follower of the Toronto Blue Jays. In Buffalo country, the football Bills are number one and baseball tends to take a backseat in that area of the nation. From the time he could remember knowing her, Liz was a diehard Red Sox fan and she wore her heart for them on the very sleeve of her favorite team jacket. Sitting through a doubleheader would never been an issue with Liz.

She would have insisted on it.

“Hey, did you hear me?” Her words returned him to the present.

“Well...yeah, I’d kind of like to see both games.” He turned his attention to Zack.

*Both games?* The boy nodded and went back to scanning the program into his memory. One of his newest tricks was to rattle off the all the stats of a player in his mind as they were being introduced as if he were a play-by-play guy on the television. Today, he had to concentrate on separating and blocking out the deluge of activity his brain was in for. It



was a big test for he was never in a situation where all his sensations would be so activated. As the crowd filled in, the waves grew, but by working different mechanisms in his brain, he was able to better din much of the psionic bombardment. A second-inning home run by the home team generated a great crowd swell and proved to be the first formidable test, but his accelerated mind quickly adjusted and by the end of game one, the boy was very comfortable with all the surroundings. He even took in a box of popcorn in the sixth. He was able to relax and enjoy the final innings with the same assertive confidence he displayed with Debbie from Domino's. He also couldn't help notice how happy his father was, not because the Sox won, but because he was feeling like he had 'won' as well, falling further into the wiles of the sensuous woman sitting between him and the boy.

It was decided over dinner that since the father and son would be traveling the next day, the trio would leave game two early to avoid traffic. That in itself, turned out to be a blessing as the Angels took out a measure of frustration on the locals, leading 10-4 in the top of the fifth. That's when Justin, one never to leave a game early, gave the signal to head out.

*Can we stay for the rest of the inning?*

Justin stopped stretching and smiled at his pride and joy before nodding to Cassie and then returning his derriere to its seat. Zack was more than willing to leave, but he did want to try out something. With two out in the Sox half of the frame, the boy began to focus his attention on the Angels' pitcher and within minutes, the home team had first and second base occupied as the result of two four-pitch walks.

Zack's youthful smile emulated every kid on Christmas morning with new toys. He turned his attention away from the pitcher to allow the inning to continue sans interference, but as the next batter grounded sharply to the second, the little mental giant took a quick stab at influencing the fielder. Although there was a bobble, the routine play was made with great effort and the Ward boys were on their way home. Much like the Sox, who would be heading out on the road for a series of games, the Ward boys would also be traveling for a few.

Although miraculously unexpected to his parents, Zack Ward's arrival has been planned for eons by the remnants of an ancient civilization continually spanning the cosmos. With the boy presenting uncanny abilities, human evolution's next step and purpose are ultimately revealed.

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