

Assassination Day

Wilizy, #3

May 1, 2082 to September 1, 2082

by David J. Wighton,

Published: 2014

***** ** ** ** ** **28 28 28 28 28****

Table of Contents

Dedication



Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 28



*This book is dedicated to my wife, Dale,
whose support and patience made it possible.*

Chapter 1

From Will's journals: May 1, 2082.

I was cuddling with Izzy in a double-sling that was hovering above a white cloud bank that stretched in little waves of cloud-froth to both horizons. Cuddling in a sling is like cuddling in a comfy sleeping hammock except that we were thousands of meters high in the sky with nothing stopping us from plummeting to the earth except for the few thin filament wires that formed the sling. It's quite enjoyable floating around in the sky. However, it's not enjoyable floating around in the sky when Izzy is weeping into my chest.

I'm certain that she wasn't crying about me seeing her naked. When Zzyk was holding her hostage in the childcare center, I had instructed a communication probe to find her and she had been stepping out of her bathtub when it did. The video feed was live but I hadn't realized that she had no clothes on. I had more important things on my mind since this was the first time that Izzy and I had been able to talk together since she had been captured. We became very busy planning her escape. Afterwards, I remembered that I had seen a lot of bare skin, so I went back to the visual records and looked again. I suppose I shouldn't have looked that second time.

So, I knew that I deserved what she did to me after the debriefing of our battle with Zzyk. Izzy gave me a choice. First, I had to undress. Then, I had to choose between squeezing myself into a pair of women's slingshot-looking underwear that appeared decidedly uncomfortable or letting Izzy see me naked. I chose the second option.

However, Izzy turned her back to me while I undressed, and then she flicked her head towards me for a second when I told her I was ready for her to look. I think that she had her eyes closed at the time, although I might be wrong about that since it happened so fast. I guess she was letting me off easy. Izzy is very hard to understand sometimes. But, I did realize that she didn't want me seeing her naked and I did feel bad about deliberately peeking at her.

Izzy wanted some time alone with me and suggested that we fly around in the sky until we were sleepy. So, we both changed into our nightclothes, which we did without looking at each other. Just like we always do. Then we climbed into a double-sling and accelerated above some extensive cloudbanks until we had a good view of the full moon. The sky was full of stars and I put the sling into a slow circle, thinking that Izzy would enjoy the view. We had been cuddling together since entering the sling, and Izzy raised her face to me, and we started to kiss.

Then, she started to cry. It started softly. But, the sobs became louder and then she started trembling. I didn't know what to do other than hold her. I knew that she wasn't crying because I had kissed her too hard. That had happened months before, but Doc helped us work that out. I knew that I had kissed her the way she liked. Besides, she had never cried like this before. These were body-wracking sobs and her cheeks were streaming with tears. I saw them in the moonlight when she raised her head to me once, and for reasons that I do not understand, I tried to console her by kissing away her tears. She smiled a little at me when I did that and then she ducked her head back into my chest and held me really tight while her body shuddered against me.

Here's another thing I don't understand. Tears are simply salty water. The body produces them to wash away any grit that might fall into the eyes. I don't know what purpose they serve when a person is crying from unhappiness. And, as far as I know, they do not carry any contagious diseases. But, shortly after I kissed Izzy's tears away, I had a scratchy throat, my mouth began salivating, and I had difficulty swallowing. I wondered if the fluid pressure inside my mouth had somehow become unbalanced because it seemed to me like the excess saliva in my mouth was now coming out of my eyes. I too found myself silently weeping and I couldn't stop. I don't think that Izzy noticed, and I started feeling better at about the same time that she did, so I didn't say anything to her. But, how could a simple kiss of a sterile tear carry something contagious from her eyes to mine? I will have to ask Doc about this.

I know why she was weeping and shaking though. When Izzy lived with the dissidents, she was frightened all the time about the DPS capturing and torturing her for information. So, after Zzyk's agents discovered us in Surrey, I had been surprised that she would make herself into a hostage so that I could escape. I wanted to talk her out of it, but she insisted that the DPS was after me, not her, and she'd be fine. I don't know what Zzyk did to her when she was a hostage. Izzy hasn't said anything about the time she was imprisoned, but it must have been bad. Then after she was rescued, I think she couldn't hold back her feelings of being frightened any longer and that's why she was shaking. I think I'm right. I'm not going to ask Doc about that though because Izzy wouldn't want me to.

I looked down at Izzy sleeping quietly in my arms. I discovered something else that I wouldn't be asking Doc about.

#

Izzy and I sleep in the same bedroom in the Wilizy, but we don't sleep in the same hammocks. We wear skimpy clothing to bed because neither of us likes being hot when we sleep. I wear a pair of loose fitting black shorts. Izzy wears green shorts and a thin, sleeveless green top that falls to her knees. Tonight she

was wearing a much shorter black top made out of some flimsy, shiny material that didn't even reach to her belly button. My discovery? Izzy wasn't wearing much of that black top any longer.

I remembered hugging Izzy tightly when she was shuddering against me and the new top must have gotten scrunched up then, but I didn't notice it. Now, as I watch her sleep, I can see that the entire black top is up around her neck and shoulders. I can feel what's pressed up against my bare chest.

I've thought a lot about when this might happen. Sometimes, when we're in the middle of a hockey game, it's all I can think of. When we used to exercise together on the ship, I would look at her dancing and get the thoughts. Or, when we were in a cloud and showering close to each other, I'd get the thoughts. I'd even shift my shower location a little closer to hers to peek at her showering. But, I know that was wrong. And I know that having these kinds of thoughts are wrong. Izzy doesn't think about these things, and she certainly doesn't want me to. That's why we have the rule about illegal use of the hands during our hockey games. That's why she got mad when I looked at her coming out of the bath. And, that's why I'm going to ease away from her and lower her top. And, that's why I'm not going to look when I do that, even though she'd never know that I did. But, I don't have to pull down her top right now. It might disturb her sleep, right?

The IOF warned all of its children that thinking about sex would turn them into perverts. I remember one of my teachers showing us an old movie with a pervert in it. He was all hunched over, walked funny, had a huge hump on his back, and spoke in a weird voice. The teacher said that he also drooled a lot. When I was trying to find out more about sex, I would often check myself in a mirror to see if I were developing a hump. That was easier to measure than the amount of drooling that I did. For a while, every time I swallowed, I would wonder if that was the beginning of drooling too much.

Now I know that thinking about sex won't turn me into a pervert. Now I know that enjoying cuddling like this is normal. I like this way of cuddling. I'm going to stay this way for a bit longer. To distract myself from feeling her bare chest pressed against mine, I will think about something scientific. Like I always do when I have to distract myself from thinking too much about Izzy's body.

I looked up and saw the big orange moon looming in the sky. What if Izzy wanted to visit the moon instead of just look at it? Keeping an oxygen supply in the sling would be the biggest challenge. Clamping the baffles shut wouldn't work. Even the slightest leak could be disastrous. Could I carry something that produced oxygen? Plants? ...

From Izzy's journals: May 1, 2082.

I woke up before Will, as I usually do. I was a little disoriented at first, but then was quick to realize that I was in a sling and that we were quite high. I was also quick to feel him cuddled behind me with his left hand on my bare breast.

This wasn't the first time that this had happened. Some months ago, Will and I had been watching a romantic movie from the comfort of Will's sleeping hammock. We had fallen asleep together and I woke up to find his hand on me. Then, I fell

asleep again. Later, I found his hand still there and freaked. But, I never told Will what had happened.

I had beaten myself up badly over that. I knew what would happen if I didn't keep iron control on my feelings. Pregnancy would happen. And Will and I both knew that with a baby to slow us down, Zzyk would inevitably capture us. I would be killed, Will would be zombified, and the baby would be held as a hostage to Will's good behaviour. I had freaked because I knew that sleeping in an intimate embrace once would make it all the more likely that it would happen again.

I looked down at the shortest tank top that I owned hanging around my neck and Will's hand where it didn't belong. I admit that I like his hand being there. I also admit that I like our hockey games a lot. Zzyk had called me a slut and had offered to let me service Will's needs. But, I am not a slut. Although I had sort of felt like one when I had rummaged through my bureau last night to find this particular top. But, I was very careful not to look at Will last night when he took off his clothes. A slut would have looked at him naked. So, that proves that I am not a slut.

Will says that he can feel my breasts against him when we hug with our clothes on. What's the difference if he feels my breasts with his chest, or if he feels them with his hand? No difference. So therefore, I am not a slut.

A slut would have encouraged him to do more than just look at me climbing out of the bath tub. I threatened to make him wear that garish thong to show him that I didn't want him seeing me naked. As for his hand, I'll remove it when he shows signs of waking, pull down my top, and he'll never know what he had done in his sleep. I will continue to pretend that I don't want him touching my breasts. That means I am not a slut.

Besides, Will doesn't think about these things. I think about them a lot, which is why I draw pictures of Winnie and hang them all over our cabin. They're reminders of what would happen if I lost control of my emotions. Will doesn't know that the pictures are a primitive form of birth control. He wouldn't need to find ways to distract himself from having thoughts about sex. Sluts wouldn't care about birth control. Therefore, I am not a slut.

Besides. Will is totally engrossed in science and doesn't have many human emotions let alone understand them in others. He became upset one time when we had to bury some murdered children, but I've never seen him show any real emotion otherwise. I know he likes me. So, that's an emotion, I guess. But, I doubt he even thinks about sex with me. How can a person who has limited feelings understand someone like me who can become upset about even little things? I used to say I became angry easily because I have red hair. But, the truth is that I get angry a lot because I grew up with everyone but Doc hating me. My own mother was the worst. I know that I'm an emotional wreck, but I am not a slut too.

Besides, I had a very good reason for wearing a skimpy top in the hopes that Will would react this way. It's true that I didn't anticipate my pathetic emotional breakdown after our first kiss. That happened, in part, because I had been terrified of being tortured and then telling Zzyk about Hank and Yolanda and their children. And, last night I became very misty when Yolanda and Granny adopted me into their family. But, the main reason that I couldn't hold it together after our first kiss in the sling was because of what I had learned while I was a hostage.

I had a lot of time to think when I was a hostage. So, I spent my time plotting Zzyk's destruction. Not in anger. But strategically. What could I do, and what could Will invent, that would allow us to defeat Zzyk so that the people of Alberta could live happy, normal lives? Now I know how that can be done.

I know how we have to organize ourselves so that we can have a chance of succeeding. I know the initial things that we can do that will put pressure on Zzyk and his security goons. I know that we can have initial success. I know the goals that we will have to strive for next, although I don't know yet how to achieve them. But, most important of all, I know how long it will take us to free the people of Alberta.

I figure it will take at least 15 years. Perhaps 20 years. Could Will and I battle against Zzyk and make no mistakes and encounter no treachery in that 15 or 20 years?

Not a chance.

One mistake is all it would take for us to lose the war. I expect to be caught, tortured, and killed before I'm 21.

I want to have some good experiences before I am murdered. Sleeping like this with Will is one of them. But, I am **not** a slut.

Chapter 2

The Narrator: May 2, 2082.

Breakfast in the ship was an informal affair, with people appearing sporadically from the temporary cabins below, fixing something to eat for themselves, and then going below to eat and dress. Afterwards, they brought their dishes and cutlery back up to the galley and then washed and put away what they had used. They had this routine because eating on the main deck wasn't very comfortable.

Remember that the Wilizy was formerly a sailing ship intended for smuggling goods into and out of the tiny republics that were created out of the former eastern states of the U.S.—those that were still above water, that is. It wasn't built to accommodate large numbers of people. When Will and Izzy purchased the ship, there had been one large stateroom below and the rest of the hold was left open for cargo. The sales agent had sold the ship empty of all furnishings.

Hank had been adding to the ship ever since Will had asked them for help rescuing Izzy. First to appear were temporary cabins in the hold—complete with hammocks—so that more people could sleep on the ship. Hank also donated an assortment of dishes, cutlery, pots and various other home-making necessities that he acquired from a second hand store in Kamloops. Also from that store, he purchased some rickety folding chairs. Before this, Will and Izzy had lived in their sleeping hammocks, dragging them upstairs or downstairs depending on where they wanted to be at the time.

The living quarters on the main deck consisted of a large galley that contained a 4-person maple table, bolted to the deck, and with high lips around the outside to

prevent dishes from sliding off in stormy weather. That table and the glossy maple floor boards were the only things in the ship that had any real value. There were some primitive cupboards and drawers—mostly empty except for what kitchen gear Hank had brought and what food Yolanda had provided. The aged white refrigerator/freezer and companion stove were functional and had been converted to run off Will's filaments and a pinky-computer battery.

Adjoining the galley was an empty space that served as a living room. Will and Izzy had used their sleeping hammocks as furniture, but other than hooks in the ceiling beams, nothing else was there when Hank looked over the ship. He had brought in an old, beaten up 3-seat sofa, primarily for Granny and Doc to use. Over time, Hank would continue to add furnishings to all of the Wilizy's rooms and the ship gradually became more comfortable for those people assigned to stand watch on the ship. All of this gear came from a variety of second hand stores.

Izzy had left a note on the fridge, *Meeting at 11:00* and they were all there at the appointed time. Hank and Wolf carried the sofa into the galley and placed it facing the table. Yolanda, Doc and Granny took the comfortable seats. Hank was on a folding chair next to the sofa. Winnie was lying on her stomach all by herself on the deck in the main living area—drawing. Four folding chairs were grouped around the table—one of them positioned all by itself on the side facing the sofa. Izzy arrived last and found that chair unoccupied, sat down, and rapped her knuckles on the table to bring the first meeting of the Wilizy to order. The date was May 2, 2082.

First on Izzy's agenda was how the group would be organized. Izzy proposed that Doc, Grannie, Hank and Yolanda would become the Wilizy's Board of Directors. They would have the authority to approve or reject anything major that the group did. Each of the teenagers would be a manager in charge of specific parts of the plan to defeat Zzyk. They couldn't act independently but had to submit their plans to the other managers for discussion. If a disagreement arose, the directors would help them sort it out. If some managers tried to do something stupid, the directors could stop them.

There wasn't much discussion on that—it all sounded like a smart way to operate. All the teenagers were interested to hear what they'd be managing. Izzy said something about not wanting to be bossy by suggesting roles, but it's likely that everyone knew that she'd be the best person to run the organization and none of them raised any objections to their roles. Wolf was the oldest, and he may have wanted at one point to take charge, but either he backed off on his own or perhaps Hank had a quiet chat with him.

Izzy was going to be responsible for *Strategic Operations*, which meant that she'd do all the long range planning and would help the others when they had to do plan an operation in their own area.

Will would be responsible for *Research and Development* meaning that he would invent things. If any of the other three managers needed something invented, he'd do that too and would be involved in all planning meetings so that he'd know what science they needed.

Wolf would be the manager of all *Offensive Operations* meaning that if they ever had to attack Zzyk's DPS army again, he'd be in charge. Between battles, he would use the Wilizy, or his invisible sling, or Wilizy supporters to spy on the DPS

military units. He always had to know the locations of their main military forces and what they were doing. Wolf asked if that meant that he could operate on his own without having to get permission first. Izzy replied that if the larger group had approved his overall plan for his department, then how he operated would be up to him. Of course, there had to be good communication with everyone, and if any danger were involved, he'd have to take at least one other person with him as a protector in case of unforeseen circumstances.

Hank interrupted at this point and asked if the group might want to make a rule that at least two people had to be present in any potentially dangerous operation, and it turned out that they did want to do that.

Yollie was becoming anxious by this time – perhaps because she had wanted to be given Wolf's job or perhaps because she thought she might be put in charge of washing dishes. But, she looked interested when Izzy said that Yollie would be responsible for *Defensive Operations*. If Zzyk's army attacked, she would be in charge of their defense. She would also keep the Wilizy ship itself safe from detection and harm; she would provide protection to individual members when they were on dangerous missions; and she would protect the Wilizy organization from spies or traitors joining the group and then betraying them to Zzyk. Yollie would work closely with Wolf so that she'd be aware immediately if his spies had turned up any signs of potential threat to the organization or to the ship.

Yollie asked about the newcomers to the organization. "You mean you want me to read them?"

"Among other things," Izzy replied. "You would keep an eye on them; you would set traps for them to discover if they were intent on treachery; you would assume that there's deceit and trickery at all times."

"Why assume the worst? Zzyk is a Z. Aren't they linear thinkers?"

"Will uncovered some DPS files revealing that, decades ago, Zzyk had inserted some DPS agents within the ranks of the dissidents and those agents influenced them to do some very stupid things that made the people hate them. He'll try to do the same thing to us. Or, he'll assassinate us one at a time. That's why we need one person who will always be thinking about protecting us. Yollie, if you fail at your job, we all die."

That put a big chill into the meeting, and Yolanda hustled Winnie below after they had all drunk some of her famous hot chocolate with marshmallows. Winnie probably hadn't heard a thing – she was intent on trying to draw her best picture of Izzy.

When they reconvened, Izzy said that they'd need to assume that their war with the DPS would take years to win even though Will had the capability to defeat them now. "We have weapons that they don't know about and all their soldiers are stationed in army bases that are wide open to attack from invisible weapons. They are sitting, blind targets. Doc, what would happen if we started a war next week and won it?"

Doc didn't even have to think. "There'd be chaos, absolute chaos in every community and city in the province. We would have made the lives of Albertans even worse, if that were possible. If we defeat Zzyk too quickly, Alberta will have no functioning government, no jobs because up to then everyone had jobs paid by the government, no money worth anything, no schools, no childcare centers, no laws,

no court system, and no police system. We'd need a police system of some kind because people would be suddenly operating without brain-bands and they'd be unable to control their newly released emotions. You can't take the one thing that controls their entire lives away from them one day and expect them to live on their own the next day."

The deep freeze blew into the galley again. No-one made any effort to break the uncomfortable silence that engulfed them all. Granny stood up and started filling one of the Wilizy's scarred ceramic pots with water, but Doc called her back to the galley table. "Not yet."

"You and I have talked," he said to Izzy. "So, you've had time to think about this. I assume you have a plan that goes beyond defeating Zzyk in battle?"

"I do," Izzy said.

From Izzy's journals: May 2, 2082.

The planning day went better than I could have hoped. I outlined a series of goals and the managers went off somewhere on their own to think about what they could do in their area of responsibility that would help us succeed. The Directors met as a group. We reconvened later in the afternoon and we all shared our initial thoughts about what we could do. We never finalized anything, but lots of good ideas were floating around. The directors were mostly quiet, but every now and then, they'd say a few words that started us off on an entirely new train of thought. The afternoon passed quickly.

I was wrapping up the meeting when Granny asked me about one of my strategic goals that hadn't been addressed yet. I said that we could wait on that because it didn't fit under any of our managers' duties right now. "I can take that on, if you would like," she said. Doc chimed in immediately with an offer to work on another goal that had been delayed, and Hank joined in with a similar suggestion. Yolanda even offered to have some of their older children help with small parts of the planning. "They'll be school projects," Yolanda explained. "Hank or I will keep an eye on them."

"I thought that..."

"This isn't the same as sending young children into battle. Being part of something important is a good experience for children to have."

"I can be in charge of the hot chocolate," Winnie offered from the corner of the galley by the stove where she had been huddling unnoticed.

"Right now, you're in charge of peeling the potatoes," Granny said and that ended the meeting.

#

After dinner, the evening stretched on pleasantly. Winnie was sent off to bed, but she asked me to come down and read her a story first. I agreed, of course, and was not surprised to feel a tingle as Winnie put her hands around my neck as I carted her down to Hank and Yolanda's temporary cabin. Winnie has healing powers and when someone needs healing, there's a tingle when she touches them. At least there is with me.

It took two stories before Winnie dozed off, and I just sat and watched her sleep. I could hear a murmur of voices from above but felt no urgency to go back up. When I did slide into the galley, I sensed that something important was happening, or as it turned out, that something important was not happening. The room was silent. I sat on a wobbly chair next to Yollie who leaned over and whispered, "Mother and Dad invited Will to become part of our family. He's thinking about it."

"Do they have any idea how long this could take? Will would take this offer very seriously."

"Fifteen minutes and counting. Does he realize that we're all sitting here waiting for him to answer?"

"He doesn't even know you're in the room. He may not even realize that **he's** in the room."

Yollie leaned over to me again, but snapped her mouth shut when Will spoke.

"Does this mean that you would be my volunteer mother and father?"

"Careful," Doc whispered to Hank who was sitting beside him.

"Would that bother you?" Hank asked.

"Zzyk was my volunteer father. He pretended to like me so that he could imprison me."

"Then no, we will not be your volunteer parents. We are inviting you to join the family because we like you. We want you to know what it feels like to be a member of a family that cares for you and will help you when you are confused and protect you when you are in danger."

"Would Yollie and Wolf be my brother and sister?"

"Yes, I guess you could say that they would. We've talked with them and they want you to become part of the family."

"What about Izzy? Would she be my sister?"

Doc had a sudden coughing attack that caused him to grip Yolanda's sleeve and pull her almost out of the sofa. I saw some hasty whispers when she offered him water. After Doc was settled, Yolanda answered into the cough-less silence.

"If you join our family, Hank and I will treat you like you were our son, but we know that we are not your parents and you don't have to treat us like that if you don't want to. Same thing goes for Doc and Granny who would sort of be your grandparents but you don't have to treat them as such if you don't want to. Wolf, Yollie, and all the children in our family will treat you like a brother, but you don't have to be a brother to them if you don't want to be. It's up to you and Izzy to decide what kind of relationship the two of you will have. Being a member of our family will have nothing to do with that. If you want to join our family, you will always be a grandson, or a son, or a brother to us, no matter what happens."

"I don't want to be Izzy's brother."

"Then, you won't be."

Will went back to thinking, and I started fuming about how he thought that I wasn't good enough to be his sister. I was opening my mouth to challenge him when Yollie pinched me so hard that I jumped.

"If you say a word, I swear I am going to pinch all this ugly flab off your body. Think of the good reason why he doesn't want to be your sister."

I shut it and rubbed my decidedly un-flabby ribs.

"So, I can ask you questions about things that confuse me and you'll answer them?"

"Yes. We will do our best."

"And you won't kick me out of the family if I turn into a pervert?"

I saw Doc struggling out of the sofa and pulling on Granny's sleeve. She pulled her arm away and shushed him when he started whispering in her ear.

"I have a mental file of questions I'd like to ask about breasts."

Granny and Doc quietly disappeared.

"How many questions do you have?" Hank asked.

"Lots. I have them organized by category and can print them out if you like."

"How about asking the most important question first?"

"I didn't order them that way."

"Try."

We waited. Everyone except me was keen to hear what Will wanted to know about breasts. I had a feeling that this wasn't going to end well. The words *impending doom* came to mind.

"You all know that I saw Izzy naked and she didn't like that very much. But, since then, I can't stop thinking about her breasts. Could you tell me what Izzy's breasts would feel like if she ever let me touch them?"

Hank and Yolanda immediately went into a private conference and we sat in uncomfortable silence. Perhaps *stunned silence* would be a more apt description. Doc had once convinced me that I should explain the birds and bees to Will; was I now going to be the one assigned to tell him how my breasts would feel to his touch?

A young voice rising from a heating vent broke the silence. "I'd tell you about Mommy's but I can't remember anything about them any more."

"Yollie! See to your sister! She's supposed to be sleeping!"

Yollie stood up, paused, smirked at me and said to Will, "I expect mine would feel much the same as Izzy's if you..."

"Yollie!" Hank erupted out of his chair. "That's disgraceful."

I found myself charging down the stairs behind Yollie, pinching at every bit of flesh I could find and yelling at the top of my lungs, "You keep your breasts away from my boyfriend. If he's going to touch any breasts, they're going to be mine, you witch." She yelled back about how she had had no takers from any boys yet, and if I didn't feel like taking pity on Will, why shouldn't she be a good sister to her new brother? I may have lost my mind after that.

I heard afterwards that Wolf told Will that he was probably going to get lucky soon. Hank sent him to the top of the mast to keep watch. Meanwhile Yolanda had to race down the stairs to pull two shrieking daughters apart while Winnie was wailing that she didn't want her sisters to fight so hard.

I gather that Hank answered all of Will's questions and the next day, everything was back to normal except whenever Wolf walked by me and flashed his bare chest at me, or whenever Yollie walked by and muttered, "Real sisters would share."

I wore heavy, shapeless sweatshirts until Wolf and Yollie told me that they had been only teasing me and then I felt stupid about the whole thing.

Chapter 3

From Izzy's journals: May 3.

Hank and Yolanda were packing up to return to their compound. Yolanda said that although the young children were usually better behaved than her teenagers, they had been on their own far too long even for such mature children. She had a straight face when she said it but I was getting better at reading the Y-women and figured she was teasing me. I made the sound of a snarling mountain cat and clawed the air in response. She smiled.

Our little family holiday was apparently over. I was going to miss Winnie, but it was time to get back to fighting Zzyk and I'd find that hard to do if I could play with Winnie all day long. Wolf was out taking reconnaissance pictures of the DPS military installations and would check in with us on a regular basis. He planned to take pictures every week so that he'd know if there had been any important changes.

Yollie left early this morning to see if the DPS technician that Doc had left sitting on a deserted Aboriginal Nation mountainside was still there. He was, so she pretended to be a local from a nearby village and hiked up to his camp. It was very rudimentary with only a fire pit and a few charred ashes. He asked her if she was from the Wilizy and Yollie said that she didn't know what that was. After the technician described me, Yollie said that some scrawny redhead had blundered into Aboriginal Nation territory some months ago towing an Albertan fugitive without a brain-band. The Aboriginal Council had ruled that she and her friend had to leave and never come back. All the frontier posts had been instructed to capture them and turn them over to the DPS if they returned. That news didn't appear to discourage him.

Yollie volunteered to take the technician down to her village and start him on the way to the coast, but he turned her down; said that he had been told to sit tight and the Wilizy would come by. Yollie pointed out that even summer days have cold nights. She took him into the woods and loaded his arms up with dry wood, in the process touching his arms a lot and getting a good reading. He was definitely hiding something. She checked that he had the means to start a fire and warned him that no aboriginal was going to help him so long as he was wearing a brain-band; told him that to see how much nerve he had. She's watching him now to see what he's going to do.

Will is slinging over Manitoba right now on his way further east. He's installing communication repeater stations high in the sky over each province so that Will and I can still talk to the duty officer on the Wilizy when we are in New York, a trip that we'll be making soon. It only took him a couple of hours to come up with the solution and design the device. He's putting the repeaters inside small slings locked invisibly into a static position over a provincial landmark. Will expects to have the entire network of repeater stations installed through to New York by nightfall and will be home before midnight.

Doc and Granny offered to be Will's back-up in case something went wrong on his installation trip, but they were also hoping to have a little honeymoon. They had travelled by bus to Regina many years ago for a sports tournament but had never been any further east. I warned them about the perils in New York so I don't think they'll visit the city, but they may take a long look around what remains of Eastern Canada after Will is finished.

Yollie just came in to say that she knows what the DPS technician is hiding; gave me a quick summary. I called everyone back to the Wilizy for an evening meeting. I didn't want to interrupt Doc and Granny's honeymoon, but we really need Doc on this. It's going to be Wolf's operation to run. I have the broad outlines of the plan ready. Hank and Yolanda have agreed to bring three of their children into the operation and they're landing on the Wilizy deck now.

From Yollie's journals: May 3rd and 4th.

After I told Scrawny Butt what had happened on my morning visit to the technician—let's call him Dopey because he's not so swift—I returned to his mountain perch, hid inside my sling and waited to see what he would do. Dopey tried to pry his brain-band off but with no luck. That surprised me because I've seen discarded bands and their rivets are quite short. A little pressure should have popped them out quite easily. He rummaged through a small tool case that he had on his belt and found a miniature screwdriver that wasn't much help because the bands don't have a screw head to turn. Then, out came the jack knife and he started cutting at the flesh where the rivets would have been embedded, all the time mumbling some sort of mantra to help him cope with the pain, I guess. He was carving off bits of flesh, which was impressive by the way, and attacked all three rivets and eventually loosened them enough to pop them out. I looked at the bloody band later and the rivets looked long and nasty which may mean something to Scrawny Butt, but not to me.

Dopey but Brave mopped up a lot of blood with his shirt and then wrapped the shirt around his head to stop the bleeding. He looked at his bare chest and then pulled some cold ash from the fire pit and made some marks on his chest. Then, he used one of his water bottles to wipe the marks off. Since that left him with only two full bottles, and no source of fresh water, I will continue to call him Dopey.

I left to establish my own camp for the night. When I checked him again before nightfall, he was standing, bare-chested on a promontory, looking down the mountainside. I expect he was hoping for a return visit from yours truly. Probably love at first sight. Naturally, I obliged but not before zipping down below his line of vision first. I saw him watching me hoofing it up the mountain and then he turned away and went back to his camp.

When I saw him again, he was standing in front of his fire pit, both palms outstretched in a *Stop* position, which I did. He pointed to a black symbol on his chest. Bomb! He reinforced the message by pointing to himself and then making arm waves like a bomb going off. The message on his bloody forehead was equally

clear—he was a live microphone. I nodded that I understood and he beckoned me into the camp.

"The Wilizy aren't going to come, are they?" he asked.

"Not if that scrawny girl is the Wilizy. She's not allowed in our territory. I told you that this morning. You're going to starve here, or die of thirst first. Let me take you to a friend who can start you on your way to the coast."

"Do you know where the Wilizy might be?"

"I don't know anything about them, remember? If anybody knew, it would be the border patrol."

"Could you find out? And take me to where they are?" he added.

"Why do you want to see them so badly? They obviously don't want to see you."

"I wish to join them. I am willing to reveal information about the DPS computer systems but someone will have to help me find the Wilizy." All the time he was saying that, he was pointing at the bomb on his chest. OK, not so dopey after all.

"I can't take you but I'll see if someone else can. You should go somewhere you're wanted."

He ignored me.

"If I can find a guide, he'll be here shortly after sunrise tomorrow. He'll bring some food and gear. If no-one comes, head downhill until you find a stream, fill your water bottles, and follow the stream to a river. By that time, you will have passed some small villages. Ask for help travelling to the coast!"

I tossed a bottle and a food bar at his hands but he promptly fumbled and dropped them. Then, I walked away and reported to Scrawny Butt. She flew off somewhere in her sling for about an hour, and then called an emergency meeting for this evening. Everyone but Will is going to be at the meeting. He'll be on the eastern side of North America but will still be able to listen in and talk. I can't believe what that guy can do.

#

The next morning, I dropped my 8-year old brother, Mush-for-Brains, into Clumsy's camp while Clumsy was still sleeping. That would save the little munchkin a nasty hike up the mountainside. I'll have to talk with Doc about finding a better place to leave defectors if we ever get one again. *Mush-for-Brains* isn't my brother's real name, but it's what I call him when I'm feeling affectionate. I have other names I can call him, but they aren't so complimentary. His real name is *Mathias*.

We still didn't know where we're going to lead Clumsy. Wolf had pored over maps last night and had identified three possible sites that were reasonably close to us. We needed to keep Clumsy hiking for several days so that Wolf could prepare the battle site first, but we couldn't hike him too far or he'd be completely exhausted. Mush-for-Brains had the easiest leg today. Basically, straight south following an established trail.

Mush brought two packs with him into camp—one with food and water, and the other with better gear for Clumsy. My instructions to my brother were simple: don't answer any questions; don't volunteer any information; don't exhaust the city-boy.

Mush-for-Brains helped Clumsy set up camp that evening and then walked away without saying anything. I picked him up soon afterwards and delivered him to the Wilizy where he received a hero's welcome. I may have hugged him once or twice myself.

The Narrator: May 4.

"Ivan's on the move," Rick announced from the doorway into Zzyk's office.

"Walking or flying?" Zzyk responded without looking up from his paperwork.

"Walking."

"Do we know who's guiding him?"

"No. We're not hearing any voices now. Assume one or more aboriginal guides."

"Would this silence be normal?"

"It could be. We know from the female voice that they didn't want to help him. The guides might not even be walking anywhere near him. It's difficult to hear things over Ivan's laboured breathing."

"Mobilize the Special Operations Force. Insert them into the area tonight after dark. Make sure that no-one sees them or hears them."

Zzyk didn't need to worry about his SpOp force being discovered. The person on the Wilizy who was assigned to watch DPS garrisons was busy planning an operation. He had taken his surveillance pictures that morning and wasn't scheduled to take follow-up pictures for another week. The approaching battle would be over by then.

From Yollie's journals: May 5.

Day 2 was a repeat of the previous day except now we knew where we were going to take Clumsy and what was going to happen afterwards. I called it *Operation Woodchuck* and the name stuck. It seemed appropriate for what Wolf had in mind.

The hiking was tougher on the second day. A nasty mountain sat smack dab between where Clumsy was and where we wanted him to be. That meant he had to take the long way around. For some sections, he would have to crawl on hands and knees up a steep incline. Fortunately, it was deeply wooded so a slip wouldn't mean anything more than some skinned knees.

Assuming the guide's duties was Toe-Jam, my 9-year old brother, boringly called Theo by Mother. I have this agreement with Theo. I can call him Toe-Jam publicly, but I can't tell anyone why I named him that or else he will spill some beans that wouldn't do my reputation any good. So young, and already so sneaky. Like Mush, he set up Clumsy's camp and then disappeared into the darkness without indicating that he even spoke English, or whatever variation of it that he actually uses. I don't always understand what Theo is saying. He and his older brother, Lucas, often speak in code that only they understand. My nickname for Lucas is Lukety-Split because everything this kid does is at high speed. First to finish supper; first to be in line for dessert; first to try to get two desserts... Reese,

my other brother, has the opposite nature. Slow to react; slow to act. But, you don't want to get on his wrong side. I call him *Grease-Spot* because that's what he'll be like if you cross him. You won't be able to get him off of you.

It didn't take me long to deliver Toe-Jam to the Wilizy since it was hovering unseen in the sky above Clumsy's camp. Doc had been observing Clumsy through the Wilizy's telescope all day long, especially after Toe-Jam had used hand signals to tell Clumsy that he stunk and should take a little bath in a creek. Ice cream was trotted out for the second night in a row. Everyone in my family loves ice cream. I didn't hug my brother this time. I had things in my pockets that I wanted to keep.

The Narrator: May 5.

"Ivan has settled in for the night," Rick announced.

"Map," Zzyk ordered. A few minutes later, both were looking intently at a large-scale map on a wall in the operations room.

"Starting location on May 3rd here," Rick said and inserted a pushpin. "May 4th camp site here," and another push pin followed. "You can see from the map that they were avoiding a mountain today and couldn't take a direct route, but they ended up eventually right here." The third pin followed.

"Almost a direct line if you ignore the detour," Zzyk observed. "This small lake is the logical destination. It straddles the Aboriginal Nation-Alberta border."

"Ivan is an hour's hike away from that lake. There's a clearing on the other side that would serve as a good campsite. Everything else in the area is heavily treed."

"He'll leave camp at dawn?"

"That's been the pattern."

"Can he swim?"

Rick shrugged. "Whoever's guiding him will have thought of crossing the lake. Will you attack immediately after they arrive tomorrow or wait for night?" Rick saw Zzyk's eyes glaze over, so he sat down and waited. *This will take 15 minutes, he thought. You should attack immediately before the Wilizy can disappear.*

Zzyk straightened 20 minutes later. "Eighty-six percent probability of success if we attack as soon as Ivan settles into their camp. Twenty percent probability if we delay and they use that time to move away from the lake. The proximity of this camp to Edmonton suggests that Izzy came here after escaping from the compound. Zurt has had ample time to join her. Sixty percent probability of catching both of them tomorrow. Alert SpOp that they need to be ready to move at dawn. Send the attack signal to them 15-minutes after Ivan arrives in their camp tomorrow."

"Contingencies?"

"Not needed. Ivan is going to cross that lake. We're going to be in their camp before they realize we're in the area."

Chapter 4

From Yollie's journals: May 6.

Today called for the smartest brother I had. Normally, that would be Wolf, but he was establishing firing lines and setting up defensive positions and couldn't be spared. A worthy replacement was 13-year old Jack who I had christened *Abernathy*. Mother had named him Jack after one of her cousins, but that name had lasted only until the would-be Jack found out that he could name himself anything he wanted to. Mother had resorted to posting a little sign on the fridge that read *Jack's name is ____ today*, but she soon became tired of changing the note every other day. Everyone just called him Nat. He was supposed to take a permanent name when he became an adult and we were all curious what it was going to be. Currently, he was trying out *Claw* but that probably wouldn't last. Nat is as much as Claw person as I am a Shrinking Violet person. I had chosen *Abernathy* for him because it sounded different, but not overly insulting. I hadn't been able to find enough dirt on that brother to warrant one of my usual nicknames. I told you he was smart.

Nat was expected to speak in his role and he had to do it with conviction. As well as with the help of Granny's flashcards. We wanted the DPS to attack us in broad daylight, so Wolf had planned for today's hike to last only an hour. During that hour, Nat walked backwards in front of Clumsy displaying Granny's flashcards that told him what was going to happen at the gravel bank overlooking the lake and then at the lake itself.

For this final day of Operation Woodchuck, we had split into two groups. On the A.N. side of the lake, we had Nat, Clumsy and Doc. The Wilizy was also on this side of the lake. Granny has had some medical training so she was in the Wilizy ready to serve as a nurse if Doc needed her. Mother was in charge of the Wilizy and was supervising Mush-for-Brains, Toe-Jam, and Winnie who were operating the ship's telescopes. I was on guard duty in my sling and would stay in the A.N. until Nat and Clumsy had safely left the area.

On the Alberta side of the lake, Dad, Izzy, and Will were in the air and watching their respective horizons in case the DPS had anticipated our destination and sent forces earlier than expected. Wolf was now in charge of the entire group from his high invisible hover over the center of the lake.

Nat delivered Clumsy to his deathbed right on the dot. I knew he would. That kid has a clock in his brain.

#

"This is about as far as I can go," Nat said to Clumsy from the top of the steep bank overlooking the lake.

"What do I do now?"

"Can you swim?"

"Not much."

"There's a log down on the beach. Roll it into the water, hang onto it, and then kick your way to the other side. Aim for the very tall tree just on the edge of the water. See it?"

Clumsy followed the line of Nat's finger. "Yes."

"I'll give you final directions on the beach."

"I have to climb down here?"

"It's steep and slippery but it's the only trail down."

Clumsy took off his shirt and wrapped it around his head and face. He sat down at the top of the path to the lake his guide had selected for him. It was indeed steep, contained a slight S-curve, and had a gravel and sand surface. Clumsy lay down on his back, nodded that he was ready, and Nat pushed on his head to accelerate him down the gouge in the bank as though he were a human toboggan. (The toboggan is one of Granny's teases. Supposedly, they were sleds that the ancients used to slide down snow-covered hills. She had gushed about them so often that I almost believed that they existed. But, snow? In Calgary? Really?)

Clumsy's back would be pretty much shredded by the time he reached the bottom but at least he hadn't flipped over onto his front. The shirt around his head was to protect his face if that had happened. Clumsy had been encouraged to make any noises that he felt like making, so it was a noisy descent. When it was finished, Clumsy lay at the bottom of the trail, his body from his waist down in the water, and his bloody back lying on the narrow sand shelf below the cliff. Doc was in the water waiting for him, his medical bag in one hand, and a heavy thick pad in the other. He'd kneel on the pad to avoid leaving prints in the sand. Doc unwrapped the shirt from Clumsy's face and then rolled him onto his front.

"Mister! Mister! Are you OK?" This from Nat at the top of the cliff who didn't have to act to sound concerned.

Doc was searching Clumsy's lower back for a small pale scar that he had seen in the telescope the day before. Alcohol swabs cleared away the sand, a scalpel cut into the flesh, and Doc swabbed out the incision as best as he could. Clumsy groaned even louder.

"Mister. Mister! Can you get up?"

Doc attacked a faint white scar by Clumsy's hairline with similar sound effects. Again, Doc swabbed the area as best he could, but hesitated. *Will, I need you overhead*, he thought.

Seconds later, Will was there—invisibly of course—and their conversation was all mind-to-mind.

Will, as far as I can tell, this is the wireless receiver and microphone that captures everything that this guy says or hears. Take a look.

Doc swabbed the incision near the hairline and opened the wound even further, which brought forth more sound effects.

Looks like it, thought Will who was using a magnifying filament from inside his sling.

This thing in his back has to be the explosive but I don't see a detonator. Perhaps it doesn't need one. I can't find any wires at all in what remains of his back.

"Hang on mister," Nat screeched. "I'm coming down. Don't move!"

I'll scan his body for foreign bodies. While Will was doing this, Nat had reached the small beach and was unpacking a second set of flashcards.

Will summarized. *These are the only two foreign devices in his body that my filaments can find. The top device is the wireless receiver and microphone. If the DPS wants to explode the bomb in his lower back, they have to send a signal to the wireless receiver, which in turn will send a signal to the bomb and it will then explode. If the wireless receiver is prevented from sending the "explode now" signal, he should be safe. However, if the bomb is moved away from the receiver, one of the devices may be programmed to act automatically. This means you can't remove the bomb without possibly setting it off. You should actually sew him up so that it can't be accidentally dislodged. Proceed as planned with the receiver. When it's dead, the bomb will be too.*

Doc nodded, taped the incision in the back temporarily, and looked at Nat. *We're ready. Show him what he has to say.*

"I'm here, Mister. Are you all right? Oh my gosh, your back is all bloody."

"I'm alright," Clumsy read. "Hurts. Do you see any big gouges?"

"No, but you have gobs of blood everywhere."

"Help me put my arms over that log."

Nat and Doc did just that and then pulled the log into the lake far enough that Clumsy could kick his legs.

"Mister, why don't I take you home with me? My mom can fix you up. You can cross the lake later. You look really hurt."

Clumsy read the final card adding some expressive pauses and grunts. "Can't. Have to go now. Clear out, kid, before you're caught. Tell me where to go, first."

"Land as close as you can to that tall tree. That tree is in Alberta. The beach is mined but you'll see a small stream coming down the slope, and that hasn't been mined. The Wilizy placed a removable patch in the fencing just above the stream. Slide through the fence there and don't forget to re-attach the patch. The Wilizy's camp is at 2 o'clock from where you slip through the fence but you have to go through some heavy woods first. You'll find a good-sized clearing, but the Wilizy hide under the trees to the edge of it. I know they were in their camp last week because they helped someone cross the border. I'll swim beside your log to make sure you're headed in the right direction, but I can't go too far."

Doc gave Nat a thumbs-up for a perfect recitation of the speech he had been rehearsing the previous night.

Clumsy started to kick paddle across the lake. It was going to take him a long time with Doc standing in front of the log and stopping it from going anywhere. But the kicking and splashing sounds were real. Meanwhile, Nat kept sloshing water into Clumsy's open wound in his hairline where the wireless receiver was embedded. Clumsy added a lot of groans.

Soon, a bright spark short-circuited the electronics in the wounds and Doc announced that they could talk now. It only took Doc a few minutes to remove both devices and slap some bandages on the worst scrapes. The DPS would be on their way to the Wilizy hideout soon, so time was running short. Doc gave his patient a final set of instructions. "You have to move quickly now. Leave the log where it is. Stay in the water with Nat. There's a rock shelf 100 meters down the shore where you can come out of the lake without leaving footprints. Nat will take you to a safe place where I can fix up your back properly. Someone from the Wilizy will be in touch with you after you've had time to recover."

Doc collected all the bloody swabs and Clumsy's shirt while Nat and his charge waded through the shallow water and then disappeared into the woods. Doc sat in his sling, towed the log more than half way across the lake, and then flicked out of sight. The DPS would find evidence of the accident and Clumsy's and Nat's footprints would show where they had gone into the water. There would be no other footprints to find, either on this side of the lake or on the other. However, they would find the hole in their security fence that Wolf had cut yesterday. The lonely log floating in the lake would present a compelling story. At least, I thought it would.

Doc joined the group in the Wilizy while I took my position on the other side of the lake and began scanning my sector of the horizon. I don't think I'll call the DPS technician Clumsy any more. He must want to join us badly; I couldn't help but notice that he's just as muscular in the chest as Will.

#

The actual battle was anti-climatic. The DPS attacked with four waves of paragliders who were quite adept at landing noiselessly in the Wilizy's clearing and then hiding in the trees. Before they could attack an empty meadow, Wolf closed his trap with some powerful explosions that chucked a lot of wood around. Hence, the operational name *Woodchuck*. When it was done, the DPS were inside four huge, prison walls of felled trees, split lumber, chunks of wood, and other associated debris. They would be able to crawl out of their prison eventually, but not quickly and not without exposing themselves to fire from our hidden soldiers—all four of us. Dad, Will, Izzy and I were not only invisible inside our slings, but we were hiding inside a dark, dense forest behind a few tons of gigantic toothpicks scattered hither and yon. Wolf boomed out some warnings through a portable PA system, we displayed some red laser dots on some chests, and Will and Dad gave a few non-lethal examples of what would happen if anyone moved without permission. The DPS gave up without firing a shot.

Wolf lined them up in military formation and had two soldiers put all their weapons in a pile that Will destroyed in an impressive explosion. One by one they put their outer clothes on the fringe of the clearing and rejoined their formation. Only when we were sure that she'd encounter no hidden weapons did Scrawny Butt land in her stolen DPS helicopter and appear in her white and emerald clothes and her flowing red hair to inspect their formation. Unfortunately, they didn't measure up and Izzy had to downgrade each of them with a W cut on one cheek and a Z cut on the other. Just a little memento of their battle with the Wilizy. Thirty-one of Zzyk's soldiers would now be unavailable for public duty, or at least that was the theory. Izzy didn't think that Zzyk would want to have his soldiers ridiculed in public by having our victory badge on their face. I didn't say anything in the debriefing, but Will told me privately that Zzyk wouldn't care what happened to his soldiers, or what the people thought. If anyone would know what Zzyk was thinking, it would be Will. I think it was just an excuse for Scrawny Butt to wear her fancy-dancy clothes and get her hair all dolled up.

Izzy didn't put the initials on the 32nd soldier and that was a surprise to all of us. She was going to W-Z the DPS commander last, but changed her mind when she saw the stricken look on his face. She pulled him aside and asked, "Do you

know what Zzyk is going to do to you when your reinforcements arrive?" He swallowed hard in response. "I'll trade you your life, but not your freedom, for information. Interested?"

Izzy led him into her helicopter and we could see her heading east, further into Alberta. However, she didn't go far before stuffing her captive and the copter into a safe hole for the night. Wolf told the other soldiers that they could get dressed so that they'd be presentable for the arrival of their reinforcements who would undoubtedly want to congratulate them for not having wasted a single bullet. We made a few rustles in the brush as we departed and then boarded the Wilizy that by now was far away and very high. Still close enough though to see what was happening below. The youngsters on the telescopes reported that 19 of the soldiers tried to desert into A.N. land, but we don't know how far they got.

We had to wait for Izzy to arrive before starting our celebration, but she wanted to debrief everyone right away while our memories were fresh. I thought that the operation had gone perfectly and had even congratulated Wolf on a wonderful ambush although I almost broke my jaw squeezing the words out. What did we have to debrief? They lost, we won. Break out the ice cream.

From Izzy's journals: May 5.

Yollie was hot to celebrate right away, but I stomped on that hard. We shouldn't be celebrating. We should be counting our lucky stars.

First, the positives. I congratulated Wolf for his creative trap and complete control of the battleground. We had captured 32 soldiers without a mortal injury, so that was impressive. I also said that the kids were great, Granny was a big help in the Wilizy, and Hank disabled two soldiers with pinpoint shots before they could even climb to their feet. Will did the same to a soldier who was trying to crawl away.

I didn't say anything about Yolanda letting the Wilizy drift far too low over an active bomb, nor did I say anything public to Will about how close he had taken himself to that bomb. I'm sure that he can make a long distance magnifying lens and I'll suggest that to him privately. I don't think he has any concept of personal danger. Doc had also been way too close to that bomb, but no-one could have talked Doc out of doing that operation.

Then came the negatives. I was going to take the blame but I had to impress on them that everyone has to be ready to raise concerns in the planning meetings, to think defensively, to think strategically. Well, just to think, really.

All of us were surprised that Zzyk had attacked from the west. I should have predicted that. I had focused too much on making sure that I gave Wolf a free rein and so I didn't run through all the possible threats that we'd face. I stressed to them that we must always expect Zzyk's attacks to be unconventional. We must always expect, and plan for, something treacherous.

I tried to emphasize what a threat Zzyk was. When we think of Zs, we think of Will. Passive, smart, but not dangerous. Zzyk may not be able to match Will in creating scientific marvels, but he's very smart at keeping power through any means whatsoever. I told them that we must always be prepared for multiple

layers of duplicity. After all, at the same time that Zzyk was holding me hostage and winning that battle, he was also wiring up the technician with a bomb in case I wriggled out of his trap.

Yollie was all mushy about the technician and had praised him for being willing to shred his back in order to join us. She would have proposed inviting him into the group right then, I think. Some of the others were also impressed by what he had done; had to stop that thinking right away.

"Just because Zzyk trolls his bait in front of our noses, and just because that bait told us that he's a lowly technician who made a mistake of spreading my cartoon picture around, that doesn't mean that the man with the shredded back is that technician. We don't even know if such a person even existed. We know nothing about this man other than what Zzyk wants us to know." I may have become a little heated; everyone was so gullible!

"Look at how easy it was for the technician to warn us that he was carrying a bomb. Look at how obvious the incision scars were. Look at how easily the devices were removed. Isn't it obvious that Zzyk wanted his plot to be uncovered? No treacherous man like Zzyk would make such a simplistic plan and expect it to work on us. Now that we've freed this poor man, Zzyk is hoping that we'll hide the technician from his wrath—which we have done. He's now expecting that we will bring the technician into our group. The real bomb that we have to fear is not the black disc that Doc removed from the technician's back. The real threat is the technician himself."

I had to stop for a breath. They were staring at me, still not believing that a man would openly say that he was going to kill us when, in fact, he was going to kill us. I started what I hoped would be a clinching argument.

"Yollie noticed how hard it had been for the technician to remove his brain-band. I went back to his camp and dug up that band. It's far too dangerous to bring here—and perhaps Zzyk was hoping that I'd do that. We'd probably be dead right now, if I had. But, I took pictures."

They crowded around the table and looked closely. No-one had seen anything like it. It certainly wasn't the usual brain-band that IOF citizens wore; nor was it like the gold brain-bands that IOF executives wore. "Why would a lowly technician be given a brain-band the likes of which we've never seen before?" I asked the group.

No-one had anything to say.

"Why do you think he did?" Wolf asked.

"I have no idea," I admitted.

#

I found the rest of the debriefing easier to manage. We had messed up, but there were solutions. I backed off and let the group work it out.

We were surprised by the use of the para-gliders. We defeated them because we were expecting an attack, because we were scanning all quadrants of the horizon, and because it was daylight. Had those conditions been different, and had that clearing been our real camp, we would have been surprised and defeated. Long telescopes can't see little dots gliding through a pitch-black sky.

The presence of a well trained, para-gliding attack force that we didn't know existed underscores the need for Wolf to collect intelligence. As a starting point, he'll be part of the captured DPS officer's interrogation. But, we need information on the DPS garrisons daily. That attack force came from somewhere, travelled into A.N territory, camped there, and we didn't know a thing.

Also coming out of the debriefing were three recommendations that I liked a lot.

(1) The ship must always be kept high in the sky when we are in battle mode. This will reduce any risk of damage to the Wilizy and its personnel.

(2) Will is going to develop long-range sensors that are always active and which can warn Wilizy officers when a potential threat is detected. He's also going to tie some weapons to the long range sensors so that attacking objects can be destroyed before they approach too close to cause us damage.

(3) The ship will become our permanent battle command center with physical space on it converted for that purpose. Yolanda and Granny have been designated as the Wilizy's master and system-wide communicator during battles and all the youngsters will be trained to operate our navigation, communication and sensor equipment. Their visible presence in the command center will remind the navigational crew to keep the Wilizy as high above the battlefield as they can manage.

I didn't mention Yollie's failure to conduct a broad security sweep even once during the three days that the youngsters were guiding the technician to the ambush site. You always do a broad sweep when you're planning to camp in a potentially dangerous area. She would know this. In retrospect, and I take the blame for not thinking of this earlier, Zzyk had data from the technician's bug that would have told him exactly where the technician and his guide were at all times. He also had a battle group setting up in that same area. He could have captured our guide quite easily but perhaps chose not to because he was after bigger targets.

Yollie's mental lapse created a serious gap in our defensive cover. We'll have long-range sensors soon and that should prevent this kind of mistake from being fatal, but I do wonder how much I can trust her. Wolf is so efficient, and smart, and calculating. Yollie is, well—she can be a goof-ball. Also, she has an obvious attraction to the technician who is almost certainly an enemy agent. How will this physical attraction affect her ability to read him?

Yollie's readings will probably be the only warning we'll get when Zzyk activates the technician. But if all she can see is a cute guy, will there be a warning? Granny and Yolanda can't read people outside their own age groups all that well, so does that mean that we are totally reliant on a goof-ball to give us advance warning? Not being able to trust Yollie means that I will have to keep the technician far away from our operations and none of us can ever be physically close to him. All he'd have to do is plant a miniature tracking device on somebody's clothes. What happens when Zzyk sees that his device is floating in the air but there's no visible body holding it up? At that point, we'll lose our secret weapon and we'll be doomed.

Chapter 5

The Narrator: May 9.

You may be wondering what Hank and Yolanda's family looked like. Unlike Will and Izzy who had their images broadcast widely during their war with Zzyk, no visual records existed that showed Hank, Yolanda or their children at this time in their lives. I know their first names, and for the children, I know at least approximately when they were born. Other than reiterating their aboriginal heritage, there's not much else that I can write that will allow you to visualize the family as they were in 2082. I was unable to find any biographical data at all on Doc and Granny.

I did discover that Yolanda was about 37 when Operation Woodchuck was executed. Of course, no formal A.N. birth or marriage records were kept during this time, and even if there had been, Hank would not have allowed any records to be made of his family. Remember that Hank and his family were members of the Aboriginal Nation's border patrol, which was facing a powerful tyrant who was casting greedy glances westward. Hank knew that any information that Zzyk obtained about his family could endanger all of their lives.

However, I did discover from scraps of anecdotal data that Hank and Yolanda were sweethearts in school although Hank was anywhere from two to four years older than Yolanda. At some point, both left school at about the same time. I know that they worked together briefly before they took up residence in a small B.C. valley in about 2064. Wolf was born there in 2065. When the Aboriginal Nation became a distinct entity in 2066, that part of B.C. became Aboriginal Nation land. Hank and Yolanda both joined the Aboriginal Nation's border patrol at that time. Yollie was the first of their children to be born in Aboriginal Nation land in 2066. The other six followed soon afterwards—all were born in their home in that tiny valley.

Like my readers, I know the name of the small village where H&Y took up residence and where in the mountains it is located. Even now, decades after the Wilizy's war with Zzyk and the DPS has ended, I am prevented from seeing details of their compound from land or from air. I didn't test the compound's defenses. I am dedicated to bringing history alive for my readers, but I would like to remain alive while I do that.

I can give you a sense of what the village looked like back in the 2080s before the Wilizy legend began. Their village was constructed along the pattern of other Aboriginal Nation border patrol villages at that time. Patrol members had real, normal houses with all the modern conveniences and appliances. Those of you who have imagined that they lived in wigwams and cooked over an open fire need to open your minds. H&Y's village had six houses. Four of them were nestled together in a tight square so that they could offer mutual help in the event of an attack by the DPS. All four houses were one story high and were interconnected below ground by escape tunnels that included weapon storage areas. All four houses had living quarters underground. The heavy logs that formed their

exteriors provided some degree of safety against conventional weaponry as it existed at this time. All villagers could use a meadow adjoining the square as pasture land.

You will recall that all of the exotic and highly lethal weapons of the early 21st century disappeared or rusted away after the oil-based world ended in chaos. During this period, many people in the remoter areas of the A.N. carried conventional pistols to protect themselves. Long guns were also favoured if they could be found since they were the most deadly against attackers. They were also very useful for keeping the family supplied with meat, but all members of the Aboriginal Nation were adept with bow and arrows. People trained as snipers were very valuable assets to a community because they could keep people fed in hard times. I know for a certainty that Hank had received such training. He undoubtedly passed this knowledge on to his children and I found some evidence that Yolanda was highly proficient as well.

The original residence of the first settler in that tiny valley was also part of the village. It was set aside a little distance from both Hank and Yolanda's compound and the residential square. This two-story building was destroyed when the Wilizy's battle control center fell to the ground and exploded on top of it in the defining battle of the war. Within a week of that battle, all signs of the wreckage of both the battle command center and the pioneer house had been erased. But, I'm getting ahead of myself, and of course, all of my readers will be well aware of that particular event.

H&Y's home compound is still intact, but most of it is underground. Very little can be seen from an extremely high fly-over, and that's all that anyone has been able to do these many years. Similar to the other A.N. patrol log houses, it was one story high above ground. I can tell you that it was large enough to accommodate H&Y's family with the adults and each child having their own self-contained and highly defensible underground bedroom stockade, for the sake of a better word. Some of the underground compound was built into the mountain that protected the rear of their compound. Given Hank's position as the head of the Aboriginal Nation's southeastern border patrol, he had sufficient income to construct anything he wanted for the defense of his family. However, it's highly likely that the A.N. government just gave him construction materials. We know that they went to great lengths to ensure that he and his family could not be found, and if they were discovered, that they would survive an attack from Zzyk's army. We know that Hank was invited to quarterly meetings with B.C. military brass near Surrey. For these meetings, he was picked up by an A.N. military copter and returned in the same fashion. It would have been possible for that copter to transport heavy building materials and explosives from B.C.'s population centers to H&Y's compound.

If the DPS attempted a ground attack on Hank's home, the compound was surrounded by wilderness and it had an underground passage into that wilderness. Hank and his family had access to sufficient arms hidden in the woods to defend themselves at least for a short time. However, we know that they had taught their children to flee first. All were trained to live in the wild on their own and could find their way to a central meeting place far from the compound.

Caches of food, water, and clothing were hidden along the route to that meeting location.

What follows is my attempt to describe how Hank and Yolanda may have interacted with each other when they were alone. I have no written journals to base their conversation on, so this part of their biography is admittedly fictional. However, I do believe that Hank and Yolanda may have talked together something like this.

#

It was a few days after the success of Operation Woodchuck and Hank and Yolanda were in their Friday night, pre-bedtime ritual back at their home compound. Both looked forward to their Friday evenings as a time that they could be together without constantly having to answer to demands for their time or attention. The youngsters were all asleep. Wolf and Yollie were on Wilizy assignments and had not returned to the compound yet.

Hank passed the can of gun oil over to Yolanda, who was motioning him for it, and then went back to his own cleaning. Friday night, children in bed, parents all alone inside a lockable room. What better time to . . . clean the family's guns? Frontier living at its best.

Hank and Yolanda tried to restrict their maintenance work on the family's armaments to when they were alone. Seeing all the weaponry together in one room might be overwhelming for the youngsters. Mathias was having nightmares again and they didn't want to make things worse for him. He had handled his guide duties well, but something could be going on in his head that they didn't know about. They'd know better in time. Meanwhile, having this routine in a nice warm room was relaxing.

"Are you going to talk to Yollie about that thing?" Yolanda asked.

"About forgetting to make a wide security sweep when she was on patrol?"

"Yes. What did you think I meant?"

"Talking to her about that technician." Hank replied. "I told you how intently she was staring at him when she was on guard duty. That's why she didn't stay focused on what she should have been doing."

"So, are you going to talk to her about either of those things?"

"No. Are you?"

"No. Not me. Why won't you?" Yolanda trotted out what she thought would be the clinching argument. "You're the one who trained her. Inadequately, it would appear."

"I shouldn't talk to her because I might let it slip that I had done the sweeps for her and was hanging around invisibly watching her when she was dreaming about finding a boy friend. Turns out that there wasn't any danger from the para-gliders acting prematurely, so her lapse wasn't fatal. Zzyk would have kept the two operations separate—he's never been one to tell his subordinates more than they needed to know. Still, she should have conducted the sweeps. You should talk to her. You're her mother."

"I'm the evil mother, remember? The one who gave her all the genes she says that she's OK with but still dislikes. If I mentioned her lapse, she'd ask me how I knew. It would take her about one second to realize that you had been checking

up on her. Then, she'd sulk for days. Challenging her on this wouldn't change anything. She wants desperately to have a boy friend that doesn't know about her big curse in life. The technician qualifies. My telling her one more time that her natural beauty will come in a few years isn't going to help."

"Did your mom tell you that?"

"Sure. You never noticed me at all when I was 13, remember? Chubby, walking around like a gooney bird, hostile to everyone and everything. She told me what would happen when I got older but she was the evil mother so I lived in a bowl of antagonism. Two years later, you started to notice me, remember?"

"Vividly. Wondered where the beautiful new girl in school had come from."

"So, we agree that you were a blind jerk when you were in school?"

"Guilty as charged. But, that must mean that you had bad taste in picking me."

"You were breathing. I was desperate. What can I say?"

Narrator: This light-hearted banter between Hank and Yolanda was common knowledge among those who knew the family. I won't bother writing in descriptive details like "she said, smilingly" so that you'll know that they aren't arguing. Nor will I tell you that the two were stripping and cleaning weapons at a quick pace. When you live inside an arsenal, you learn to clean and banter at the same time.

"Does Izzy know that Yollie forgot to do the wide area sweeps?" Yolanda asked.

"Probably. I expect that's why she emphasized Zzyk's duplicity so strongly in the debriefing."

"You think the technician is a spy?"

"Yup. 99% certain."

"Why the 1%?"

"Because I wonder why he would carry a bomb so willingly towards what could be his certain death."

"Know the answer?"

"Perhaps. Izzy did a good job on the debriefing, didn't she?"

"She did, and why are you changing the subject?"

"Yollie and Izzy aren't going to get along together, are they?"

"Not for a while and you're still trying to change the subject. Try not to be so obvious."

"Did you have another chance to talk to Izzy about birth control?"

"Still being obvious. I gave her details this time and showed her some things, but she's not interested. She reacts with outrage to the idea of sex outside of marriage and says that she isn't a slut."

"I can't help here, can I?"

"Nope. You're virtually identical to the male dissidents that she lived with when she was growing up. Gun fanatics, wife beaters ... I could go on but you might become enraged and teach me my place."

"You left out suave and mysterious."

"Rub my nose for me, would you?"

Hank did. "Itch?"

"Nope. I had a tremendous urge to snort and didn't want to blow gun oil all over the table."

#

"Saw you nail that soldier that was trying to pull out his pistol."

"Little weasel. Thought that we wouldn't shoot!"

"You still have the good eye."

"Automatic reflexes," Hank shrugged.

"You know that Izzy is a pacifist at heart."

"So, we protect her until she isn't."

#

"So, why would the technician go willingly to his death?"

"Why don't you slip on your invisibility cloak, stand behind him, and read him. You know where he's stashed."

"From that cloak, it would be like trying to see through a marshmallow."

"Speaking of which, is Winnie's daily marshmallow quota going up from five to six on her birthday."

"I guess. She's good about rationing them. This year, she'll have two in the morning, two in mid afternoon, and two before going to bed, or at least that's what she told me."

"I've never seen anyone who liked marshmallows so much. These things aren't easy to find, you know. We should tell her that marshmallows are unhealthy for children once they turn 6."

"Go ahead, oh lying wife beater."

"Or just hide them."

"So that you could still have yours and she won't know?"

"Worth a try."

"Wouldn't work. I've already been playing Hide and Find with her and I can't hide the marshmallows anywhere that she doesn't find them. Really quickly."

"Betcha I could hide them. Mere women do not have the hiding skills that men do."

"I've hidden what I think about suave men these many years. Besides, I have no hiding places left inside the compound that she doesn't already know about."

"Still the outside."

"You're on."

"Usual stakes?"

"Yup. You're going to lose, oh lying wife beater. I think she can smell them."

Chapter 6

From Izzy's journals: May 12.

Yollie read the technician and reported that he's a decent man. I don't believe it. So, we've hidden him in a village in the corner of southeastern A.N. that's within one day's hike into Alberta, Washington, or Idaho. Aborigines in this area have had smuggling trails through this area forever. It's the safest place any of us could think of.

We're hiding him in the same village where we stashed the four IOF infants that we rescued from Zzyk. The family caring for them are Granny's distant cousins and they reassured us that they would keep a close eye on the technician. The wild mountainous area should also keep him penned in until we know what to do with him.

I made it clear to everyone that only Yollie could visit the technician, and only briefly, and only to take other readings to see if his status changes. I'm hoping that she comes to her senses. The spy already knows about Yollie, Doc, the three guides, me, and of course Will although he has yet to see him. I don't want him to learn about any other members. I made it a big deal that he can't have any other visitors and warned them again that the man was a danger to us.

Hank helped with our captured DPS Commander. Through his work with the border control, Hank has some contacts in the B.C. military. That made it easy for Hank, Wolf and me to travel to their military complex in Surrey and turn the commander over to them for interrogation and then confinement. After all, the Commander had taken his forces well into A.N.'s territory and, by treaty, B.C. and A.N. territories are considered one and the same if either is invaded. Hank and Wolf will participate in the interrogation, but Hank had suggested that my time would be better spent meeting with their upper brass instead.

It was quite a meeting. I was introduced to the top three officers in their armed forces. A government official was also present as an observer. We met in their military complex under where the old Guildford Shopping Center used to be. According to my personal tour guide, Surrey had lots of shopping centers before the oil drought. The centers' parking lots and empty condemned stores serve as a good bomb cover in the event of an air attack, so they built bunkers deep under almost all of them.

The military brass had heard of the Wilizy and was very curious about us. After they stopped trying to wriggle information out of me about our forces, armaments, and capabilities, we got along. I told them that we had severely weakened Zzyk's capability to attack B.C. and itemized exactly what we had destroyed and what we thought remained. They were happy to hear that we controlled the woods and mountains on their eastern border since Zzyk's forces would have to travel through or over those areas to invade British Columbia. I offered to warn them if we saw signs of any military build-ups that might warrant their attention. Depending on what we had available at the time, I also offered to help the B.C. military defend themselves if Zzyk became ambitious again. That got me the names and contact information for some very important military people scattered throughout their command structure.

They weren't surprised to hear that I was expecting some services from B.C. in return. They were quite happy to make sure the DPS commander would never see the light of day again but would spare his life as I had requested. They also agreed to roll-up Zzyk's spy network that had captured Will and me at the dance. They had identified them all long ago, but were reluctant to antagonize Zzyk when he could invade the province any time he felt like it. "You won't have to worry about spies when you visit B.C. again, which we hope will be often," the officer with the most gold braid said. I thought that was very gracious of him. I didn't ask if that

meant that the spies would be imprisoned or killed; thought about it on the way home and discovered, to my surprise, that I didn't care.

Unhappy that they weren't providing us much in return for putting Zzyk's attack plans on hold, the military men kept offering me more help. Mostly weapons, of course. Gold if I wanted it. Medical supplies. Access to specialized military personnel. I turned them all down, but just for the time being. Then, I stared at the silent government official who had been sitting in the shadows in the windowless meeting room. I don't think that I'd like to work all day long in an underground bunker; it would be too dark and a little bit stinky and depressing.

The gray-suited man had the military men saluting him and groveling out the door quickly. "Do you have something else in mind?" he asked me in a gravelly voice.

"I do," I replied and then gave him some papers listing some of our goals and how B.C. could help us achieve them.

"We will try to do all of this for you," he announced without hesitation after scanning it quickly.

Who was this man?

"We might be able to complete it by the deadlines indicated but I will have to talk to the people who will be doing the work before making a commitment."

I had given generous time lines, so was pleased to hear it all might be possible.

"We need to talk about money," he rasped.

"Later," I said. "After we know for sure that you have the personnel and equipment."

"Fair enough. Will we be seeing you in your white and emerald green any time soon?"

"Yes, I do believe you will."

From Will's journals: May 13.

Izzy was all enthused when she returned from B.C. and wanted to fly to New York right away and bring back their library. So, we left after filling some backpacks with food and water. At one point, we had talked about taking the Wilizy to New York because it had enough room in its hold to store everything we wanted to bring back. But, the trip there and back would have been very slow and I had lots of projects on the go. Izzy had said that I should come up with a different way to transport the library, so I did.

We arrived over New York after dark, and Izzy insisted that we sleep in our slings high over the city until we had had a chance to assess the threat levels. The last time we were here, underwater swimmers were planting bombs in buildings and blowing them up.

Sunrise revealed the New York skyline now had fewer tall buildings. Izzy started preparing the library while I flew back to the lab where I had manufactured masses of my filament on our last trip. I used up all the remaining raw materials that I had stored in the lab and brought the finished filaments to the library. In the future, if I need new filaments, I will manufacture them in Stanford University's physics lab.

Izzy left a note on the circulation desk to say that we had signed out the library's collection to keep it safe and would return it to the New York library whenever they wanted it back. Then, we started an assembly line. I would build a storage pallet out of carpets wrapped inside filaments, insert the power and navigation equipment, prepare a lid, and then I'd float it over to wherever Izzy was working. She'd stack books and other materials inside the pallet, label the contents, install the lid to complete the invisibility circuit, and fire up the pinky computer that would provide the power and navigation instructions. When we had everything on that floor ready to go, we broke one of the large picture windows and sent the weightless and invisible containers on their way. After we finished with one floor, we repeated the process for the other floors. It took about 18 hours of steady work. Once we started, we didn't want to stop. Both of us had the feeling that the library's building would not be standing much longer.

The navigation commands would take each pallet at a slow speed and a safe altitude to the nearest Wilizy communication hub that existed to its westward side and, from there, to the next westward hub, and so on. In a week or so, we'd have a queue of floating pallets full of educational materials lined up in the A.N. skies for unloading. Izzy didn't know where she was going to store the materials yet, but they'd be easy enough to transport when the time came.

We slung back home to the moored Wilizy without any difficulty. Izzy suggested that since we had the Wilizy to ourselves, we could take a day to rest and perhaps work out in the sun and then sunbathe together. But I was keen to work on my ideas for the long-range sensors that she had requested, so I told her that I couldn't. She looked a little miffed, but Wolf wanted some spying tools that I thought could be spun off from the long range sensors. The idea of making tools multi-functional like what I had done with the communication network and the pallet delivery system was way more interesting than sunbathing.

Chapter 7

"You have only two choices, Yolanda." Hank's use of his wife's first name indicated that they were having a serious discussion. "Either you convince Izzy that you have to read the technician or you find a way to go behind Izzy's back and read the technician."

"Either way, I have to read the technician?"

"Yes! Yollie cleared him! She might be right, but from what we've seen of Yollie's behaviour around the technician, there's a good chance that she's not. Everyone's lives are at risk. You **have** to read him. You should think about taking your mother too so that there'll be no doubt about accuracy." Hank knew that Yolanda would find it difficult to ask her mother for help and was expecting some resistance, but none came.

"If we find out that he's a spy, how do I convince Izzy that we need a second reading without ruining Yollie's credibility?"

"I don't see how that can be done."

"Then, I have to go behind Izzy's back. Is it possible?"

"Perhaps."

"And then, if we find out that Granny and I are right and Yollie is wrong?"

"We try to convince Yollie that her judgement may be wrong and hope that she'll change her reading. Again, without Izzy finding out."

"Yollie will argue that we're meddling in her life again. She'll insist that she's right and I'm wrong. Are you still sure that Zzyk is controlling him?" Yolanda asked her husband hoping that he'd say *No*.

"Oh, I'm 100% certain on that now."

"You've changed your assessment. Care to explain, or are you going to change the subject?"

"My assessment carries no weight. It's just a feeling that I have. The opinion of the Yolanda women is what Izzy will rely on. And, so would I," he added. "If you don't trust Yollie's ability to make an impartial assessment, and if that's going to jeopardize everyone's lives, then you have to sneak into that village and take a reading. When you and your mother have taken joint readings before, and agree on the results, have you ever been wrong?"

"Never. You're sure he's a spy? No doubts?"

"Yolanda, he's a spy. I have no doubt about that."

#

"Izzy asked me some questions about what child birth was like after she returned from New York," Yolanda said while stretching her arms and back. Cleaning guns was fiddly precise work and her muscles became tired after an hour of it.

"That's new, isn't it?"

"Yes, she's gone from wondering about sex to wondering about giving birth."

"Please tell me that you scared her off."

"I told her that my eight births were eight of the nine best experiences of my life."

"She and Will are way too young to have children. Both are still emotionally damaged too. You could have lied."

"You can lie if she asks you."

"You think she'd ask me about her having a child?"

"No. You're safe. She won't consult with you beforehand. I'm not sure that she'll even consult with Will."

#

"Nat wants his own sling," Yolanda opened another line of conversation after sitting down again and reaching for Hank's sniper rifle. No one but Hank and Yolanda were ever allowed to touch it. "He wants to be an active member of the Wilizy like Yollie and Wolf."

"I thought that would be coming."

"He doesn't have a warrior's mentality or the necessary coldness."

"Which makes him becoming more active in battles dangerous."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. Perhaps as someone's assistant?"

#

"Are those clothes that I brought back from the Surrey meetings going to work for Winnie?"

Narrator: Hank was talking here about a little detour he took into Cache Creek so that he could visit the town's thrift shop on his way back from Surrey. On every child's birthday, she or he would receive some store-bought clothes that Hank would purchase from a thrift store on his way to or back from one of the quarterly meetings he had with the military in Surrey. Hank never bought brand new clothes. An exception was Izzy's white and emerald green clothes, and technically Hank never purchased those. Yolanda and Yollie went to Surrey – Yollie to identify something Izzy would like and Yolanda to make sure the sizes were right. Yolanda only had to look at something dangling from a hanger to know if it would fit one of her children, and if not, she could accurately predict how many months they'd have to wait before they did fit.

"Not really. They're too big for her now and will be for some time."

"They were the smallest that I could find without going into toddler sizes and she'd never wear those. I'm going to look at the thrift stores in Prince George soon, and then I'll drift into other areas up north. I might find something small enough for her there."

Getting store-bought clothes that would fit Winnie was now a struggle for Hank and Yolanda. Most of their children would be fitted from Hank's 'barter barrel' where everything that the family was finished using would be deposited. Hank would tolerate no exceptions—everything potentially useful went into that barrel where it might be bartered for something the family needed.

Hank's unwillingness to throw anything away was normal frontier mentality. For example, all parts of a slaughtered farm animal would be used in some way, either directly by the farmer's family or through trading it for something they did need. Each member of H&Y's family made his or her own clothes and moccasins out of hides of animals that they had killed for food. Nothing was left on the ground for the crows. Even Winnie was now self-sufficient in making her own clothing. Footwear was an exception. Moccasins were fine for walking inside the house, but Hank knew from bitter experience that existing in the woods depended on keeping warm, dry and injury free. That started with good, solid shoes. Hank's contract with the Aboriginal Nation allowed him to requisition military boots for everyone in his family once a year.

From the family clothes in the barrel, Theo's old shirt might become Mathias' new shirt, suitably changed by dyeing to reflect the colour tastes of its new owner. Every child had a favorite colour and Yolanda kept plenty of dye on hand. But, clothes that had gone through five, or six, or even seven previous owners weren't going to survive intact for the eighth. Plus, Winnie's birth one month before full term made things far more difficult to find clothes that would fit and be appropriate for her age. She was born tiny, and at six now, she could easily pass for four. Those agonizing first six months after Winnie's birth, when both Hank and Yolanda were convinced that they were going to lose her, were why they abandoned their goal to have 10 children. No-one could understand how Winnie had survived at all in the absence of any medical facilities whatsoever in the frontier.

"Did Winnie find all of your hiding places?"

"Yeah. Even the marshmallows that I put in sealed containers. She's not smelling them."

"Is she watching you when you hide them?"

"I am now hiding them the night before in the dark and from inside my sling. Why don't we just give them to her?"

"Because she likes the game. I can't believe you're giving up so easily."

"I'm OK conceding defeat to a 6-year old. Not a 5-year old. But 6 is OK."

"You should just tell her that you won't be able to hide her marshmallows any longer because you've become old and feeble. She'll understand. I do."

"I've tried watching her after I tell her that she can go find her marshmallows. She doesn't want me to do that. She says that I'm confusing her. "

"Do you yammer at her while she's searching?"

"No. All I do is watch her. I want to see if she's using some search strategies."

"Just watching her confuses her?"

"I know. It doesn't make any sense."

#

"About that eight out of nine best experiences?"

"Relax. You're in the top nine."

"Good. You had me worried for a while."

"You were #1 a few minutes ago. But, a 6-year old girl cost you eight places. All part of being old and feeble, I guess."

"If I were to find a way to allow you and Granny to take a reading on the technician without Izzy finding out, would that help my ranking?"

"That, and finding out how Winnie can track down hidden marshmallows might raise you a notch or two. I can't say for sure. I'm terribly disillusioned right now."

Izzy's words: May 19.

I received a coded message from B.C. this morning asking me to contact the mysterious government official at my convenience; found out his name. Franklin. I hopped into my sling before calling him. I'd rather be paranoid than dead; wondered if Franklin was his first or his last name.

"Your project is moving along," he told me. I recognized the distinctive voice; wondered if he was wearing a gray suit. "I don't see any obstacles in the way of your project so I thought we should think about formalizing it."

"Sounds good," I said. I didn't know what *formalizing* would involve but was willing to listen some more.

"There's a man in Cranbrook that we use from time to time for securing joint interests over a long term time continuum. I think he would be the best person to run point on our joint interests. Can you meet him in Cranbrook?"

I understood the last sentence about Cranbrook. "OK, I'm not that far from Cranbrook right now. When and where? After sunset works best for me."

Franklin told me the man's home was on the southern shore of Pyatt's Lake, just south of the town. It was the only building on that side of the lake. I'll be

meeting a man named Stu at his home after sunset. He asked me if I would have any difficulty finding the place. I said *No*; didn't tell him that I was circling overhead the house as we talked. It turns out that Franklin was both his last and his first name. I would never give my kid that kind of name. No wonder he likes to sit in the shadows.

I couldn't help but think. A man that I hardly knew was having me meet another unknown man in an unfamiliar town. If B.C. were going to sell me out, now would be a good time to do it. I had no-one to protect my back so I contacted Hank but he was busy up north researching something.

Yolanda met me above the lake as the sun was setting. By then, I had looked in every window in the house and had established that no-one was in the house or watching the house. I asked Yolanda to remain high above when I went inside because he wasn't expecting me to bring anyone and I didn't want him reacting badly at the surprise. Yolanda was there to ensure that I had time to escape if an armed squad arrived. We watched as a dark shadow carrying a briefcase entered the home and kerosene lamps began to illuminate the interior. Time to go.

#

"What did you think about him?" I asked Yolanda when we arrived back at her compound. I had made an excuse for Stu to meet my bodyguard so that she'd be sure not to shoot him in the future. Stu thought nothing of it. Yolanda could have given him a medical exam he was so trusting. I hit it off with him quickly too. Now to find out if he had passed Yolanda's tests.

"I sensed very strong signals of ethical behaviour," Yolanda started. "I've actually heard of him. His full name is Stu McKenzie. He's well respected in aboriginal circles and has done a lot of work on our behalf."

"So when he says that he's been asked to represent the Wilizy's interests in the finalization of our project with the B.C. Government, he really will work for us and not for the government even though the government nominated him?"

"Yes, I believe so. I have some cousins who could tell me more about him. Should I ask?"

"Yes, let's make sure. Do you know anything about the papers that he'll draw up?"

"Not a thing. And, neither Hank nor I have any contacts in the legal profession who could explain them. I wouldn't know where to start to find help. We'd probably ask our B.C. military contacts to suggest someone, and they have essentially just done that."

"So we should trust him."

"Yes. That would be my advice. I had very strong positive readings. He admires what the Wilizy is doing by the way."

"What's an accountant?" I asked.

"A person that works with numbers, as far as I know. Why?"

"I'm supposed to bring our accountant to our next meeting so that he can run the numbers that Stu gives him. This came up before I could invite you inside. Stu insisted that the Wilizy have our accountant at all future meetings to give us confidence that we weren't being cheated. Do you or Hank know anyone who can run numbers?"

"Nat's good with numbers and he would like to become more involved with the Wilizy."

"Sounds good to me. What's Hank up to?"

"Trying to find marshmallows and clothes for Winnie, I think."

We talked for a while about Winnie and her love of the mushy desserts. She was sleeping by now, so I just looked in on her and then left.

Izzy's words: May 22

The barges from New York arrived. I used my sling to tow them to a higher altitude, checked that all had arrived undamaged, and then left them to float.

Yolanda gave me the update on the family. Winnie is busy with school projects, Wolf and Will are still working on the long range sensors, Yollie is doing something to increase our levels of protection but she's being evasive and Yolanda doesn't know what that means. Hank is researching something. Doc and Granny are on their honeymoon and won't be back until next week. They flew over New York and reported that the library building was no longer standing.

I haven't heard anything from Stu—but I wasn't expecting to yet. It's too early to expect results from B.C. They had some construction to complete before we could meet again. I don't have the skills to start building the command center on the Wilizy; not even sure where to put it. Hank said that he would take charge of that project. Perhaps, that's what he's researching.

Bored, bored, bored. Guess I'll check what the weather is like on the other side of the ship. Yup. Same as this side. Still bored, bored, bored.

Since I'm all alone on the Wilizy these days, I've been spending a lot of time topless. I'm gradually becoming used to it. It's OK if I'm sitting down and reading, but I'm still self-conscious walking out on the deck. Even though the ship is high above the clouds, I still automatically check over my shoulder to see if someone is watching.

I decided about a week ago to take my top off for Will. Now I'm trying to decide how to do that. It's not as straightforward as I had thought. Should I take it off slowly while facing him? Should I take it off with my back to him, and then turn around after it's off? Should I take it off and then cover myself with my hands? Just whip it off and get it over with? Do I smile? Perhaps I should close my eyes? Wish there were rules about how to take a top off in front of a boy friend.

#

I invited Will to come to the ship but he's too busy to think about sunbathing right now; told him that I had some things to show him, but he didn't catch on. I wasn't going to say out loud what the things were that I was going to show him. Might be days before he can return to the Wilizy; he's busy calibrating something that needs calibrating. Will can be so thick sometimes!

Chapter 8

"What's this thing?" Granny asked Hank. She and Yolanda had just flickered into the coordinates Hank had given them to find him unwrapping Will's filaments from what appeared to be a 19th century covered wagon.

"Peddler's wagon," he said. "Big wheels to make it easier to go up and down hilly territory. Like here." They were deep in a mountain valley with the sun falling behind the western range behind them. It was still too early for what would be the very short sunset in mountainous country. Other than the hum of insects, there were no signs of any living creature near them. "The trail to the technician's village is on the other side of that stand of alders," Hank explained. "I scanned the trail on either side of us before I came down. We won't be disturbed tonight."

"Will you be providing the donkey that goes with this thing?" Granny asked.

"A donkey is old technology. You'll have a solar powered putt-putt." Hank opened the back of the wagon, pried a putt-putt loose of the clutter inside, and plopped it on the ground in front of Granny.

"You expect me to sit on this thing?" Granny wasn't impressed.

"While it pulls the wagon, yes. Unless you feel like getting behind and pushing."

"And what do I do?" Yolanda asked. "Pick up the yoke and pull?"

"No, you'll have a putt-putt too." Hank pulled a second putt-putt out of the wagon and placed it in front of Yolanda. She ran her pinky finger over the grime on the putt-putt's seat and grimaced at what she saw. Granny dismounted from her putt-putt and peered inside the wagon. All she could see was a solid mass of junk.

"You better show us how to set the wagon up so that customers can see everything." Yolanda was the practical part of the team. Granny was looking for a way to hoist herself into the wagon and go dumpster diving.

"They had these when I was a teenager," Granny said as she was stepping down off the wagon's back steps in disappointment. "A peddler would come through town and everyone would cluster around, look at his wares, and wonder about the outside world and what it would be like to live there. Back then, donkeys pulled the wagons and their brays would announce the peddler's arrival. Some of the peddlers would do magic tricks; others would have cons to trick us out of our money. If you didn't have money, some peddlers would encourage you to barter. It was a way to keep their inventory growing. Let's open this baby up!"

Hank talked while he was lowering the wagon sides, pulling out shelves, and opening up cupboards. "That was my experience too. Peddlers disappeared from the roads when it became unsafe to travel without armed guards, but they're coming back into remote areas now. I bought this from a guy in the Yukon who was tired of fighting off mosquitoes in the northern swamps. If today's trial works, I want to introduce them into Alberta. Get people operating their own small businesses."

"Zzyk would wonder how a wagon made it through his security fences. Having one could be fatal for the owners," Yolanda commented.

"Yeah. The wagons will have to be built inside the province. Perhaps this wagon could be discovered in an abandoned barn somewhere and that could serve as the model for building others. That might be another small business to promote. I still have to work out some of the practicalities."

"Where'd you find the junk?" Granny asked as she was rummaging through the drawers and holding bits of loose fabric up to the light. "This cloth is usable. Small pieces, but someone might want them for patches."

"Two thrift store owners in Kamloops and Kelowna are very happy right now."

Yolanda was still focused on the practical side of whatever scheme Hank was pitching. "So, we go into the technician's village, see if he'll respond to the lure of cheap junk, read him, and leave. You bundle everything back up and then decide if the peddler wagon idea could work in Alberta?"

"Right, but you'll have to go into the next village too—it's only a two hour walk and you'll raise suspicions if you don't drop in."

"What makes you think the technician will come out and look?"

"Right now, he's sitting in a small room somewhere inside that village, telling himself that he's bored, bored, bored. He knows nobody and he has nothing to do."

"Some people in the village might recognize me or Grannie. What were you planning to do about that?" Yolanda asked.

"Ah. That's where the fat suits come in."

"Fat suits?" Yolanda asked in a tone that she'd use when one of the youngsters was treading into uncharted depths of misbehaviour.

"Two fat suits, two wigs, and two mouth implants that will change the way you talk. Plus make-up. I've set aside several hours tomorrow morning for you to put on your costumes and makeup. " In response to an arched eyebrow that was approaching historic levels, he added, "Kelowna has an active amateur theatre group."

"And what will you be doing the whole time we're melting in the hot sun?"

"I'm going to be watching the technician closely. I'm hoping that he'll react to some things I've planted in the wagon."

"I'm looking forward to seeing Yolanda in a fat suit," Granny teased.

"Take a picture and die."

"This is going to be a hoot," Granny exclaimed.

#

"Who, who, who," the owl hooted in anger at the electric shock it had just received in his feet and fled high into the air complaining the whole time.

"I'm still able to pick up the movement of an owl. We don't want to be hearing alarms in the Wilizy any time an owl goes for a midnight flight 10 miles away," Will said. "I'll re-calibrate while you find another owl."

"This is crazy," Wolf complained. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to find an owl in a forest in the dark, sneak up to it, and then run a shock into its feet?"

"No, I don't" said Will who thought that was all that Wolf would expect him to say. He couldn't recognize the exasperation in Wolf's voice. Just like he had missed the exasperation in Izzy's voice when she asked, "Why don't you want to sunbathe with me?" While Wolf was searching for another owl, Will mentally reviewed his plan to create a rolling wave of blackouts on Alberta's western border. Some of the IOF's electrified defenses would be off-line while Will added a feature to them that Zzyk would not expect. If Will had been the smiling type, he'd have had a broad grin on his face.

#

Hank's fondness for acquiring clothes and other goods from thrift stores around the province was unique to him. Most families on the frontier were born, raised, lived, and died within walking distance of the family's original homestead. Yes, some people did have solar putt-putts that could travel across the bumpy terrain of the rough trails that connected communities together. But, most people disdained these putt-putts as frivolous pretensions foisted on them by uppity city folk. If they wanted to travel to another community, they'd walk. Thrift stores lived and died off what business they could promote from the locals. Even then, profits were small because people didn't have much money to pay for such goods. Both B.C. and the Aboriginal Nation used the B.C. dollar as their currency. This was nicknamed the Klaboobie for how it had imploded during the oil crisis. But few dollars circulated in the frontier where the barter system was dominant.

In the mostly unpopulated frontier, no-one had personal solar powered copters. You could find these in the larger communities in the Okanagan that benefitted from substantial trade with communities in B.C.'s lower mainland. Stu, the lawyer in Cranbrook, owned a personal copter because he travelled frequently to Surrey as part of his legal business and he could afford it.

Hank had access to what was effectively a personal copter. Four times a year, the Aboriginal Nation would put a copter and two pilots at his disposal so that Hank could attend several days of joint military strategy meetings in Surrey with the B.C. and the A.N. military leaders. Hank would visit a large number of thrift stores the day before the meeting as a way to obtain data for his report on *The economic conditions of B.C.'s interior*. The information that Hank gained from talking with the owners of the stores provided a surprisingly good indicator of the economic health of the region. Naturally, it was necessary to obtain a broad sample of economic conditions so flights to Surrey often took a circuitous route. And naturally, Hank would lubricate the conversation with purchases of certain personal goods in order to keep the shop owners talking. And, if his desire to obtain useful information meant that he was often on his hands and knees in dusty corners of the shop looking through wooden boxes, that was just Hank being Hank.

Hank became well known to thrift storeowners throughout the province and was welcomed with open arms whenever the military copter set down in a nearby field. That welcome wasn't because of the profits they'd earn from Hank's purchases. On those transactions, the storeowners were lucky to recover their own costs. Hank's military background probably gave him the ability to realize when a person was, shall we say, *stretching the truth*. He always seemed to know when to keep haggling no matter how strongly a storeowner claimed that he could go no lower.

But, profits were there to be earned from the copter pilots. The pilots would be enthralled by the collection of rustic memorabilia that greeted them—objects that weren't available in the lower mainland. Storeowners learned quickly that Hank wouldn't interfere when they priced their goods outrageously high. A storeowner would book a profit that would carry his business for months. The copter pilots would emerge victorious with a cargo hold of goods that they themselves would sell for a profit in Surrey while they waited for the meetings to end. Everyone was happy. Except for the other copter pilots who had lost the contest to fly Hank that quarter.

You can now understand how the idea for starting a peddler network in Alberta had come naturally to him when Hank heard that Izzy wanted to encourage Albertans to work for themselves. His sling, and some invisible, towable cargo pallets gave Hank easy access to friendly thrift store owners throughout B.C. and the Yukon who would be happy to provide him with stock at Hank-like prices. What Hank didn't know was how the economics of such a peddler network would work. How could he purchase stock in B.C. and then sell it in Alberta when the people of Alberta had no money to buy it? But first, the whole concept of a peddler wagon had to be tested. Using the DPS technician's village for a trial run was a no-brainer.

#

It was dusk and Hank was meeting with Yolanda and Yollie where the road to the technician's village intersected with what had been B.C.'s #3 provincial highway. At this junction, it had once been a solid stream of asphalt flowing towards the Alberta border. Now, the asphalt was all gone—scrounged for use in building construction. This turned out to be a bad choice because the asphalt disintegrated over time—just like the oil-based societies of the world had disintegrated. Hank was preparing the peddler cart for air travel and listening to the Y-women reporting on what they had read from the technician.

"He's so tense he's going to blow a blood vessel," Yolanda said in exasperation. "How could Yollie have missed that?"

"He also has anger. Lots of anger," Granny added sadly.

"Desperation, too, mother."

"What about his character?" Hank asked as he prepared to close the lid on the cargo pallet.

"I couldn't reach that level. I just know that he wants to kill somebody really badly," Yolanda said darkly.

"Did your little traps work, Hank?" Granny asked. "I would have watched him when he came near them, but you were being secretive."

"I wanted him to find them on his own—not encouraged by a sales-hag pushing something at him."

"Sales-hag? You actually want to risk saying that?" Yolanda was especially peeved because she was on her third bottle of water and was still trying to wash the dust and grime off her hands. "What kind of peddler wagon doesn't sell soap?" she complained.

"Sales-hag, for sure. No other way to put it with that ghastly face your mother gave you, Yolanda. And, yes Granny, my two traps did work. He saw the vintage mouse, picked it up, and took it apart. He probably would have asked for the price but he had nothing to offer in trade. Good thing for me because selling it would have cost me a bundle. It had cost me enough to borrow it. Those things are rare!"

"What's a mouse?"

"Old device for interacting with computers. Only a computer guy would recognize one. Proves that he's a computer technician like he said he was."

"The second trap was in the children's section right?" Yolanda asked. "You took some of Winnie's smocks that she's outgrown. And some shirts from the boys, a little doll, an infant's bunny, some other items from our barter barrel?"

"Yes. You saw his reaction?"

"No, I was too busy fending off the advances of an old geezer. I was severely tempted to give in to his wrinkled leer. If I had known that I was considered a sales-hag, I would have thrown myself into his arms."

"The old geezer couldn't have held you up with all that weight you were carrying. What about you, Granny? Did you see the reaction?"

"I was too far away. But I know that he spent a lot of time in that area."

"But not in the area that would have reminded him of a wife, if he had had such a cumbersome burden."

"Which tells you what?"

"It's still a hunch, but I think that Zzyk could be holding his young daughter captive. He fondled the infant and toddler clothing and picked up toddler toys. He wasn't interested in anything of Winnie's and didn't even glance at the boys' stuff. He wasn't drawn to the women's cupboard so I think his wife is dead or perhaps not in danger."

"Sher-Hank Holmes, master detective," Yolanda quipped.

"Be still, sales-hag. It makes sense. Desperation and anger. He's desperate for us to approach him so that we'll help him rescue his daughter. He's angry at Zzyk, not at the Wilizy."

"Only one tiny little no-see-um in your theory, oh sleuthy master."

"What's that, sales-hag?"

"IOF men can't have daughters. Or, God forbid, sons."

Granny hooted with laughter. "I believe that's a big, fat Got'cha! Nice one, Yolanda!"

"So Granny," Hank replied. "You'll be telling Yollie that her reading is all wrong?"

"She's not my daughter. I had enough confrontations with my own daughter to last me a lifetime, thank you very much."

"Yolanda?"

"Better to confront Yollie and try to convince her that she made a mistake then let the whole group know that she misread him."

"But, what if...?"

"What if what?" both sales-hags said as Hank dragged out the pregnant silence.

"What if the technician isn't an IOF man? What if his wife wasn't an IOF woman? Then, they could have had a daughter."

"How do you explain the technician's IOF brown skin and nose?" Yolanda asked.

"Izzy camouflaged herself in IOF brown, and she hid her real nose too." Hank responded.

"But, would that make-up have remained after being immersed in a lake?" one sales-hag asked. "And what about Doc's surgery?" the other added. "He was cutting through brown skin. Wouldn't he have noticed fake skin colour?"

"Good questions," Hank admitted.

"Zzyk would kidnap a foreigner if he thought he could get away with it," one sales-hag said to herself. "Difficult to prove the theory," the other sales-hag said.

"Could be proven if a person had the right motivation," Hank said. With that, he winked out of sight leaving two sales-hags all alone in the dustbowl that used to be Highway #3.

Chapter 9

"Everything is ready at the B.C. end," Stu had messaged Izzy about 3 days after the test of the peddler wagon.

She had replied promptly. "The learning materials have arrived from New York, we have our accountant, and I'm ready to read."

Izzy, Yolanda, and Nat left for Surrey at first light by individual sling. Nat was proud that he was old enough now to travel by himself. His flight to Surrey was much less sedate than Yolanda's and Izzy's.

Hank and Wolf had departed well before sunrise to transport the pallets full of New York City Library materials to a secure site that Stu had found off the main road connecting Hope and Chilliwack. As Stu had promised, empty wooden crates were hidden in some trees behind the two heavily rutted furrows that constituted the highway out of Surrey this far east. The only road to the interior of B.C. ended in Hope with the disappearance of the furrows. In the winter rains, passage to Hope was impossible. Solar powered trucks just weren't strong enough to push their way through the mud.

Wolf and Hank shifted the contents from the pallets to the crates and then Hank left to sit in on the meeting in Surrey with the lawyer. Wolf stood guard until Stu's assistant arrived with the delivery vehicle and a forklift. He helped her load the crates into the truck and then returned home.

Their meeting with the lawyer was a little awkward at first. After introductions, Stu had seated Yolanda, Izzy and Nat around a small but serviceable table but had invited Hank to sit next to him so that he could see the papers more easily. While the lower mainland still had some electrical service, Stu's office had no such luxury. Meetings were scheduled during the daytime when light could come through the office window.

"I don't need to see the papers. We trust you," Hank said while sliding into the empty chair next to Yolanda.

"Well, I appreciate the trust but must insist that the family's accountant sign off on every document that I prepare. Think of it as a security back-up in case I've made a mistake. It would be best for the accountant to sit here."

"OK, that sounds like a good idea," Hank said and motioned Nat to take the empty seat.

"You're the accountant, Nat?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Call me Stu, please."

"Sorry, Sir. Mom says that I have to show respect for my elders."

"Very well. How old are you, Young Sir?"

"Thirteen."

"And you've had training as an accountant?"

"I can run numbers, Sir."

"Perhaps a little demonstration?"

"Yes, Sir. How quickly would you like me to run them?"

"However quickly you wish."

"1 2 3 4 5 6..."

Stu interrupted. "Well, I think we may have had a little misunderstanding."

"I can run them faster, as well as backwards, Sir. Would you like me to demonstrate that?"

"No. That won't be necessary." Seeing the disappointment in Nat's face, Stu ventured, "Why don't we try something more challenging?"

What followed then was a quick test in mental arithmetic that Nat passed easily. Stu then thought of a test that he thought Nat would fail, thereby allowing him to ask the family if they had an accountant friend who'd be willing to serve.

"An accountant has to have a good feel for when numbers aren't coming out the way they should. Errors will happen and a good accountant will find them quickly just because he'll know that something isn't right."

Nat squared himself in his chair for a hard question. Meanwhile, Stu was using his pinky ring computer to make some calculations. He wrote two numbers down on a piece of paper and handed it over.

"One of these is the answer to a multiplication question that I'm going to give you. The other is wrong. I will time you to determine how quickly you can tell me which is the correct answer. Are you ready?"

On Nat's nod, Stu said, "Which number is the correct answer to 416 times 378?" He then started the timer on his pinky ring.

"Neither, Sir."

Stu stopped his timer and looked down. Two seconds. "You're certain?" Stu asked. He was sure that one of them had been right.

"Yes, Sir."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Sir, in the first answer, you have the 7 and the 2 in the wrong order. The second answer isn't even close."

"And the correct answer is?"

"157,248, Sir."

"What grade is Nat in, Yolanda?"

"We don't know. We home school all of our kids and so long as they are working diligently through the bots, we let them go as quickly or as slowly as they want. Nat hasn't had to ask us questions on his courses for years. He's always been good with numbers."

"I can see that." Turning back to look directly at Nat, Stu continued. "Young Sir. Accounting is more than the arithmetic questions I have given you. If you want to be the Wilizy's accountant, you'll need to study some university level bots. I can get you those bots, but you'll have to learn them on your own. I won't be able to help you. Are you willing to study on your own to become an accountant?"

Nat turned to Hank. "Can I still fight in the Wilizy's battles?"

Hank nodded, Yes.

"Can I choose my permanent name now?"

Hank and Yolanda had to have a brief consult, as this was entirely unexpected. But neither of them saw any reason to object. All of their children were allowed to choose their first name when they were old enough to know what they wanted.

Yolanda gave Nat the parental approval. "What do you want us to call you from now on? You know that this time you can't change your mind."

Nat took a breath and then declared. "My first name is going to be Wizard. I wish to become an accountant and be known as Wizard Wilizy."

"It has a certain ring to it," Stu noted.

And now readers know how the career of the legendary Wizard Wilizy began. However, I must hasten to explain. It's highly unlikely that Wizard Wilizy chose his first name because he thought he was a wizard with numbers. There was nothing vain about the man, although he was indeed a wizard that way. I found ample evidence to suggest that young impressionable Nat chose his name because it contained the same sounds as Izzy's name.

#

One thing surrounding life in B.C. hadn't changed after the oil shock. Lawyers still produced a lot of paper.

First were the documents establishing the Wilizy as a formal organization following the lines of Izzy's initial command structure. These papers would not be made public unless absolutely necessary because they identified all the key people in the insurrection against Zzyk. They'd be kept in a safety deposit box that was accessible only to Wilizy members. Yolanda and Izzy were the initial signers, but history shows that these documents were changed from time to time.

The second set covered the bank account, to which the safety deposit box was attached. Wizard's and Hank's signatures were on the initial set of documents. Both signatures were necessary for any withdrawals above a certain limit.

The third set of papers was the most important, and the most complicated. It consisted of six different agreements all surrounding how the New York City Library's learning materials would be used. Briefly:

- The Wilizy gave the Government of British Columbia permission to store and broadcast to its citizens any or all of the materials that the Wilizy had obtained from the New York City Library. Such broadcasting was done under a fee structure that was fixed for 2-year terms.
- The Government of British Columbia was responsible for all costs associated with broadcasting these materials within B.C.
- The Government of British Columbia was prohibited from broadcasting outside B.C. and the A.N. Only one transmitter was allowed and that was the refurbished antique that was on top of Mount Seymour near the small village of North Vancouver.
- The Government of British Columbia was responsible for the safety of the library materials. The Wilizy would be reimbursed for any damage or loss as per the costs in Schedule A.
- The Government of British Columbia would allow the Wilizy to access their broadcast feed from the Mount Seymour transmitter for the purposes of broadcasting the materials within Alberta and within any other jurisdictions that they wished. Such access was governed under a fee for service agreement that the Wilizy would pay to B.C.

- The Wilizy laid claim to ownership of the materials that they had initially borrowed as per New York City Library requirements. After the library was demolished by terrorist swimmers, it is the opinion of the Wilizy that they were then entitled to the materials because (1) they were at that point keeping them safe, and (2) the materials could be considered as *abandoned* by the original owners who had left the city without securing them first.

After these documents were explained and duly signed, Stu was facing four tired and confused clients. Izzy summed up their feelings. "I didn't understand any of this, Stu. Just tell me this. Did you get us what I asked for?"

"I know it can be overwhelming Izzy, but yes, you now have the ability to broadcast any learning materials from the New York library into Alberta. It will be receivable on pinky ring computers, and from there, viewable in people's brains like anything else we input from a bot."

"I have also negotiated you some extras: The materials will be stored in B.C. and broadcast from B.C. where it is unlikely that Zzyk can destroy them. If he attacks, the B.C. government has to protect the materials and pay you their value if they're damaged or lost. The B.C. government will take care of all of the broadcasting details according to directions from you on what you want shown and when. They will send out the Wilizy's special messages into Alberta every hour on the hour of the broadcast day."

"I never thought of those details."

"That wasn't your job, Izzy. That's my job. Now, here's the last set of papers. You have to sign a two year contract under which the Wilizy has to pay B.C. for certain expenses that they incur, and the B.C. Government has to pay you for services and materials that you provide them. I have B.C.'s offer. You can accept it, or submit a counter-offer. Read this summary page and let me know what you think."

The Wilizy didn't have to think long. Izzy spoke for all of them when she reacted immediately, and unhappily.

"It's way too high! Will and I have some gold coins that we found in the woods but that's it. We'll never be able to afford this."

Stu held up his hand to stem the tide. Unsuccessfully, as it turn out.

"Stu, it's out of the question. They're asking for way too much."

"Izzy, you've confused the columns. The total that you're looking at is the amount that the B.C. government is offering **to pay you** for access to your materials."

"In which case, their offer is too low," Wizard interjected.

"I'm going to enjoy working with you, Wizard."

#

Hank offered to stay with Wizard while he and Stu negotiated a contract with the B.C. government. Izzy had to slip out to Burnaby to do some taping and Yolanda said that she'd tag along.

The idea of broadcasting materials from the New York library into Alberta had been Izzy's. She wanted to get Albertans thinking about what life could be like after the IOF; to give them pleasure through seeing old time movies and videos; to

give them some peace with soft music; to give them excitement to their lives with music and drama and comedy; and, to give them an awareness of what freedom would be like by telling them what freedom was. She knew that the Wilizy couldn't win through war; they'd only win by giving the people their lives back.

As part of that broad goal, Izzy had booked some time in a Burnaby studio to tape interludes that would appear between their broadcasts. In one, she would read the poem *I know why the caged bird sings*, by Maya Angelou. Just as she had used this poem with Will, introducing this poem to Albertans might prompt them to think about freedom. In all, she had chosen six readings and the studio was waiting for her when she and Yolanda arrived.

Izzy had thought that she'd just sit on a stool in her Wilizy colours and read. She wasn't prepared for what that would require. First, she had to have her hair washed and designed. Then, make-up had to be slathered onto her face, something that Izzy disliked intensely, but something that had to be done apparently. Then, the bright light in her eyes was disconcerting. The man behind the camera kept saying, "Let's do that again." This would be followed immediately by the make up lady crouching about two centimeters away from her nose and scanning her face for shiny spots to dab at with her little brushes.

But, eventually, Izzy taped six readings and not once did she snap at the make up lady, "Get out of my face!" Izzy was at her most striking with her red hair flowing all around her face. The interlude where Izzy was looking down and reading *The Big Box* by Toni Morrison, another introduction to freedom, was considered the best ever of Izzy in her basic green and white. She said that she had pretended that Winnie was sitting in her lap and that's who she was reading to.

B.C. even asked permission to broadcast her readings as a reminder to their citizens of what was important. Initially, the B.C. producer wanted to name the interludes *A Wilizy Winner*, but, in fact, this name was not a winner and did not see the light of day. Nor did his, *Here's... Izzy!* Yolanda suggested *A Melissa Moment* and that stuck.

Meanwhile, while Izzy was struggling under the lights, the negotiations with the B.C. government were going exceedingly well. Stu would receive an adjusted offer from the B.C. government, consult with Wizard who would shake his head *No*, and then Stu would tell his counterpart that their offer wasn't high enough. At one point, the B.C. negotiator had become so frustrated that he asked for an hour break. It was in this intermission that Hank asked Wizard how he knew that they'd come back with a higher offer.

"I don't know, Dad. I just know. I look at him and I can see that he's willing to go higher."

"We're actually in a very strong bargaining position, Hank," Stu explained. "The Wilizy owns something that nobody else has, at least not in North America. You are renting out entertainment content that can be broadcast easily to the population. The alternative would be for B.C. to create their own entertainment, and that would be much more expensive. They probably have room to go higher still. Wizard has the right instincts. Next year, we'll offer to lower B.C.'s annual fee when we sell content to other provinces and states provided that B.C. helps

transmitting it to them. This way, you won't have to do anything but collect the fees."

"Other states and provinces?"

"Of course. Why would you rent the content only to British Columbia? Other places will want it too. Your Wilizy station will become just like the networks that existed before the crisis—national broadcasts. I already have your call name reserved."

"Call name?"

"The call name is what you use to identify your station periodically throughout your broadcast day. It's a way to remind the viewer who you are. It will sound like this: This is WZBN, the Wilizy Broadcast Network. You're going to be rich."

"We're not doing it..."

"No, you're not. But having access to money can make your goals easier to reach."

#

Izzy wasn't the only Wilizy who had wanted to scream *Get out of my face* that day! Yollie was waiting for Yolanda in the compound when she opened the door. Yollie brandished a series of pictures of Yolanda and Granny putting on their fat suits and makeup, slapped them into Yolanda's hands, and stormed off after snarling *Get out of my face! I have this covered!*

Chapter 10

Will returned to the Wilizy the day after Izzy's trip to the coast. He was keen to share the difficulties he had encountered in calibrating the long-range sensors so that they would only pick up movements of objects that had the potential to be threatening to the Wilizy. Then he started on how the DPS's electric fences had been adjusted. Izzy was too jittery to sit still, so she paced back and forth saying, "Uh huh. Uh huh" until Will ran out of words.

"That's good, Will. Everyone will be happy that we're safer on the ship. Well, I think I'll sunbathe on the deck now. Want to come?"

"Uh, not now, Izzy. I should decide where to install the long range..."

"That'll be outside, though? Right? So, let's go out to the deck, but first, I have to put on my sunbathing clothes. You wait right here, OK, and then we'll go out together."

Will couldn't know that Izzy had rehearsed what was going to happen when they went sunbathing together. So, he waited naively in the galley until she came back up the stairs—it scarcely took her 30 seconds she was so anxious to surprise him before he could make another excuse. Will did notice that she was now wearing the skimpy top that she had once slept in, but it meant nothing to him. He was thinking about the mast and if the sensor capsule could fit into the crow's nest.

"Good, now we're going to pop outside, Will. I want to show you some things. They're a sort of surprise."

...

"OK, Will, right here's good. You stand here and close your eyes. Don't open them until I say so. OK?"

Will didn't need his eyes to be open to think about the configuration of the crow's nest.

"OK, Will. You can open your eyes now."

Will did. It turned out that it hadn't mattered at all if Izzy was smiling or not. Will barely saw her face. That was probably a good thing because she had unknowingly screwed her mouth into a gruesome combination of a crooked smile and a grimace of apprehension. That didn't matter because Will immediately put his hands up to his eyes and scrunched both hands and eyes shut.

Izzy hadn't expected that reaction at all. She had hoped for a wondrous smile of appreciation. She would have enjoyed a slack-jawed reaction of *Wow*. She could have even tolerated a leer. But, Will had wrapped both of his arms over his eyes and had turned his back to her as well.

"WILL!!! What are you doing?"

"Izzy. Your top has come off."

This would have been useful information if Izzy hadn't been diligently practicing putting her top on and taking it off for days. "I know. I took it off. I thought you wanted to see... these."

Will didn't have to guess what *these* referred to. He had had a split second glimpse and that was enough. "You're going to become pregnant," he wailed.

"I am not," she said weakly.

"Yes, you are if I look at them. You said so. When you explained how babies are made. You said it would all start if you were ever silly enough to take off your top in front of me."

Well, technically, that is indeed what Izzy had said when she was trying to describe to Will how a baby might be created. But, in her mind, Will seeing her with her top off was only the first step in a long series of steps that might inevitably end up with a baby being conceived. Will had welded them all into one sudden catapult into pregnancy. "You've seen me naked and I didn't become pregnant," she tried logic to bring him back on script.

"But you didn't take off your clothes in front of me that time. I wasn't there when the clothes came off. You said a man had to be present when a baby was created, and I wasn't in your bathroom when you took off your clothes. So, there was no risk of you becoming pregnant. No man, no pregnancy. But, you just took off your top in front of me, and I'm right here, and that's what you said would start it." Readers may have noticed that Will had a tendency to take things very literally. It didn't help that he had no real understanding of the human body.

"Will, take it easy. It's OK. I'm not going to become pregnant." Izzy put her hands on Will's arms to calm him.

"They're touching my arms. They're touching my arms. That's the next step that you described. Get them off of me. Get them off of me!" Well, once again, some touching between Will's skin and Izzy's skin was indeed the next step that Izzy had described, but in Izzy's fantasies of how this unveiling of her breasts would go, she had never once imagined Will fending off her touches, rather than the other way around.

"Only my hands are touching you, Will."

"We're still touching when you don't have a top on. Get away, get away!"

It was at this point that Izzy started to think that perhaps she might have gone through the birds and bees story a little too quickly. She stepped back. "Nothing is touching you now, Will. It's OK. You're not going to make me pregnant."

Will lowered the arms that he was using to block any impregnating look escaping from his eyeballs but he continued to look the other way just to be safe. "You won't?"

"No. Looking at them is all right. I wasn't ready for us to do that before. Why don't you turn and face me?"

"It's alright?"

"Yes, I won't mind. You can open your eyes now." Izzy struck the pose that she had practiced—her feet precisely positioned, her body turned just so, and her smile picture perfect. She wasn't aware that the gruesome smile was back in all of its gruesomeness. It was a good thing that Will focused almost immediately on her chest. He stared and stared and stared.

"Well?"

Izzy had not only anticipated the various words that Will might use to describe what he saw, but she had also planned her own reaction to his compliments. Included in her repertoire of responses was "Thank you, that's very nice of you to say," and "Oh, you're embarrassing me," and "I try to stay fit." She also had practiced, or tried to practice, a modest smile tinged with a bit of pride. Izzy had seen what the bodies of the women in the dissident camps looked like and she knew where her body ranked in comparison to theirs. Unhappily, in her stress, the gruesome smile remained plastered on her face like a super sloppy cow pie on a pristine meadow.

"Interesting."

The gruesome smile morphed into peevishness. "*Interesting?* That's all you have to say. *Interesting?*"

"Yes, interesting. They're like suspension bridges. Your body is the tower that provides the support. Muscles at the top of your chest hold all the weight like bridge cables do and the deck of the bridge hangs naturally from that."

"I have suspension bridges on my chest?!"

"No, of course not. Your breasts are too small for that."

"My breasts are too small?"

"Izzy, all I'm saying is the construction principles are the same as would exist with a suspension bridge. Those bridges are built out of steel, and yours are covered in flesh. Otherwise, they have the same basic engineering design."

Silence. Frigid, space-vacuum grade silence.

Will blundered on, oblivious. "Suspension bridges can sway a lot in a stiff wind. Do yours too? You have no muscles to provide lateral support."

"My... suspension bridges... do not sway in a stiff wind!"

"Probably not. Too small I expect."

"Too small!? Again with the too small?"

"Mind if I look more closely? I won't touch."

"Why not? This is turning into such a special day."

Will approached within an eyelash of touching flesh. He looked from above. He looked from below. He looked from the left side. He looked from the right side. He didn't seem to mind having suspension bridges right in his face.

"What are you looking for?"

"I'll know it when I see it."

"Are they still too small for you?!"

"Do they always jiggle when you stamp your foot like that?"

"Will, you're freaking me out. Go away. I don't want you examining my skin pore by pore. I'm going to sit here and read. You can look at my suspension bridges if you wish but from a distance. If you're going to say something nice to me about them, you can speak to me. Otherwise, don't say a word."

#

In time, Izzy calmed down. Of course, Will would first think in terms of science. Perhaps if she refocused him onto something other than civil engineering.

"Will? Will? Where are you?" She looked up to see Will standing in the crow's nest at the top of the main mast. He was waving at her from behind something long and tubular. It took some squints into the sunshine for Izzy to make out that he had been staring at her through the Wilizy's long-range telescope. The magnification on that instrument was tremendous. "Will," she sighed. "Why don't you come down here and tell me what you're looking for. Leave the telescope where it is."

Will scrambled down quickly. "I can't figure out how your suspension bridges work, Izzy. Do you know?"

"Of course, I know. Ask your questions." *Will doesn't have a romantic bone in his body. Why hadn't I realized that?*

Will stood in front of her lounge chair and asked her to stand up while he took one more look. She did as asked. No alluring pose this time. Just two hands on her hips and a scowl on her face that any normal human would have translated into *Finish this quickly before I rip off your face starting with your toe-nails.*

"The fronts of your bridges don't come off, do they?"

"No, they're fully and permanently attached."

"Can't be taken off with a turning motion, or a popping off motion?"

"No, they can't."

"I thought so. The skin is too smooth—I'd have seen any signs of detachability."

"Oh, wow. I have smooth skin over my bridges. Try not to hyperventilate, Izzy."

"So, where do you pour the milk in if you wanted to feed your baby, Izzy? I've looked and looked for valves and I can't find them. How can you pour milk into your suspension bridges if you don't have valves?"

"You think women pour milk into these?"

"Sure. In my daycare center, women care-givers would take empty glass bottles, unscrew the top, pour milk inside, replace the top, and then let the baby drink. I remember watching them. But, your fronts don't come off and you have no valves where you could dribble milk into the inside. So, how does a mother put the milk inside?"

"You think my suspension bridges are hollow, don't you?"

"Uh huh. And the skin over top of them must be thin. Hank told me that I must always touch them gently. I figured that sharp fingernails or too hard a grip might pop them."

"Like a balloon? And then the milk would spill all over everything."

"Only if they were full at the time, Izzy. Not if they were empty. I expect that yours are empty right now."

Sighing heavily, Izzy took Will's two hands, cautioned him that she wasn't going to get pregnant and then placed them squarely on her two suspension bridges. "Lift them a little. Do they feel empty and hollow?"

"No," Will said hesitantly.

"You may squeeze gently. If you squeeze too hard, you will hurt me. Do they feel empty and hollow?"

"No. Does that mean you have milk inside and you're already pregnant?"

"No. I am not pregnant nor am I likely to become pregnant any time soon. I can guarantee you that! Women's suspension bridges aren't hollow. They are full of milk-making tissues. When a woman becomes pregnant, her body starts to produce the milk inside the bridges. We don't put milk in; we make milk. Other mammals do the same."

Please, oh please, Will, don't compare me to a cow. Don't say cow. Don't say cow. Don't say cow. Don't say...

"Just like a cow, Izzy?"

"Yes, just like a cow, Will. But with better looking suspension bridges."

"You're right."

"That's the high point of my day. Don't say another word, Will. It will ruin the moment. I'm going below to put on my sweat shirt." Izzy left, hoping beyond hope that Will wouldn't say anything more.

"I don't know why you hide them, Izzy. They're just milk delivery systems that are currently inactive."

He couldn't let it go, could he?

Chapter 11

"Izzy sounded cheery," Yolanda commented. It was Friday night and the smell of gun oil wafted gently in the breeze created by a pinky ring powered fan. Even underground gun cellars can become overwhelmingly hot in the A.N.'s baking summer sun.

"Will was in good spirits too. He didn't think much of the London Bridge—said it was just an old bridge. But, he was able to tour a big 3-masted man-of-war that had real cannons. Apparently, Britain's naval fleet has quite a number of them. He also liked the Eiffel Tower. They sell old-fashioned hot dogs at the top of the tower and Will liked them so much that he climbed the stairs every day that they were in Paris."

"I had no idea that Britain and France had emerged out of the oil shock so well," Yolanda said. "When Izzy and Will flew at night, she said that there were pinpricks

of light for as far as they could see. Good call on suggesting that the two of them take a three week holiday in Europe where they wouldn't have to think about security and battles."

"Something needed to be done," Hank said. "Izzy can be very... volatile when she's stressed. Besides, I needed them out of the Wilizy so that we could renovate the ship."

"Is that about finished?" Yolanda asked.

"The command center is up and running. A couple of days more on the new cabins in the hold and we'll be finished."

"Izzy liked all the lights of Paris when they did the river cruise. Said it could have been very romantic," Yolanda continued.

"You don't think she's going..."

"No. Not a chance. The day after whatever happened between her and Will, she took down all of Winnie's pictures in the cabin. Plus, she returned everything on birth control that I had given her. She said that she wouldn't be needing it. Plus, she was extremely frosty with him. I don't think Will noticed."

"Oh, he noticed alright. But, he was completely befuddled. When I asked him what had happened, he said that he had been looking at suspension bridges when Izzy stormed off because of two balloons and a cow."

"That doesn't make any sense. You didn't ask further?"

"Wouldn't want to be accused of meddling."

"Speaking of Yollie, have you heard anything from her?"

"No," Hank said. "Not a word in three weeks."

"You think she's in danger?"

"You know the answer to that, Yolanda. She's watching a spy that Zzyk has gone to great pains to insinuate into the Wilizy. He'll have a trip wire of some kind."

"Are you worried about that?"

"Nope. Any time that a man receives the gift of a woman not talking to him for three weeks, that's considered a good thing in male circles."

"Tread carefully, meddler peddler."

"They're going quite well. Thanks for asking. Two wagons in operation and the DPS guards haven't done anything besides take a good hard look through the wagons."

#

"All of the youngsters seem to enjoy flying their own sling. How is Lucas doing with his?" Hank asked. Lucas, the 10 year old, was the one most likely to black out in the first minute of any unrestricted sling time that the parents gave the boys. Of all their children, Lucas was the most fearless and, at times, the most oblivious of risks to his personal safety. Everyone had agreed that the children needed to have their own slings if they were going to be fully involved in Wilizy battles from now on, even if they were restricted to command center duties. But both parents had insisted on long training times and parental sling controls on speed and turning circles that they could adjust as they got older. Having their own sling, and having time to fly it had been the reward for the youngsters' work on the Wilizy.

"He's staying under control but he still wins all their games of tag."

"Have you thought any more whether the kids should have their own rings for protection?"

This was another of the defensive changes Izzy had talked about to make the kids safer from Zzyk. The decision was left to the parents to make. So far, Yolanda wasn't budging.

"You aren't seriously considering giving Lucas and Theo access to powerful weapons, are you Hank? The way they fight with each other?"

"No, I guess not."

Yolanda gave him a hard stare. "Absolutely out of the question at this age. Right? At the first sign of trouble, all the youngsters are to flee. Right?"

"Those aren't fights. They're just boys being boys, Yolanda."

"It would be nice if they lived long enough to become men."

#

"Is Wolf still patrolling the border for DPS incursions into Aboriginal Nation space?" Yolanda asked.

"Yes, but it's probably not necessary now. He fired a warning shot from the ground at a helicopter the night they reacted to their security towers re-broadcasting all of our WZBN shows throughout Alberta. What an idea! Having Zzyk help us with the shows. Since then, the DPS is very carefully staying in Alberta territory. Workmen are buzzing around the towers, but so far, they can't disrupt the broadcasts. Wolf is using the Wilizy's long range sensors to monitor the whole western border while he and his brothers finish reconfiguring the ship."

"Is Will confident that the WZBN broadcasts can't be stopped without dismantling Zzyk's entire line of security towers?"

"Well, I talked with him about that. He said that he used some spray-on liquid metallic concoction that acted as a distributed receiver and re-broadcaster and it can't be removed easily. At least, that's what I think he said. About 5-minutes later, he said that he would start looking for a different way to broadcast the signals. He had the look that Will gets. I have no idea what he's thinking now."

"Wish I knew how the people in Alberta were reacting to the shows," Yolanda mused. "What about Winnie? Did you discover her secret?"

"Not yet. Winnie can find marshmallows or any other item that I wish to hide, big or small, inside the compound or in the woods. She can't find them if I leave a note for her telling her what I've hidden. She can't find them if I have one of the boys hide them and if I don't tell her that I've done that. If I let it slip that one of her brothers hid the item, she can find it. Does that mean anything to you?"

"It's definitely strange. But, I didn't expect that Nat would want to be an accountant either. Or that he'd have your haggling skills. Now Winnie appears to have some weird object finding powers. I'll ask Mom about that the next time I see her."

#

Granny and Doc were serving as the skeleton crew in the Wilizy while Yolanda and her kids were doing chores around the compound. The boys were weeding—while flying face down over their assigned rows and yanking offending weeds out of

the ground as they passed overhead. Wizard's new method of weeding beat being on your knees in the hot sun and having to shift position every minute. It was even better when they closed the lids on their slings because then they could adjust the baffles to shield them from the blazing sun. From the kitchen, Yolanda was able to keep an eye on their progress by tracking where detached hands were flinging weeds into the air. The weeding went faster this way and the boys had fewer weed-throwing wars. Winnie was lying in her bed, complaining of a headache that her brothers had given her.

Hank was in Alberta delivering his third peddler wagon. Yollie was somewhere, nobody knew where. Wolf was keeping an eye on the Red Deer DPS compound where there had been some curious platoon movements. Soldiers and equipment had entered a remote village, had stayed for the afternoon, and then had returned to base. Wolf had found the activity in his review of surveillance tapes and had told Granny that he would remain in position over Red Deer for the rest of the week. As the Wilizy's head communicator, everybody had a duty to inform Granny, or her assistant Wizard, where they were going to be whenever they changed location.

That summer Monday evening, Izzy was talking with Granny as part of that duty. Will's high altitude communication slings over Hudson's Bay, Labrador and the Atlantic had allowed Izzy to make daily reports from Europe, but now that they were on their way home, Izzy was checking in with Granny every time they passed one of Will's repeater stations over Canada. They had entered Alberta air space and Izzy had been telling Granny about Will's trip to Oxford and how this professor had spotted him immediately as being from Alberta when Granny hit the system-wide button that would send two blasts of a loon's call into everyone's head. Will had initially programmed a loud buzzer but Granny had cajoled him into the loon signal instead. The loon call was followed immediately by Granny's voice: "This is an emergency! All Wilizy to their battle stations over southern Alberta. Report in when ready. Stay off the system wide net otherwise."

Yolanda and her brood flooded into the Wilizy moments later. Doc handed the navigation controls to Yolanda and then took a pinky ring from the emergency storage cupboard and added it to the ship's power grid. Yolanda would have more speed if she needed it, but she also had to be cautious of taking the Wilizy beyond its capabilities. Wizard sat down at the communications console with Granny and made sure that he could speak individually to each Wilizy who was outside the ship. Individual communications would come to him and he'd pass them to Granny as needed; handling system wide messages would be Granny's job.

Lucas, Theo, Mathias and Reese were at their stations in the long-range sensor circle, only a short distance away from Granny and Yolanda so that either of them could help the youngsters if required. Their screens were on but they were watching Yolanda and awaiting orders. Winnie was at another nearby sensor station but had two screens to watch—one scanning the skies immediately overhead, and the other scanning the ground immediately below. Although still pale from her headache, she had insisted she was all right and was watching Granny and her mother.

As soon as Wizard had opened his personal communication channels, Yollie, Wolf, and Hank had all reported to him that they were on their way—all with

expected arrivals above southern Alberta within minutes. They knew enough not to ask for a specific destination yet—Granny would tell them when she knew.

This was not the first time that the Wilizy had been called to the alert. After the command center had been installed and tested, Hank had conducted drills with the youngster until everyone knew how to use their equipment. Then, the drills continued but with Doc and Granny serving as attackers.

From his seat right next to Granny, Wizard could hear her talking on a private link with Hank, the designated second-in-command when Izzy wasn't available. Wizard's face blanched when he heard why they had been called to the ship. Seconds later, Granny informed the full crew.

"Our communication link to both Will and Izzy has been broken and cannot be re-established. I lost Izzy in mid-sentence. All Wilizy members should assume that we have been attacked and Will and Izzy were the targets. Izzy and I had been talking together when she passed over Medicine Hat. We lost contact approximately 5-minutes afterwards. They would have been on a direct line from Medicine Hat to the compound. The Defensive Operations Manager is now in charge of the operation. Yollie, you are now linked to all crew."

Seconds later, Yollie responded. "Stand by for instructions."

Then, nothing. After an uncomfortable delay Yolanda looked at Wizard and whispered, "Is she talking with Hank?" Wizard shook his head. "No-one is talking to anyone."

Then. "Wilizy Captain, please assume a high position above the Rockies and looking eastward towards Medicine Hat. Remain alert for any attack on the ship from any direction. Advise when you are in position."

Doc whispered into Yolanda's ear and she began taking the ship up to what would be an uncomfortable altitude but where there'd be less chance of wind or turbulence slowing them down. "I'll keep an eye on the children," he added.

Yollie had other ideas. "Doc, Hank, and Wolf are to meet me above Medicine Hat. We'll establish a search grid there. Get to the Hat fast but don't draw attention to yourself. Keep an eye out for copters in the air or trucks on the ground. This is open prairie—it will be difficult for the DPS to hide."

Doc left at a run. "Winnie," he bellowed as he left. "Don't get a chill. Put your sweater on."

"Captain, begin long range sensor scans on maximum range for copters or other forms of transport now please. Are you still over the mountains?"

"For the next 10 minutes or so," Yolanda replied.

"Stand by for further instructions in 10 minutes, everyone."

"All scanning stations begin operations," Yolanda ordered. "Winnie, stop looking at Granny and focus on your screens."

#

Yollie ordered the Wilizy to remain over the easternmost Rockies while the adults in the slings searched quickly for signs of a DPS ground force. When no threats were detected, she consulted with the adults on a private net.

"We would have found any significant DPS force, so that leaves the possibility of a small platoon, probably on foot and hiding until nightfall which is...?"

"Coming fast," Yolanda said. "We can't pick out details on the ground any more."

"So, let's assume that a small group of scouts have found Will and Izzy after they had some sort of sling failure. Perhaps they lost their invisibility and had to land and the scouts found them?"

"We'd find evidence of weaponry," Hank said.

"Not if they fell to the ground and were knocked unconscious," Yollie argued. "That would explain how they could be captured and why they're not communicating."

Dead silence. No-one was going to offer the other explanation about what a fall from a great height might cause.

"Do we have anything in the ship that can sense their rings?" Doc asked. "Those would be on even if they were unconscious."

Wolf answered. "No. Will didn't want Zzyk to have the opportunity to find us from ring emissions."

"Do we have anything that we can use to find a fallen body other than long range sensors for body heat?" Yollie asked.

"Just flying low and listening for calls for help?" Wolf suggested.

"OK, system wide net, please Granny."

It was in the following *Address to the Troops* that Yollie established how the members of the Wilizy family would become known in battles from that day forward.

"Listen up, everyone. We are assuming that Will and Izzy fell to the ground through a sling failure and may be unconscious and unable to communicate. There is still a possibility that they have been captured so we will operate with ample caution. The **Wilizy's Warriors** will conduct a search eastward from its current position towards Medicine Hat. Captain, please take the ship low enough to easily read the body heat signature of an unconscious adult. Employ all sensors, but focus heavily on heat signatures. Use a switchback search pattern so that you'll cover a wider search zone. **Sling Warriors** should assume that a small group of DPS scouts may be traveling with captives. They will have no reason to stay hidden now that it's dark and could be on the move. Find them. Everyone stay alert for an ambush."

Lucas was the first to see the thermal heat of two bodies in the distance. Yollie and Wolf investigated and determined first that the bodies were not DPS and then, that the bodies had not been injured. Rather, the two bodies were sitting comfortably by an empty fire pit at the base of what had once been a dam on the Little Bow River but which was now only crumbles of concrete. The water itself had disappeared decades ago.

"Wondered when you'd arrive," Izzy said when Yollie and Wolf shimmered into sight.

"We were thinking of roasting marshmallows for everyone participating in the surprise drill," Will said.

"You'll have to bring the sticks, firewood, and marshmallows," Izzy added. "Surprise!"

"I have lots of wieners from France," Will offered.

"You can eat them with this concrete for all I care," Yollie exploded.

"That's what French bread actually tastes like," Will replied but only Izzy was there to hear him.

#

"So you see, the whole surprise drill was my idea," Granny told the family fuming in the galley. "I decided to spring it on you so that you'd have to run an operation without any warning whatsoever and with everyone being scared. I brought Izzy and Will into the plot but not even Doc knew what I was doing."

"I was totally fooled," Doc agreed. "Granny was right to do this. There'll come a time when we'll have to go to battle with no time to plan and with everyone scared. Going through this once will mean that we'll be better prepared to do it when it's real. You shouldn't be angry at Will and Izzy. Or at Granny."

"Were you really scared, Doc?" Reese asked.

"Scared about Will and Izzy, you bet. Not scared about how everyone in the family would react. I knew we'd all do our jobs. And we did."

"Yollie was the best," Yolanda said firmly and the daughter in question looked up sharply at the comment. "She took charge, kept everyone focused on safety first, and ran a smart operation."

"I liked being called a Warrior," Wizard said.

"Everyone liked that, I think," Hank said and again a glance was exchanged between parent and daughter.

"Here's an idea," Izzy stepped in. "We should always debrief after an operation, and from now on that has to include everyone who was involved in the operation, no matter how young. But, talking it through with so many Warriors in this tiny galley could take a long time. So, how about everyone getting a piece of paper and listing the things that you thought went well. Also, put down anything that you want Will to invent or fix. Will and I weren't able to hear your conversations, so we need you to tell us what would have made this drill go better. Give your paper to either Will or me and then we'll tell you about our trip to Europe. We'll debrief the operation properly tomorrow."

"Yollie, you should name the operation first," Granny said. "Any ideas?"

"It's gotta be Operation Hot Dog."

And that's how it is still known.

Chapter 12

The Narrator: June 22, 2082.

The debriefing meeting started at 11 a.m. and involved only the adults, which now included Wizard. The slips of paper that everyone had submitted revealed a lot of concern about safety, not only for the Warriors during battles, but also about the powerful weapons that the children might need to have access to in their daily lives. For example, Operation Hot Dog revealed that they needed a way to track personnel in case normal communications broke down. This tracking software had to be absolutely secure so that the DPS couldn't use it to ambush them. One option was to add the feature to the braided thumb rings that Will had created. But those rings were already filled to capacity with weaponry. Adding the new

software to the braided rings would make the rings bigger, and therefore even more likely to be noticed than they were now.

Will said that he could install an advanced communications software package into a Warrior's brain plug instead. Brain plugs of that era were first generation computer plugs that were inserted into children's skulls early in their lives as a standard practice worldwide. They had been in existence before the oil shock and the practice survived it. Like today's brain plugs, first generation plugs allowed various electronic devices, like a pinky ring or a storage bot, to feed data directly into a human's brain, and from there, to a vision field. While today's third generation brain plugs now extend the connections to other senses, what existed in the 2080s was a primitive way of moving data from machine to human. Brain plugs back then were so common that nobody would expect a standard looking brain plug to be anything but that.

Will said he could create a Wilizy brain plug that looked normal on the outside, but had very sophisticated capabilities inside. In addition to standard machine-to-human electronic transfer, the new brain plug would also allow a Wilizy Warrior to voice-talk or mind-talk to any other Warrior, provided they both were wearing their braided ring computers and were within range of each other, the ship, or one of Will's repeater stations. No-one could overhear that conversation unless he had a Wilizy brain plug. If any Warrior had his brain plug removed or tampered with, an alarm would sound throughout the entire Wilizy communications network.

Will would also include a Warrior tracking device within the brain plug. Since the brain plug was always on, so too would the tracking system be always on. Even if a Warrior couldn't respond to a voice- or mind-call, any other Warrior could find his location in an emergency.

They had a long discussion about their braided ring and the power of its weaponry. Will had created the thumb ring when Izzy was being held hostage and time was short. He crammed everything he could into a largish ring that was originally intended to be a prototype but became an emergency escape tool instead. Its size and its unique appearance would soon be noticed and, at that point, the Warriors could become easily identified. Will could decrease the weaponry component so that it would fit within what looked like a normal pinky ring computer but nobody wanted him to do that. However, they all agreed that the braided ring had to be replaced with something less noticeable. Hank and Yolanda added another request. Could he include a feature in the device that would allow them to limit the powers that their children could access until they were mature enough to handle the responsibility? Will agreed to test out various prototypes.

On the likelihood of anyone falling from the sky, Will couldn't think of any reason why the slings would fail without warning. They had had a situation in Chicago where a gang of young boys used pebbles of some kind to shut down all the energy sources in their vicinity but that couldn't happen when a Warrior was slinging above the clouds. Will was curious how the pebbles worked but studying them would be impossible without a workable energy source to conduct microscopic examinations and no energy source that he knew about would function near the pebbles. At some point, he might pursue that inquiry but not now. He had too much else to do. The meeting was then turned over to Yollie to

give her assessment of the technician. I will leave Yollie to report her findings in her own words.

From Yollie's journals: June 22.

I have to admit that Scrawny Butt runs a tight meeting. She had predicted 30-40 minutes for the debriefing discussion, and she was right on. She had also told me privately that Operation Hot Dog had been run well; no-one had made any suggestion for improving it. So, with Mother and Dad also throwing some praise my way, I was feeling pretty good about making my report on Clumsy but Brave. Note to self: find out what his name is!

"I have no doubt that he's been planted on us," I started. "I expect everyone here would expect him to be a spy from the suspicious way that he was dangled in front of us. I did myself, and that's why I've been observing him daily, sometimes as an acquaintance just dropping by, sometimes in invisible surveillance mode. He knows that I'm from the Wilizy although we haven't talked about that openly."

No-one flinched when I said "daily." Scrawny Butt had said to keep visits to a minimum, but that wasn't possible. Now to deal with the two sales-hags and their unauthorized readings.

"He is extremely angry. He wants to kill. Those surface emotions jumped right out at me. I'm sure that Mother and Granny would see those emotions too, even though he's not in their age group. Based on only that information, it's natural to consider him a threat to all of us."

There. I told Mother that she was sort of right and restrained myself from saying anything about the meddling. Granny gave me two quick eye blinks. Our private approval signal. Granny and I have always been close. I have a good relationship with my dad, but Granny is the one I run to when something is wrong between me and Mother. Granny understands me because she and Mother had issues of their own. Granny has told me about things that she had done wrong when she was raising my mother. Also, there are things in her life that she wished she had done differently. She won't tell me what those were, and I don't pry, but I do know that she really disapproved of my dad when he started dating her daughter. Mother had insisted that he was a good man, and Granny had tried to warn her otherwise. They had a big break up about it. Granny told me that they were both right, which is impossible I think, but she won't talk about it.

"There is much more to this man than the surface conclusion that he's a plant out to harm us. I can read this man more clearly than anyone I've ever read before. I can see through all the anger right down to his core. Deep down, he's a good man. It would be far out of character for him to hurt us unless he had no other choice. That's what I have read, and I have seen nothing in the six weeks that I have been observing him to change that judgement. He's a decent man."

"I've learned some things about the man that may help us to understand him better. For example, I can tell you that he is not an Albertan. An IOF man would shy away from incidental contact. IOF citizens have a very low tolerance to people intruding into their private space but he had no reaction whatsoever when I deliberately and repeatedly touched his arms. Doc operated on him, and other

than the pain, he had no reaction to someone touching his body so painfully. This man could not have been born or raised in Alberta. This raises the question of how he can look so much like an Albertan, but we can investigate that later."

"I can also tell you that he has never worn a brain-band—at least not one that controls his emotions. He had no trouble controlling whatever emotions he had after removing his brain-band the first night. Nor did he react at all to eating a chocolate covered food bar that I deliberately placed in his supplies that same evening. He ate it just as though he had tasted real chocolate all of his life. I am certain that the brain-band that he wore was there for a reason, but it wasn't to control his emotions."

"There's something on the left side of his head that he doesn't want to touch. He never touches that side of his head with his hand or anything else. He'll smooth his hair on the right side, but not on the left. At times, he raises his left hand to scratch his head, catches himself, and then drops the hand as though it were burned."

Now, to report on the sales-hags. I had known they were coming, of course. Granny had told me. She also said that I could get along better with people if I learned to listen and keep my big fat mouth shut, so why didn't I try that for a change? Her exact words. Granny isn't shy about speaking her mind. So, I heard Dad saying some things that sounded right and they fit right in with what I had been seeing. A skeptical person might wonder if Dad had asked Granny to arrange for me to be there so that he could slip me his ideas. I don't think that happened. Granny and Dad are polite to each other, but there's something cold between them. Probably coming from way back when Granny disliked him. Still, I think he's right. I don't know how to give him credit for the ideas without revealing that Granny and Mother disobeyed Izzy's orders. I'll thank him privately.

"The technician had an unusual reaction when two fat old peddler women came through town. The technician looked through all of their wares with interest like everyone else in town did. But, he spent a lot of time looking at the clothes for young girls. Why were these items of so much interest that he would actually put them in his hand and almost caress them? Everything about that incident suggests that he has a young daughter. Having such a daughter would require a mother who is not an IOF woman. I suspect that one or both are being used as levers to ensure his continued good behaviour."

"Knowing that the technician has been put into our midst to harm us, it would be easy to just send him back to Zzyk. I suspect that such a decision would go badly for him. I'm reading an internal desperation that is mounting steadily. He asks me almost daily now if the Wilizy has made up its mind about him yet."

"The question for us is: Do we want to find out why Zzyk has a foreigner working for him? One who claims to be a computer expert? One whose Albertan disguise has not failed in six weeks? Do we want to know what he and Zzyk are up to?"

"I believe that the technician might be willing to provide us with some answers. He speaks with no apparent guile to me. If some of us were to meet with him, we'd have to ensure that he is not able to touch the left side of his head, and we should observe some general security steps like a blindfold. The risk to us seems minimal;

the gain would be tremendous if he proved to be a foreigner working under coercion and truthfully willing to defect."

The Narrator: June 23, 2082.

Yollie held up a sign in front of the technician: "The Wilizy is prepared to talk with you directly. Right now. Do you have anything on or in your body that will transmit that conversation to the DPS?"

"No," said the technician out loud. "You removed the microphone. There is nothing else."

Yollie and the technician were inside his mostly empty, one-room cabin. Its furniture consisted of a cot, a table, and one chair. There was no kitchen but some plates, glasses, and cutlery were on a shelf. Various print reading materials were also on that shelf, most of them with markings from the New York City library. No bots were present because the Wilizy had taken away his pinky ring computer. The village women took turns bringing him food, providing clean clothes, towels and sheets, and even serving as company if he wanted some. An out-house was behind the cabin; a communal water pump in the middle of the village served as a source of water for washing and for drinking. Personal hygiene needs such as a razor, soap, toothpaste and toothbrush were stored loosely underneath his cot. A sturdy rocking chair with a pad was situated outside the cabin and it was here that the technician spent almost all of his time – reading.

Putting aside some other signs, Yollie switched gears. "We will expect you to tell the truth. Any lies or less than full disclosures will end the meeting. I have to tell you that you've been under intense surveillance and we know a lot about you already."

"I will tell the truth."

"Are you willing to be placed under restraints and be blindfolded?"

"Yes."

"I should tell you that the people you are here to harm will not be in this room but will be observing from a distance."

"Will and Izzy. Yes, that's understandable."

"Others will be here in the room but you won't be able to see them. They will not harm you, so if you sense them coming in and moving around, do not be alarmed."

"I am used to being under surveillance. Such things are of no concern to me."

"Please sit at the table. I will tie your hands to the chair legs and put a blindfold over your eyes. Let me know if you become uncomfortable. A man will conduct the interrogation."

#

"Tell us your name."

"John."

"Where were you born and raised?"

"I was born in a place my people call *The Citadel*. It's a fortress somewhere in Alaska—I don't know exactly where. When I was very young, my father was transferred to a place called Prudhoe Bay where my people had an oil installation."

I grew up there. My mother was given another assignment and I saw her only intermittently. My real name is Ivan, which means John in your language."

"What is your normal skin colour?"

"White."

"Why did you come to Alberta and work for Zzyk?"

"I had no choice. My people traded me to Zzyk in exchange for something. I do not know what that was. I had technical skills that he wanted. Plus, I was of no further use to my people."

"Why were you of no further use?"

"It's a long story."

"We have lots of time."

"Before *The Citadel*, my ancestors were living in a dictatorship. After the oil shock came to my country and the peasants rose in revolution, the military used that as an excuse to round up all the smartest people in the country and take them to a large, remote, hidden base that was constructed to be impregnable. It is from that military installation that we have taken our name. The military had a list of everyone they wanted to capture so they must have been planning this for some time. The generals ordered the civilians to breed frequently among themselves. No one could refuse. They thought that if only geniuses were making babies then their babies would be geniuses too."

"Those children who were born with average intelligence or less were discarded. Then, smart adults educated the smart children, who became smarter than their parents. Then, they were required to breed. But the collection of breeders became smaller and smaller as more children were born who were not suitable for retention. Those too were discarded. This experiment now appears to be reaching a natural conclusion. There are now far too many flawed babies from too much inbreeding. No effort is being made to expand the breeding pool. This does not make any sense to me but I am not a geneticist."

"After the earthquake of '48 and the resulting tsunami, our military took advantage of the chaos along the Pacific Rim to relocate all of our operations and our people to Alaska. As I've said, I lived in Prudhoe Bay, which is the terminal for Albertan oil. From there, the oil is shipped to Alberta's customers. The north side of Alaska did not receive much earthquake damage, so it was easy to re-establish the port's functionality. We operate the port and have an effective military force in the area to deter invaders."

"When I grew up, the village of Prudhoe still had its original inhabitants, and we were their unwelcome intruders. Villagers who complained about us taking their houses and businesses disappeared. Soon, we were welcome. When I turned 16, I was required to mate with all the women in the breeding pool who were brought to the village for that reason. I didn't like any of them. I chose a villager. She became pregnant. We were eventually discovered. She was executed in front of me and the entire village as a warning of what happens if you disobey. There weren't that many villagers around by then to impress. My wife's execution was intended to keep their tame geniuses in line. I was traded to Zzyk because they didn't want me in the village infecting the others. I am told that my 2-year-old daughter remains in the village. I am told that she will live and I may be allowed to return to the village if I kill Will and Izzy."

Hank paused to give the Wilizy a chance to reflect.

#

"Are you the technician who saw Izzy's cartoon of Zzyk and distributed it?"

"No such technician existed and no cartoon was distributed. Only an insane DPS officer would do such a thing. I was being prepared to help in Will's capture long before Izzy drew that cartoon. Only when it became possible that Izzy might escape from the childcare center was I given my instructions and told to watch her mother being tortured. I was carrying the bomb and had the open microphone at that point. They just had to exchange my fake brain-band for an exploding brain-band and I'd be ready for you to rescue me. Since the project that I was responsible for was designing and manufacturing that exploding brain-band, I had been given the generous offer to field test my own creation."

"We were expected to discover the threats?"

"No, I was instructed to show them to you so that you'd be more likely to think of me as a sympathizer."

"And the brain-band explosive?"

"To be used in case I found myself in a position to kill someone important. They didn't expect that you'd require its removal so early. I had been given the code word to disarm it, otherwise the brain-band would have exploded when I attacked the screws with my knife."

"And now, you have no way of killing anyone important?"

"I didn't say that. But, you are safe from me for the moment."

#

"What do you want from us?" Hank asked.

"Reunite me with my daughter so that we can live with the Wilizy. I will fight with you against the evil people in Alberta and in *The Citadel* for as long as my daughter is alive and safe. If she is killed after we are reunited, you may use me as a disposable weapon."

"We have plenty of weapons and we have no intention of fighting the people of *The Citadel*."

"You should hope that you won't have to. Our leaders claim that our fortress is impregnable and cannot be destroyed. Plus, we have been told that our military is now testing offensive weapons that cannot be blocked. Our military will not be content much longer to hide in Alaska."

"They'll invade Alberta?"

"I do not know. They do not share their plans with ordinary geniuses. But, I do know that Zzyk and my people are very close. One of our top scientists has been working with Zzyk for decades. It is more likely that they will join forces with Zzyk to defeat you. At that point, you will have to fight them."

"You say you're a genius?"

"Everyone in any position of authority in *The Citadel* is a genius. I am not a technician. I am a computer scientist. I am the most knowledgeable person in the IOF on computer-related operations. I have worked directly under Zzyk and know a little bit of his plans, although I must confess that what little scraps that I have managed to overhear may prove to be planted information. I do have intensive

knowledge of their entire computer network. As soon as Zzyk learns that I have escaped from him and joined the Wilizy, he will give my underling responsibility for blocking my access. I have been forced to train my replacement, but I fear that I have been a terrible teacher. For a short time at least, they will not be able to keep me out of their computer networks. During that period, I can destroy their computer network completely, or if you like, I can use it for your secret surveillance."

"That's it? Some rinky-dinky computer stuff is all you can offer?"

"You are joking, I think. I must tell you that I have no sense of humour. It was not a requirement in the genetic make up of the breeding pool. I used to have emotions. I used to love. I used to laugh. Now, the only emotions left to me are hatred towards the person responsible for my wife's execution and desperation to keep my daughter from becoming one of them."

"I apologize for trying to joke. News of *The Citadel* is a little difficult for us to grasp. I did not mean to offend. Do you have anything else to say that will influence our decision to accept or reject your offer?"

"I can tell you how Zzyk is going to find your geographic location. I can also tell you how Will and Izzy will be killed if Zzyk's plan works. I can also tell you what gift Zzyk will give the citizens of Alberta in the very near future."

"And from us, you want what?"

"Your word that you will do your utmost to rescue both me and my daughter."

"Only our word?"

"It is the most valuable thing that the Wilizy has, is it not?"

Chapter 13

Friday, June 25—gun cleaning night at the compound. This evening, in addition to guns, gun oil, brushes and swabs, the table held a bowl of raspberries that Yolanda was sharing with Hank.

"Do you have enough raspberries for the birthday parties?" Hank was trying to determine how many he could eat. They were his favorite dessert and he could polish off the whole bowl by himself. Yolanda didn't like the seeds, so she ate sparingly.

"Barely. Do you have any idea what kind of birthday parties Will had in the past? Cake? Gifts?" Yolanda was in charge of setting up family celebrations. Will was turning 16 on June 30.

"No idea. I doubt he had any parties. You could ask."

"Ruin the surprise."

"Are we celebrating Wolf's and Wizard's birthday at the same time as Will's?"

"Their 17th and 14th. Of course. Too many parties; not enough ice cream otherwise."

"Did you arrange for all of our Ws to be born close together?"

"Yup. Part of the master plan."

"Thought so."

"Do you have any idea why Izzy is so secretive about her birthday?"

"No. But, I do know that she's older than Will. She was teasing him that he was finally catching up to her. Perhaps Doc will know."

"I asked him but he can't remember. Don't get gun oil on the raspberries. I might want a few."

"Woman should count herself lucky man doesn't just pour them down his throat."

"You'd do that if I weren't here, wouldn't you?"

"Yup. All the boys would too if it they had a bowl to themselves and you weren't watching. So would Yollie."

Yolanda couldn't dispute that. It was only a matter of time before Winnie would join the evil raspberry gulping forces. Yolanda had tried it once when she was alone and had choked and dropped the whole bowl into the underbrush. "Yollie did a nice job on the surveillance report," she said to change the subject.

"She did, didn't she? Do you and Granny agree with Yollie now?"

"The little details that she picked up supported her arguments."

"So, she's not infatuated with him after all?"

"I didn't say that. Raspberry-chugging man not wise in the way of women. Must listen and learn."

"She **is** infatuated?"

"Duh."

#

"Were the Wilizy directors all in favour of accepting John under tight conditions?" Yolanda had missed the meeting in order to care for Winnie who had been laid low with another headache. She had sent her vote in with Hank.

"Yah. I told Izzy that the vote was unanimous and she and Will are going to meet with him from a distance next week. He's not to have any technology other than the pinky ring we're going to give him and it's been stripped nearly bare. For the time being, he doesn't leave the village. In the meantime, Will and Izzy are going to investigate that Red Deer area village and see if they can determine why the DPS were there. That will give us a chance to pretend ignorance and see if he coughs up the right information. They'll pressure him to reveal what else he's been holding back too."

"We rescue him and his daughter, but we don't trust him?" Yolanda wanted confirmation.

"No trust whatsoever. Not now at least."

"Good."

#

"Did any of the youngsters get nightmares from the surprise operation?"

"Nothing apparent. They were all scared though. Wizard turned white when he heard the news. The four horsemen of doom looked like someone had shot their horses. All five of those boys have secret crushes on Izzy, you know."

"So do I."

Yolanda snatched the half empty bowl of raspberries and put it on the floor by her feet. "Man will find it difficult to eat more raspberries so long as he has big fat foot inside tiny cramped mouth."

"Did Winnie handle it OK?"

"She surprised me. Of all our children, Winnie is the closest to Izzy and she never missed a beat when Granny said that Izzy was missing. She was a little slow to start on her scans but then she handled the night like it was just another test run."

"Did you check with Granny about the marshmallow puzzle?"

"She can't explain it. Marshmallows aren't a big issue now—I'm concerned about Winnie's headaches. Both times now she's complained that the boys are giving them to her. The first time, the boys said that they had been trying to get her to play her hide and find game with them. That was it. No teasing. After the second headache, I talked to each of them separately. They all swore up and down that they were only playing amongst themselves. She was flying around in large circles above them, but they weren't bothering her. They weren't lying, Hank."

"Says the mom truth-o-meter?"

"She who dishes out desserts always receives full truth."

"Winnie wouldn't lie."

"Nor would she fake headaches."

"Did you talk to her?"

"Of course. She just says she gets the headaches from the boys."

"Are you going to involve Doc?"

"Not yet. I'm going to lie down with her next time she has one and try to soothe her. The headaches are pretty painful, I think."

"As painful as raspberry withdrawal, oh wise mother of my children?"

"Foot now removed. Wise mother going to bed. Don't eat all the raspberries at once when I'm gone."

"Of course not. I might choke and drop the whole bowl into the underbrush."

"You saw me?"

"Man sees everything. Knows when to keep big mouth shut. Most of the time."

#

The following Monday found Will and Izzy circling invisibly over a farm a couple of kilometers east of Coronation, Alberta. Coronation was the small farming community where, last week, a DPS platoon from Red Deer had spent an afternoon with the town's citizens in their community hall. Izzy had selected this particular farm to watch because it was situated all by itself well outside of town and therefore not under the possible scrutiny of neighbours. The farmer's wife had three high school girls spending the summer with her as field hands. The four of them were pitchforking hay up onto a horse drawn wagon as Izzy watched from her sling. No-one else was in sight.

Izzy wanted first to determine if the four women had been watching the WZBN broadcasts and what they thought about them. As part of that conversation, she'd slip in some questions about what the DPS platoon had been doing in town. It was possible that these women had not been taken to the community hall, but they'd have heard about it.

Izzy stepped out of her sling behind the barn and straightened her clothes. She was wearing her Wilizy colours—an emerald green top with white shorts. She figured that if she were recognized, that would mean that the women had seen the network shows and she was hoping for a friendly greeting. Will was circling high overhead, watching all the approaches to this small plot of parched hay-strewn farmland.

If recognition was the dessert that Izzy wanted, she received all she could handle plus some extra helpings as well. She was half way across the hay field—the women were leaning on their pitchforks and watching her approach. Then, full, withering, and unbridled recognition.

"It's that Wilizy Bitch," the matron muttered. All four women hoisted their pitchforks to shoulder levels and, as in the days of yore when knights would make fierce charges with their swords extended, so too did these four women charge at Izzy. No horses were in sight, except the two tied up to the wagon. Certainly no swords. Just four very deadly pitchforks and four lusty lungs shrieking at the top of their lungs, "Kill the Wilizy Bitch!"

This was not the greeting that Izzy had expected, so she may be excused for her short lapse into indecision. She had all the weaponry she needed to laser the women well before they reached her, but those would be fatal wounds and those wounds would receive a lot of attention. She couldn't fly away—she was in a wide-open field and these women would certainly talk about the Wilizy Bitch suddenly disappearing. Izzy did the prudent thing. She turned and ran towards the closest place of refuge, which was the barn.

Melissa of the Wilizy, the princess companion to Zorro, did not have a stylish pair of hiking boots in her closet to wear to this social occasion. Instead, she had chosen moccasins, which did have the white and emerald green colours embroidered in beads on their tops. But they were missing one critical component—shoelaces or the Velcro equivalent.

Izzy outran her moccasins in her first two steps. Galvanized by the pain of running barefooted through a field of needle-like shorn stalks, Izzy fell onto her face almost immediately. Behind her, four very lusty, strong, and lethally armed women were closing the gap.

Running again, Izzy mind-yelled to Will. *Stay invisible. Trip them. Kick away their pitchforks when they fall. I'll be in the barn.*

Will managed the tripping part quickly and easily. He didn't have to worry about their pitchforks. The women made no attempt to pick up their weapons after falling, but continued their homicidal assault, arms outstretched to their limit, fingers clenching and unclenching around what soon would be the Wilizy bitch's neck.

They're mad, Izzy. Stark raving mad.

Indeed, that certainly seemed to be the case, given their bugged out eyes. Shrieking words had been replaced by a murderous howl.

I found a pitchfork, Izzy announced.

That won't stop them and you can't kill them, Izzy. These women aren't sane. Will materialized in front of Izzy at that point and scanned the barn's interior. "Stand behind me. I'll slow them down."

Will grasped an eight-foot long rusty bar of iron that had been propped up against a dilapidated wagon with a deck of crumbling plywood supported by four large iron wheels. For a second, he eyed the wheels, but they were solidly attached to the wagon. He hoisted the iron bar horizontally in his hands, flexed his biceps, and prepared to bar the barn's entrance for as long as he could. For a self-described plodding thinker, Will was decisive when it came to protecting Izzy.

"I can't stop them all—the opening to the barn is too wide. I'll try to let only one get by at a time. Use your martial arts. Flip them into the air if you can. Knock them unconscious or at least wind them."

Izzy did just as Will had instructed. Will would let the shrieking women elude him one at a time and Izzy would grab the hands poised to throttle her, fall back onto the barn floor and use her two feet to catapult the woman to the other end of the barn where she'd land with a thud. After repeating the same throw with the next three, she'd position herself behind Will again and await the next rush. Four times, the women attacked and four times Izzy hoisted them one at a time into the air to fall with a thud and a groan. There was no planning to their attack. It was a mindless charge that served no benefit other than raising dust from the barn's floor. Now hoarse from their shrieks, the women were reduced to grunts as they attacked and grunts as they thudded to the ground.

Izzy looked at her attackers as she positioned herself behind Will for the fifth attack. The farmer's wife and her three farm hands were slowly prying themselves off the rough timbers of the barn's floor, their eyes still crazy, mouths opening and closing soundlessly, hands clasped around their heads now.

"Close your eyes," Izzy shouted. Her words had no effect. The women were exhausted and bloody but still, one shuffled forward. "Close your eyes," she repeated. The other three were on their feet now and staggering towards Izzy, hands outstretched for that elusive Wilizy bitch throat.

"Will, tell them to close their eyes with me on 3. 1... 2... 3!"

"Close your eyes!!"

The matron did and received immediate relief. "Girls, close your eyes," she barked. "The pain will stop."

And it did.

#

Will and Izzy helped the four women into the kitchen, Izzy grabbing four gray well-worn flannel shirts from the sagging clothesline on the way in. She helped the women collapse into kitchen chairs and bound the shirts around their eyes. Then, she and Will went from one to the other administering first-aid, offering water, and wiping off sweat and blood.

When all were calm, Izzy began a conversation, first introducing herself as Melissa and then her protector as Will. When she found out what the DPS platoon had done in general, she asked some specific questions. What equipment did they use? Did they bring props? How many soldiers were there? How long did they keep the citizens in the hall? Did they show more than one picture of her on the projector? What did the soldiers say about the Wilizy? Did they touch anybody's brain-bands? Did they take them off?

Clear now on what had happened, Izzy described what the women had tried to do to her in the barn—they had no memory of it whatsoever. She also explained that they had acted so crazily because the DPS had repeatedly showed them a picture of her in the Wilizy green and white clothes. That image was then accompanied by massive bolts of pain. To make the pain stop, the people had to yell *Kill the Wilizy Bitch* while throttling stuffed animals. She told them that the DPS had conditioned the people of Coronation to become mindless murderers any time they saw Izzy in that particular green and white apparel.

Izzy also learned that the community generally liked the shows and would watch them every evening if they weren't being pain zapped every time a Melissa Moment came on. "I'm going to cancel all the Melissa Moments where I'm reading in those green and whites," Izzy said. "Give me a week to do that. If you wish to watch shows in the meantime, just close your eyes during those readings. Tell everyone in Coronation."

While Izzy went into the field to retrieve her moccasins, her feet now protected by a set of wooden clogs, Will asked the farm lady about the rusty iron lying around the barn and would they like to get rid of it? Turns out that they did and their neighbours had lots of old iron to dispose of too. When the negotiations were completed, it was agreed that any iron lying around their yard would disappear from time to time. In return, they could keep Izzy's white and green moccasins which one of the teenagers was now clutching to her body in a death grip, defying either of her two school mates to take them from her.

"If you could give us a schedule of the shows, we'd know when the Young and the Restless was on. Oh, and Dad wants some hockey games," the farmer's wife yelled after them as they walked down the lane.

Izzy and Will looked at each other. "What's a young and restless?" Izzy asked.

"I wouldn't mind some hockey games myself," Will admitted.

From Izzy's journals: Monday, June 28.

I couldn't believe what Zzyk had done to those poor people in Coronation. Torturing them to stop me from reading bits of poetry? I fumed all the way back to the Wilizy, and even then, I wasn't finished fuming. Will said something like "About those hockey games," when we reached home but I wasn't going to spend time right now finding old hockey games to transmit to the Coronation farmer. Told him so. He looked a little hurt, and part bewildered, and I guess I did come on a little strong, but, I mean, Zzyk was torturing innocent people! Finding game tapes of the Nuckaluts versus the Dames, or whatever the old B.C. and Alberta hockey teams were called, was not very high on my priority list. He left the room; hadn't done that to me before. Usually, I'm the one to storm out.

That made me furious all over again at him. I could have used a little support. He had been all tender and considerate to a bunch of strangers, but did I receive any emotional support? No, I didn't. They used my face to trigger their attacks! Zzyk will be conditioning the entire province to hate me! To try and kill me! Kill the Wilizy bitch! Kill the Wilizy bitch! Kill the Wilizy bitch. I had 10 years of my life

with all the dissidents hating my guts, now I was going to have another 10 years with the entire province hating me?

Yeah, I know. Will protected me and did it very well. Instantaneous plan. He was as exhausted as I was when it was over. But that's Will. Great at the strong, silent stuff. The science stuff. The muscle stuff. But, a boy friend should be more than just a macho calculating machine. Right?

I had to be alone; took off into the sky and played astronaut until I threw up all over my clothes. Still wearing my good clothes. Way to go, Izzy. I used to enjoy making the steep dives and climbs in the sling that would leave me weightless. Now I throw up.

Zipped over to the Okanagan and put the sling down in one of the lakes—not sure which one. Then I tried doing gentle dives into the deep water and back up again. Surfaced enough to breathe, and then dove down deep again. Like a dolphin would do if any of them still existed. Slowly. Slowly.

I don't know if the cold water cooled me off, or if I couldn't stay mad when I had to concentrate so hard on breathing, but it worked.

I finally realized that Zzyk wouldn't spend all that time and effort to condition an entire village against a silly girl reading a poem. It had to be a test run. I did some thinking; test run of what?

I think he was researching how to reprogram the brain-bands. This particular shock treatment wasn't going to work because the people in Coronation were locked into the image of me in the specific green and whites I had been wearing. I could easily counter the conditioning by changing my clothes, or the backdrop in the scene—anything, actually. But, how was Zzyk really going to reprogram the citizens?

I couldn't find an answer. Too many possibilities. But, knowing that he was going to try to change the programming in the brain-bands was enough. It was time to go home. I opened the baffles and ran the sling through the lake water at some speed. No soap, but it did flush away most of my recycled lunch. Dried off on the way home with a high-speed air run; found Will; told him I'd look for tapes of the old hockey games. He just looked at me. Like he didn't understand. Didn't say *Thanks* or anything.

Started fuming inside all over again.

Chapter 14

Izzy called a Wilizy Directors and Managers meeting for Wednesday morning to discuss what she and Will had learned in Coronation. That meeting would also include a conversation with the technician. She spent all Tuesday by herself and only returned to the ship Wednesday morning to find everyone waiting, aghast at what Will had disclosed. Izzy declined to talk about the assaults on the people, saying that she had called the meeting to talk about the strategic value of what they had learned and what they could do about it. Zzyk was trying to turn the citizens of Alberta against them; how could they counter that?

Izzy then outlined a long list of ideas that she had developed after the Coronation tortures and the group discussed each. All of Izzy's ideas were approved. When she asked for other ideas, no-one had anything to offer. *Blown away* would be an apt description of what the directors and managers were experiencing right now. Izzy called a break in the meeting so that she could talk with Stu.

#

Stu closed the connection between him and Izzy and sat back in his chair. Quite the conversation! Mostly one sided. He had listened and taken notes; Izzy had spewed ideas.

Of course, he would run the WZBN, but he'd think more about it first because that's what she wanted. He didn't mind losing all of his income from his legal business—this project would be far more exciting. But Izzy was right that he'd have personal expenses and would need a salary. A small amount, perhaps. He'd run it by Wizard first.

Izzy's warning that Stu would become the public face of the WZBN and so might attract the wrong kind of attention was troubling. But, Izzy said that they'd put secure communication links into his office and his home, help him interview all new staff, and conduct security sweeps of his home and office. Plus, somebody named Doc would visit him in Cranbrook and install something that would give him personal safety. Izzy declined to elaborate on that over the phone. All of Stu's personal safety considerations were swept aside by the invitation to sit on the Wilzy's Board and attend all meetings, via a video link as necessary. He'd have a vote on all important decisions and would provide input. For Stu, that offer alone was worth the risk.

Running through his notes, Stu pulled out the tasks that needed his attention first.

Izzy wanted to tape more Melissa Moments but not in the same clothes. Combing all of the local stores for clothes in Izzy's size that had white and emerald somewhere visible was doable for the right person. Delivery to the TV studio for sizing and approval would also be easy. Somebody would have to coordinate the tapings with the studio people. One of many tasks for an executive assistant perhaps.

That person could also take charge of expanding the programming hours that Izzy had talked about. Perhaps they should look at two different channels so that people could have two choices of shows each hour. That would be a full time job for this person. Not an executive assistant then. A Programming Manager. Perfect for his current assistant who was overqualified for what he had been assigning her.

A Website Manager would be needed. Perhaps a part time position. Posting a schedule of their shows was valuable, but that was not time consuming to do. Allowing an opportunity for their viewers to give feedback and make programming suggestions could be labour intensive if anybody was actually watching the shows in Alberta and was willing to comment. Izzy was closed-mouthed about the number of viewers that she had interviewed. Call it a half position. Some technical

skills required, but mostly communication skills. Call the position a Communications Manager (part time), probably.

Next—searching for old hockey game broadcasts. There weren't any in the New York City Library bots, Izzy had said. Could we find other sources? Vancouver used to have TV stations—perhaps one of them had stored their tapes safely. Someone could track those down. Call it a Communications and Acquisitions Manager (full time) then. Perhaps they had stored tapes of other sports besides hockey?

All of Izzy's other ideas would have to wait.

#

Izzy returned to the meeting in the galley. "Stu is interested in running the WZBN. I told him to take 24 hours to think about it, but I'm sure he'll take the job. I also alerted our contact with the B.C. government about *The Citadel*; he wants us to keep him informed. As far as they knew, Alaska was mostly unpopulated and still living in the dark ages. Has Yollie given John the pinky ring?" Seeing Will nod, she told him to shut off the video feed out of the Wilizy. At their end, they would be able to see and hear John. For John and Yollie however, they would only be able to hear them.

"We're ready," Yollie said.

"Let's begin," Izzy replied. "Do you prefer John or Ivan?"

"It is good to hear your voice again, Izzy. I like neither name. John reminds me of being imprisoned within a four letter IOF computer name, and Ivan reminds me of my wife. Call me anything else you like."

"Tech Guy for now? TG for short?"

"TG allows me to break the IOF naming rules. This is good."

"Apologies for the precautions of this meeting."

"Of course. Be sure that Yollie takes this pinky ring with her when she leaves and she should never leave me alone with it."

"We get down to business quickly in the Wilizy, so let's start. How will Zzyk find our location?"

"Zzyk has instructed me to offer you secret access to the IOF computer network. Naturally, I would be the person to break into the network but some of you would be watching to ensure that I didn't leave any messages. You would tell me what you wanted to know. I would then open certain files and allow you to read the data. The files will all have unrecognizable file names so you would have to rely on me to open the files that you want. The data that I showed you would appear to be valuable, and you would want me to show you more. Each time I revealed more of Zzyk's secrets, you would trust me more."

"You'd be showing us false data?"

"Yes, in part. The network that I supposedly would be accessing is a mix of old records that are no longer valid, current records that have been doctored, and new records that will not hurt Zzyk if you read them. Much of the material is duplicated and stored under different file names to make it appear that the network I have penetrated is very large. Each time I access the network I will be conveying a message to Zzyk. Like, *I am safe and now working for the Wilizy*. Or, *They are beginning to trust me*. And, when I become aware of the geographical

location of your main base, or if I know where you or Will are going to be on a certain day and time, I will send him that specific information. I will do all of this without transmitting a single keyboard character to Zzyk."

"No transmissions from you whatsoever?"

"None. You won't be able to catch me sending him information, coded or otherwise, because I won't be."

"How will you send the messages, then?"

"When you ask me to reveal Zzyk's secrets, I will open certain files for you to read. What files I open and in what order I open them will be the treachery."

"You are familiar enough with every fake file name so that you can access any particular report and let us read it?"

"But, of course. The plan wouldn't work otherwise, and Zzyk gave me plenty of time to organize the fake database and the fake filenames."

"So, we can stop Zzyk's plan simply by not looking into his files. Then, you can't betray us."

"But that would be out of character. Zzyk expects a certain amount of delay, but having access to all of his secrets and not looking at them would be a sign that I had betrayed him and he'd kill me. I have several weeks remaining before he'll do that. Not much longer, I think."

"How would he kill you if he doesn't know where you are?"

"He doesn't need to know. He just pushes a button and when that signal eventually reaches me, I am dead."

"How?"

"There's a hair on my head. One of my own. The signal will push the hair out of its pore. I don't know how death will come. But death is triggered when the hair comes out of its pore."

"But if we do start to read the files, and go very slowly, and delay, and delay?"

"That will be out of character and he'll know that and kill me. Plus, hairs fall out in time, naturally. Without warning. Either way, delays will kill me."

"Do you have a solution?"

"No. For that I am counting on you. So long as you rescue my daughter, I will be content even if you fail to prevent my death."

"We'll want to examine the hair and its location, TG. That may give us some clues as to how you're supposed to die."

"Of course. Would Will be part of that examination?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Before you allow him to be near me, perhaps you should find out how I am supposed to kill the two of you if I am given the chance."

"I had assumed that once Zzyk knew where we were, or where we were going to be, our death would be through capture, assassination, sniping, whatever."

"You may add treachery as well. If by some chance, a frontal assault on your headquarters doesn't work, or if by chance you avoid being there when the DPS attack, I have the means to kill you without warning if you come near me at any time."

"That means you could kill Yollie right now?"

"She is not in danger. But, yes I could."

"How?"

"On the left side of my head, near to where my personal death hair awaits me, there are two other hairs, both specially treated. I can pull either or both of them out of my scalp without consequence. When I place one of these hairs on each of your heads, it will find the nearest pore and enter. When Zzyk knows that the hairs are embedded, he can explode them remotely. You are facing certain death anyway. Hairs fall out."

"So, if you cause us to die either from DPS ambush, or from your direct action, then Zzyk will happily deactivate your hair bomb, reunite you with your daughter, and everyone will live happily ever after?"

"I appreciate your sarcasm. I don't believe it either. I don't believe that they will defuse my hair even if they could do that. I don't think I will be reunited with my daughter if I am successful."

"Changing the subject, you mentioned that the citizens of Alberta were going to receive a gift from Zzyk soon."

"New brain-bands, like the one I was wearing. Automatic death if you rip it off without knowing the password. The new bands have stronger pain shocks. They can also be re-programmed through wireless instructions from a remote transmitter. All of the cities will have those transmitters already installed by now. Zzyk will soon have the capacity to severely punish any unwanted behaviour that an individual or the citizens as a whole develop within a few hours of him making that decision. Brain-bands in rural areas will take longer to re-program."

"This was your project?"

"Yes. The kill-when-removed function has been ready for months now. My team... my former team has been working on how to add new programming efficiently. In the past, children learned correct behaviour from a combination of a little zap and an adult telling them why they were zapped. The condition for deserving a zap had been hard-wired into the brain-band. The new brain-band will allow the DPS to re-program citizens of any age to avoid any behaviour that Zzyk wants them to avoid by giving them massive shocks over and over every time they misbehave. No explanation of why. What we didn't know was how massive the shock had to be and how many times the shocks had to be applied to get results. There'll be a field test within the next week or two, I believe."

"Two days ago, actually."

"Then they're ahead of schedule. What was the offending behaviour?"

"Seeing me in my Wilizy costume."

"That wasn't in the plan. It's difficult to understand why they'd want to punish that. The conditioning would be easily countered. Zzyk must have been angry when he gave the order."

"Zzyk gets angry?"

"If you take something away from him that he thinks is his, he can go into a rage and it's not safe to be anywhere near him. After you and Will took away his four babies and destroyed his air transports, Rick told me that Zzyk would be unapproachable for days."

"Rick talked directly to you after our attacks?"

"He used the location device in my new brain-band to find me and then we had an early morning meeting after you dropped me onto that mountainside. That reminds me. Once every citizen has a new brain-band, the DPS will know where

every IOF citizen is every second of the day. Computers will track them and raise alerts if they act out of the ordinary. Brain-band location data will be linked to personal data on the pinky ring, so they'll know everything that you do with that pinky ring too and how to find you if they want to. Or they can remotely zap you into oblivion if they're too lazy. If you try to take the pinky ring off, the brain-band will punish you severely until you put it back on. If a pinky computer comes into a scanning zone and it has no brain-band data associated with it, they'll know that an imposter is in the province and they'll find him wherever he tries to hide."

"You were responsible for all of this?"

"Yes, but sadly, it may not work as perfectly as they want. When I am upset at being denied access to my daughter, I tend to make mistakes that even I can't correct quickly. Plus as I have said, I am a very bad teacher. And, when I know that I am likely to die no matter what I do, I use the time that remains to me to think of ways to destroy what I was forced to create."

"You'll share?"

"Only after I see the plans for our rescues. Apologies for the precautions."

"Understood."

Chapter 15

With the end of July quickly approaching, Yolanda and Hank were hovering just below treetop level in an isolated Aboriginal Nation valley watching the first day of Wizard's firewood harvesting operation. Hank had been tied up with his peddler project for the last two weeks, so they both agreed to watch Wizard's secret plan and bring Hank current with what the family had been doing.

Cutting firewood in the summer had always been a vital part of the family's income. They'd use surplus firewood to trade for whatever vegetables Yolanda's garden patch couldn't provide as well as for other necessities. According to Wizard, Will's slings and weapons gave them the opportunity to greatly increase their firewood production. He claimed that the boys would be able produce more firewood in a morning than what they had been able to produce with axes and saws in three weeks. Today, he was going to prove it.

The boys were working in two independent teams: Wolf, Theo and Reese on one; Wizard, Lucas and Mathias on the other. All boys were in their slings, but visible. Wolf and Wizard would each use a rough-cutting laser beam to cut a tree from its base, lop off all of its branches, and then cut the stripped pole into firewood sizes. Their younger brothers would tie ropes to a tree and then use sling power to keep it vertical during the initial phases. After it had been stripped, they would raise the pole over one of six wagons while Wolf or Wizard sliced it into usable chunks. Each wagon was sitting on top of what would become an invisible transportation pallet.

Wizard had seen Will's growing collection of iron wheels and it had been those wheels that had prompted him to think of building a whole train of invisible firewood carrying high-sided wagons. The boys were filling those wagons now in anticipation that they would be able to expand their sales, ideally into the

Okanagan with its bigger communities. Demand would be higher, so they could raise their prices. In exchange for firewood, the family would be able to trade for fruit and vegetables plus manufactured goods that couldn't make it to the Kootenays from the coast. It just made business sense, or so Wizard said.

Yolanda produced a picnic basket and she and Hank retreated from the timber-cutting site so that sawdust wouldn't fly into their food.

"A picnic in the woods at 50 meters up. Who would have thought?" Hank commented.

"I think I know Izzy's birthday," Yolanda said with some pride as she passed over a plate with cold roast chicken, potato salad, and freshly picked tomatoes. "I asked Will. He says that it's either April 26th or the 27th."

"Too late now for a birthday party."

"About 10 years too late. I also discovered why she's been so secretive about it. Her mother sent Izzy to poison Will on her birthday. When she couldn't, her mother beat her, shunned her for a decade, and influenced everyone in the dissident community to hate her. Izzy despises being reminded of the day. She tells Will that her birthday is always her worst day of the year."

"This year?" Hank asked.

"She was held hostage by Zzyk and something particularly bad happened on her birthday. She won't tell Will what it was."

"They're actually talking?"

"Talking, yes," Yolanda replied. "Communicating, no. Will asked me for advice. He wanted to know why Izzy was so angry at him."

"Did he have any inkling at all?"

"He knew only that she became mad at him after she showed him her breasts. Those were the suspension bridges that he told you about."

"And the balloons and the cow?"

"Would you like some lemonade? Fresh squeezed."

"Yes, please. I got it—don't pry. Does he at least know why she became so upset?"

"I believe he does now. Will didn't understand how appearing like that in front of him would have been such a big deal for Izzy. It must have taken her weeks to work up the nerve. She had to convince herself that she wasn't being a slut, for one thing. He didn't have a clue that she was giving him a very special gift and that he hadn't even thanked her for it. It must have been humiliating for her."

"What's he going to do?"

"I don't know. I told him he owes her big time."

"Some of their problems are made worse when Izzy becomes mad and shuts down communications for weeks."

"True."

"Sometimes, Will should stand up for himself when she rolls right over him."

"True, again."

"Did you suggest that they make rules for how to fight? Does he realize that every couple has fights?"

"I thought I'd leave all of that to you."

"So, we're meddling again, are we?"

"You sure are. I'm just an innocent bystander."

#

Yolanda produced two pieces of blueberry pie which were sufficiently rare that they had to retreat out of view of the boys working in the woods. Too much sawdust. Too much chance of jealousy erupting if slices of blueberry pie were noticed. Or perhaps, too many weeks away from each other. The adult supervision of the timber operation resumed later without any blueberry pie in the hamper and neither of them feeling lonely any longer. Yolanda continued to update Hank on what the family was doing.

"TG is accessing the DPS files and sending positive progress reports to Zzyk under Yollie's supervision. Granny and Doc are in the Wilizy. Winnie could have been part of the wood cutting operation but she has a headache again. Will is flying her around."

"Winnie still won't let you come into her bedroom when she has a headache?"

"Physically pushes me out. She does the same to Izzy now too. I asked her to choose somebody to stay with her when she had a headache. I thought perhaps Granny. But, Winnie chose Will. For the last couple of days, when she has needed help, she's been flying with him in his sling. Will is studying a university bot that he took out of the NY Library collection so he doesn't mind flying in giant circles. Winnie's headaches disappear and she enjoys being with him. Will says that whenever he looks down at her, she's looking up at him. Sometimes she cuddles right up to him and lies there cheek to cheek."

"Crush?" Hank asked.

"I don't know. Perhaps? But, she doesn't pay any attention to him at other times when Will is around. If she had a crush, she'd be clinging to him wherever he went."

"Will isn't losing time on his projects by taking care of Winnie?"

"No, he redesigned the brain plugs and Doc has installed them all now, including Stu's. Will continues to add to his collection of old iron but isn't saying anything about what he's going to do with it. Says that he's done all that he can do right now, and is just waiting for Izzy to create a plan."

"And Izzy is..."

"Completely dead in the water," Yolanda admitted. "She hasn't generated a single idea on how to rescue TG and his daughter. The WZBN broadcasts are going great now, so they aren't distracting her. The problems with the Melissa Moments have been solved. Plus, the big news that you may not have heard—we have a complete feed going out now on what Stu calls an entirely different *channel*, showing the four little babies and what they're doing every waking minute. Izzy put four different coloured caps on them—gold, blue, red, and green—so that people can tell them apart. She chose bright colours to avoid the IOFs drab browns. Stu says that the opportunity on the website to suggest names for the babies has prompted a lot of interest."

"That explains why my peddlers are selling bits of cloth in those four colours. I'm having trouble keeping them supplied."

"Six now?"

"Seven starting tomorrow. I'll have to find additional sources of coloured cloth soon."

"What about stocking the wagons with dye? Let the Albertans make their own coloured pieces of cloth."

"Brilliant. Thank you."

"Wish I had a brilliant idea for Winnie's headaches."

"Doc?"

"He's stumped. Nothing physical that he can find. Winnie doesn't like him in her bedroom now."

"All the boys are worried, Yolanda. Reese asked me if Winnie is going to die. He's always been close to her."

#

"Here's an idea, Hank. Wizard's idea for cutting a lot of firewood is obviously working, so why don't you take the boys to the Okanagan and let them do their trading. Most of what they earn has to go towards the family, but they can keep some profits. Include some time in the woods with them if you want. Give them some training on the ring weapons that they're allowed to use. Stay away a full week."

"And you?"

"I'll share Wilizy duty with Doc and Granny. Winnie can stay in the compound with Will. I mind-talked to him a few minutes ago and he's willing to do his studies there and care for her. I'll check in with him regularly from the ship."

"You're isolating Winnie."

"She gets her headaches at the compound. It's either something in the environment at home that's causing them, or it's one or more of the family. A week's stay all alone with Will should tell us which it is."

#

When Yolanda told Hank that Izzy hadn't generated a single idea on how to rescue TG and his daughter—that wasn't quite accurate. Izzy had considered lots of ideas but all required TG to participate in the operation and so she discarded them. Izzy didn't want TG anywhere near the operation—either in its planning stage or in the battle itself. The mood of other Wilizy members towards TG ranged from outright sympathy for him and his daughter down to guarded reservations. Izzy, on the other hand, didn't trust him at all. That reaction was entirely understandable given the analysis that Izzy had made of how TG had responded in his interrogation. I've reproduced that analysis below.

#

What we're asked to believe about TG

- TG claims that there is an impregnable Citadel in Alaska with undefeatable offensive power. The presence of such a military power can't be confirmed. We just have to trust that what he said is true.

- TG claims that the people in The Citadel are geniuses and that one of those geniuses has been working closely with Zzyk for decades. This existence of a group of geniuses hiding in Alaska can't be confirmed. Nor can the presence of an IOF collaborator be confirmed. We just have to trust that what he said is true.

- TG claims that he wants to help us because his wife was executed. The previous existence of a wife can't be confirmed. We just have to trust that what he said is true.

- TG claims that he wants us to rescue his daughter. We are asked to believe that he has a daughter because he showed interest in some used clothes. The existence of a daughter can't be confirmed. We just have to trust that what he said is true.

- TG claims that Rick spoke with him on the mountainside and that Zzyk's vulnerability is his anger. This information can't be confirmed. We just have to trust that what he said is true.

- TG claims that he has white skin. However, the brown colour of his skin was not affected by being immersed in water. Nor has it been affected by three months of exposure to weather, clothes, and so on. This white skin can't be confirmed. We just have to trust that what he said is true.

Levels of deception?

- TG has revealed two sets of weapons on his body (an exploding brain-band and some dangerous hairs) to give us confidence that he has revealed all. Why should we believe that he has only two ways to kill us?

- TG has revealed two ways of communicating back to Zzyk—the microphone inside his body and his use of the database filing system. Why should we believe that he has only two ways of communicating secretly to Zzyk?

- TG has revealed that Zzyk will soon have new brain-bands that will give him complete control over the population. The existence of working versions of this new technology can't be confirmed. However, the threat of this presumed danger would certainly motivate us to accept TG's presumed expertise and his offer to help us destroy this threat before the brain-bands are installed. We're being pressured to act quickly.

- TG has painted a picture of an executed wife and a little girl held as hostage. What better way to pluck at heartstrings?

- TG has painted himself as a persecuted victim. He claims to be a non-IOF person rejected by his homeland and forced to work under duress for Zzyk. Again, an attempt to gain sympathy. He tells us that a person from his homeland has been collaborating with Zzyk. If such a homeland exists, why would we think that only one collaborator is working with Zzyk?

How do we know that TG can be trusted?

- Yollie says that he's a good man.

Chapter 16

With five of their seven days in the Okanagan gone, Hank was feeling good about the trip. The trading was great! They used invisible pallets to transport two borrowed horses and their steadily diminishing firewood wagon train from one

Okanagan town to the next. Each morning, the two horses would visibly pull one wagon the final few kilometers to the outskirts of the next small town and word would quickly spread that there was firewood for trade. The first day, they had not anticipated how quickly they could sell a wagonload. From then on, they set high prices and waited for customers to agree.

Lucas was the most cutthroat. His share of the wood was always the last to sell, since once he had set a price, he was determined not to give in. He always sold out, but it might be noon before a turned-away customer would show up with a sheepish look on his face and the required baskets of fruit on his back.

The younger boys were too impatient to get top prices. Wizard understood the theory but found it difficult to say No to a customer claiming to be too poor to bid higher. Wolf found the whole activity too boring to think about. By the third day, he had sold his entire share of the firewood to Lucas and was content to take 50% of whatever Lucas received for it. Hank was tempted to do the same, but understood that giving Lucas control of too much firewood would mean that he would lower the price that he'd be willing to pay to his brothers. Fathers know their sons well, and Lucas at 11 was very similar to what Hank had been at the same age.

The best part of the day for everyone was from 9 p.m. to midnight. That was when the boys would have their battle. But before that, after the firewood was all sold and the wagon now holding their bartered goods was safely hidden, they'd wander around the town. Sometimes, the boys would barter for things they saw in the little shops. Sometimes, they would swim in the nearby lake. But, whatever they did, they did so in the same teams of three as they had used to cut the wood. Wolf or Wizard would make decisions for the team if agreement couldn't be reached. Hank would let them wander as they wished, while he scouted for a battle site. At 3 p.m., last night's losing team would meet with Hank at the spot where they had hidden the wagons, and that team was responsible for returning the wagon they had used that day to the home compound. Fruit and other produce had to be stored away in their giant root cellar. All non-perishable acquisitions were placed in the appropriate bedrooms. Hank would go with them to ensure that the boys did this without interfering with Winnie. They actually never did see her although there were signs that Winnie and Will were living quite comfortably, and sloppily, away from Yolanda's all-seeing eyes.

At 5 p.m., Hank would fly-over the battle site with the two teams. This night's battle, for example, would be in a restricted area on one side of a heavily treed mountain two valleys away from the Okanagan. The two teams had until 7 p.m. to outguess what their opponents would do and make plans accordingly. At 7 p.m., they'd eat. Last night's losing team again had to pay a penalty by cooking supper and cleaning up. At 8 p.m., both teams would disappear into the trees. At 9 p.m., Hank would sound the signal to begin. The battle would end when all three boys in a team had been disabled. Hank would then explain what the losing team had done wrong, or what the winning team had done right, and perhaps introduce some new military tactics. They'd end the day with roasted marshmallows or some other delicacy. Hank would assign private sleeping areas for each boy; otherwise, the teams would talk tactics all night long. The next morning, they'd start all over again.

Slings could not be used in the battles. Weaponry for these games was restricted to their lasers. Hank had parental controls on all of the youngsters' rings and dialed the strength back to a minimum, non-harmful zap. Laser targeting beams were active and required. Sniping an opponent from behind was not allowed, nor were head shots. Disabling shots to ankles, elbows, and wrists were encouraged. Hank froze the trigger mechanisms until three sequential pulses of the laser-targeting beam had been delivered. At that point, the low-grade shot could be made. The boys quickly learned that active teamwork was necessary to protect each other and to coordinate their own forces on a single opponent who could be pinned down. Hank was the referee.

Wolf and Wizard were responsible for their own personal armaments, assumed the team leadership roles, and each operated a secure communications net. After two straight convincing losses, Wizard relinquished control of his team to Lucas, although he continued to operate the communications net. After that, Lucas' team became more competitive with Wolf's team and actually would win the last two battles.

#

Their second-to-last stop was in Oliver, the smallest town they'd visit and the only place without a near-by lake to swim in. July in the Okanagan was very hot to begin with. But, where the valley was wide, the land baked. However, treed mountains were nearby, and if the boys wanted to go swimming, Osoyoos Lake was a few minutes by sling south. A short distance further south was the old Canada-United States border. The border was still informally recognized, but there were no border controls to pass through. They weren't needed. The Okanagan Valley was close to desert this far south, and other than Osoyoos where they'd spend their last day, there were no habitable villages in the area.

They set up their wagon just north of Oliver and hobbled their two horses to graze in a nearby field. Oliver was a tidy little village with a main street of shops, and lots of houses pushing away from the center of town and up the mountainside. Of course, ample wood was available in the mountains, but constant harvesting had meant that mature wood was a strenuous hike away. That meant that any firewood they cut had to be transported into town. Solar powered vehicles could be used year round in this part of British Columbia, but owning something that was big enough to haul ample loads of wood was an issue for the poor villagers. The boys' wagon full of firewood was visible from the village's main street. It should mean that they'd sell out their wagon before noon.

By 10 a.m., no customers had appeared. The main street was deserted except for seven solar-powered putt-putts baking in the sun in front of a tavern. Each of the putt-putts carried bulging saddlebags and a rifle. Strong drinks can be created from fruit, and the Okanagan's wines and ciders were known widely. A tavern open this early was unexpected, but then Hank hadn't been here for years. He made a mental note of the putt-putts and returned to the wood wagon.

At 11, still without customers, Hank told Wolf to take the boys into the shade afforded by a dozen wild apple trees in an irregular line about 30 meters from the road. Wizard offered to stay with Hank at the wagon and was perched comfortably on the top of the wood, a wide-brimmed Okanagan sombrero keeping the sun out

of his eyes. The others were lying in the wild underbrush beneath the trees munching on apples. Soon, apple cores would be flying through the air. Then, whole apples would fly. Hank began thinking of calling the day off. Had Hank acted on those thoughts, they wouldn't have been in Oliver when the putt-putt owners left the pub.

Villagers in the B.C. interior dressed pretty much the same. All clothes were homemade, of course. Herds of cows and local wildlife provided leather for shoes, belts, coats, and other such things. Clothes weren't restricted to the drab colours permitted by the DPS in Alberta, but there wasn't a huge amount of colour either. Men were usually clean-shaven, although moustaches were common; women wore their hair short, or if they liked it long, they wore it in a tight bun during the working hours. These people were essentially farmers but their crops were fruit. Their working day was long and arduous. Weaponry consisted of rifles. The communities had little need for short barrel guns or for law officials. If any villager became too rowdy for the taste of the majority, they'd just stake him out in the sun for a day.

Hank's instincts kicked in when he saw the putt-putt owners staggering out of the tavern and he issued instructions immediately. Parental controls were shared so that the lasers could be raised to full power. Wolf was put in charge of the boys in the underbrush who immediately spread out, and burrowed deep into the undergrowth under the stunted apple trees. "This is not a drill! This is not a drill!" Hank repeated.

#

Hank was loosely surrounded by seven drunk, burly men, all but one dressed in farmer overalls. They also wore a grungy long sleeved shirt in an unidentifiable colour and stained with fluids that looked disgusting and are better left undescribed. To complete their fashion statement, they had clod-stomping boots and various hats or caps. All were bearded and reeked of beer and sweat. Six were heavily armed—an ammunition belt with two filled holsters around their hips, and a second ammunition belt with a third gun slung over one shoulder and under the opposite arm pit. Six wore at least one piece of clothing that did not fit their desperado, gunslinger image. A red silk bandana around a throat; a heavily jeweled necklace around another throat; a closed pink parasol secured inside a boot; a stuffed teddy bear peeking out of another boot, a black patch covering an eye, and a gold wedding band on a grimy pinky finger. The seventh man dressed differently from the others and carried a long antique rifle.

The giant towering over Hank was pressing the business end of a large pistol to his left temple. Five of the other men were watching the big man terrorize the unarmed injun with the long black braid. The rifleman was keeping an eye on the kid who was sitting quiet as a mouse on the wood pile, his hands apart, bare palms revealing that he wasn't armed. Hank was reaching for the sky as ordered and was explaining why they were on the street.

"Being strangers to town, we couldn't wait in our homes to be robbed like you told the people of Oliver. We weren't trying to defy your orders. Why would we do that? How'd you convince the Oliver people to stay indoors, by the way?"

"Told them we'd burn any building to the ground that didn't have someone in the window waving real friendly-like to us if we wandered by."

"Also crammed all their women and children inside a locked church so that we could rob the men in the houses easier," the rifleman added.

"Did you come up from the States?" Hank inquired softly.

"Yup. Got a little too hot down there. Thought we'd take a little trip to gentle old Canada," the rifleman man admitted.

"You seen a gang like us up here before?" the parasol man asked.

"Can't say that we have. Those special things that you're wearing... Those are trophies, right? Reminders of places you've been, people you've met?"

"Could be that we take a trophy from you and your boy," necklace man snickered.

"Take-um a scalp-um off him-um while you watch-um," the parasol toting gunslinger had apparently seen one too many old westerns.

"You don't appear to be frightened," the rifleman observed. "You think we won't kill you if we feel like it?"

"Well, I'm sorry. I'm trying to be frightened, but I can't quite get there yet. I mean vicious men robbing a town and then escaping on putt-putts? Crippled dogs can limp faster than a putt-putt. And, what would you do with your loot? Putt-putt out of town with a sack of apples slung over your shoulder?"

"You making fun of us?" the giant put one of his meat hooks for hands around Hank's throat.

"No, why would I do something that stupid?" Hank croaked. "I have a gun to my head and I'm trying real hard to be frightened, but I'm just not buying the fact that you're robbers. There's nothing here to rob. There never would be in a small town like this. If you told me why you were really here, that might make me scared of you."

The gang had a small meeting. Hank took this opportunity to lower his arms and rub his neck. "Wouldn't hurt," the rifleman said. "He's going to know soon enough."

The giant stepped forward again and put the gun back to Hank's temple. "We like to do a little target shooting when we come into small towns," he explained. "Livens up the day."

"Ah, that's better. Now I think I understand. So, you come into a small town and tell the people to carry big target signs. They walk around town and you try to hit the bulls-eye in the targets? Where do you find the paper for this? Or, do you make wooden targets?"

Another meeting had to be held. Several of the gunslingers looked at Hank and made twirling motions around their ears. One of them said, "Use small words" to the giant. Meanwhile, Hank tried to look perplexed and a little frightened. A quick mind message later, Wizard put his hands together. An invisible weapon became visible but hidden inside Wizard's clasped hands. We may assume that the boys under the apple trees were similarly warned to get ready, but even in the dead heat of a summer day, no rustling sounds made it to the ears of the desperados.

Once again, the pistol was poised against Hank's temple. "You're just not getting it, friend. The people don't carry targets. They **are** the targets."

"Ah, now I understand. That is indeed a little scary. Only a bit though. You see, what I don't understand is this. With only seven of you, and with all the people in a village running around to avoid being shot, how are you going to stop them from escaping? You plan on chasing them down on these puny little putt-putts?"

The group meeting was now an automatic reaction. A snarly "You try threatening him if you think you're so smart," ended the meeting.

The rifleman now held the gun to Hank's temple. He was a thin man, clothed in a deer-hide fringed jacket, rawhide leggings, and a raccoon skin hat. His antique rifle was now leaning up against his putt-putt. The frontiersman look was ruined a bit by the motorcycle boots.

Hank took the opportunity to whisper out of the side of his mouth. "Are you dressed up to be Daniel Boone?"

Daniel Boone nodded his head and copied the whisper. "I won't wear the moccasins. They make me look like a dumb injun like you."

"You know that Daniel Boone was a good guy, right?" Hank whispered. "The boys let you get away with that?"

"They do what I tell them to do."

"Ah," Hank nodded in understanding and then began playing for the larger audience. He wanted his boys to hear this. "So how do you keep everyone in the village under control while you have shooting practice?"

"We take hostages and threaten to kill them if they don't do what we want."

"And then butcher everyone in the village one house at a time anyway. Were you the same gang that did that little village of pacifists and their children in, where was it, Nevada?"

"Yah. I had them all stuffed in their houses. One of the boys was in each house and when I gave the signal, the boys pulled out their guns and was going to shoot them right then. But the parents and their kids just went and flopped down on the floor. My boys shot each of them through the forehead like they was supposed to. People didn't try to run away or nutting, so it wasn't as much fun as we had expected."

"And now you've come to Canada?"

"We got seen. People spread our descriptions and we had to leave. Too risky with so many guns in the States. You don't got many guns. This will be our biggest village that we've done though so that should be fun. Are you frightened yet?"

"Yes, I truly am. Now, you may have made one tiny miscalculation. I feel it's only fair to warn you about this because Canadians are known for being polite and I wouldn't want to ruin our image by killing you without warning you first." Hank started to walk towards Daniel Boone's henchmen, stopped, and said, "Are you coming, Daniel? You'll want to keep the pistol to my temple, won't you?"

Arriving at the giant properly threatened again, Hank told his captor. "I'm going to turn your giant a bit to the right. There. Now, Mr. Giant, look towards that stand of apple trees and would you be so kind as to tell me what you see?"

"A flashing light?"

"Yes. Well done. It is indeed a flashing light. I was going to say, No flies on you, but that wouldn't be true, would it. Now, Daniel, what do you see on your giant's forehead?"

"A flashing red light. Laser sighting?"

"Yes indeed, it **is** a laser sighting for a type of gun that can fry your giant's brains before he can twitch a finger. I'd stay perfectly still, if I were you, Mr. Giant. Try not to scratch." Indeed, the giant might find that advice hard to follow since his clothes were inhabited by so many biting little varmints.

Daniel placed the gun so that it was physically touching Hank's temple and put some pressure on it.

Hank continued undeterred. "Perhaps you'd be good enough to tell your other boys to turn towards the trees and look for their own personal flashing lights. Mr. Boone, you can tell them if a laser light is shining on their foreheads. Oh, by the way, the man on the end of the line has a gun pointed at the back of his head. He should turn towards my firewood wagon if he wants to see who's going to fry his eyeballs until they pop."

Daniel and the man at the end turned as one. There was Wizard, a bright red light shining out of his clasped hands and splattering itself on the man's forehead. The other men facing the trees had similar lights—all focused dead center on foreheads and not wavering a bit.

"Can't see no gun. How do we know you got more than flashy lights?"

"That's very smart, Daniel. Perhaps we do. Perhaps we don't. A demonstration is in order. Seeing as how you are the smartest man in your gang, you must also be the bravest. So, we'll do the demonstration on you. Now, you keep that pistol snug against my head. I'm going to take my left hand and raise the tail of the dead raccoon sitting on your head. OK. The tail is up in the air. You ever think of curing this hide? It would probably reduce the reek. You're sure that this tail was fastened securely to the raccoon's body, right?"

Daniel nodded hesitantly.

"Captain Wolf, would you oblige?" Hank then handed Daniel the seared end of a raccoon's tail. "It's not attached any longer. As you have seen, our guns make no sound. Unless you're looking at the man next to you, you might not realize that his brains had just evaporated."

Eyes started to wander right and left.

"You forget that I have this gun at your head and there ain't no red light flashing on my forehead. You're out of men, ain't you?"

Well, in truth, Hank was out of sons. But, one man was left who could take care of the situation.

"Daniel, Daniel, Daniel. You have miscalculated badly again. A laser sight has been on you the whole time. You just haven't been facing the right way. Now you keep that gun tight on my left temple. I'm going to turn you around so that you can see your personal laser light." Hank gently turned Daniel Boone so that he was facing into town. "Now, I'll stand aside a bit so that my man has a clear shot. There's the red light, right on your chest. See it?" and Hank prodded Daniel's chest with his forefinger.

Daniel looked down at Hank's finger on his chest and was just realizing that no light was there when Hank's left hand swept the gun away and his right fist made a bloody, excruciating mess where his nose used to be.

"I can't believe that old shtick still works after all this time," Hank muttered to himself.

Chapter 17

"The court is called to order," Hank announced in a somber tone. All seven gunslingers were sitting on the ground and leaning up against a wheel or the side of the firewood wagon. The would-be desperados were tied securely together and to the wagon, their arms bound behind their backs by one of Wizard's tree hauling ropes. Hank's boys were sitting cross-legged on the ground opposite the bound men but well away from them. Wizard and Wolf were responsible for keeping the gunslingers under control but after Wizard had finished with the ropes, laser sighting beams were no longer needed. They had searched the gunslingers though and had removed wicked looking knives from under the coverall leggings of each of them. Those had joined the guns that were in a large pile behind Hank. With the boys to his right, and the prisoners to his left, Hank was standing at the third side of what could be an imaginary square. Or, in this case, an imaginary court room.

"My name is Hank" and Hank then terminated the sentence with what sounded like a coughing sound. "I am a member of the British Columbia detachment of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. You have all seen my badge. That badge gives me the authority to detain suspected criminals, question them, determine if they have broken any laws, and apply justice as required within the Aboriginal Nation. By treaty, my authority also extends to B.C. I will now call my first witness, Wizard. Stand over there, son."

Wizard rose and walked to the fourth side of the imaginary courtroom, where he shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other, not sure what was going to happen next.

"Wizard, did you hear Daniel Boone describe how he and his boys had entered a Nevada town and how they had confined all of the citizens of that town to their homes?"

"Yes, Dad, I did."

"What did you hear Daniel Boone say next?"

"That he had put one of his boys in each of the homes, and when he gave a signal, they all shot the people through the forehead."

"Were the people of the village threatening them in any way at the time?"

"No, they were just lying on their backs in their houses."

"So, why did they shoot them?"

"I believe that they were trying to amuse themselves. Daniel Boone said that they didn't enjoy the killing as much as they had expected to."

"You may go back to your brothers. The prosecution rests. Do any of you men have anything to say in your defense?"

Some frantic whispering followed. Daniel Boone spoke for them all.

"I was just funning you when I told you that story. We wasn't there when those villagers got shot. We didn't do it. We came across the village by accident a week or so after they had gotten themselves shot. Stopped to find out what the smell was. Saw all the dead, rotting bodies. Thought we could take credit for it. I was just lying. Ain't no law against lying."

"The court will now call a rebuttal witness. He'll be here in a minute or two," and Hank pointed to the solitary figure walking towards them along the dusty trail.

#

"State your name."

"Will."

"Did you enter a town of pacifists in Nevada last year only to find something disturbing?"

"Yes. All the people in the village, including the children, had been shot through the forehead. They were just lying on the floors of their homes."

"Please describe everything you saw and did in that village as fully as you can."

Will did. Wolf and his brothers were disturbed to hear the story. Daniel Boone and his gang were downright vexed.

"So, as I understand you," Hank began the court's summary, "you buried all of the dead people in that village and then left."

"Yes. We put them all in one big grave and said some words. We left as soon as we could."

"And when you found them, the bodies hadn't started to rot. There was no stench. Chickens were still there. The cows weren't in distress."

"That's right. We must have entered the village only a day after they were shot."

"So, if I were to tell you that these seven men have claimed to come across this village, and saw the rotting, smelly bodies of the citizens lying in their homes, what would you say about their account?"

"They're lying. Those rotting bodies wouldn't have been in their homes to find."

"The court will now issue its verdict. I find that the seven men sitting before me are guilty of murdering six pacifist families in cold blood. From Wizard's testimony, I have heard how the leader of the gang described in his own words how he and his partners had killed these people. From Will's testimony, I have heard convincing details that the murders occurred as Daniel Boone had indeed described and that the gang could not have arrived at the scene weeks later. That was their defense, and it was a lie. This trial is now adjourned. Justice will be administered shortly."

#

Wizard had recovered his rope, Lucas and Reese had hitched the horses to the wagon, and all of the youngsters were now on the dusty trail out of town. Hank had sent them off with a little speech.

"You all have acted as men today. You captured a gang of cowards who have terrorized many villages and killed many people for their own entertainment. You have participated in a court of justice. That experience doesn't come along too often these days. Our family believes in standing up for what is right even if doing that can be dangerous, and perhaps a little scary. I hope that you also will stand up for what's right when you're adults. The public part of justice is now complete. A guilty verdict has been announced. But, the administration of justice is generally done privately and so you are no longer required to be here. Wizard is in

charge. Move into the mountains as soon as it's safe to do so and Wolf and I will meet you at the usual spot."

With no wagon to lean against, the gang members were all sitting on their hands with their legs outstretched in front of them. Getting up would be a difficult process. If they did try, Wolf and Will had their weapons ready, albeit in invisible mode. Hank joined Will and motioned Wolf over to listen in as soon as the firewood wagon had disappeared from view.

"Will, I am authorized to carry out the sentence of the court. However, I am also authorized to deputize someone else to administer the court's sentence. You saw the results of what these men did. Do you want to be the one to bring them to justice?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Hank saw the gang starting to whisper. Before Hank could say anything, Wolf slammed them with his ring's gravity beam. All seven found themselves compressed helplessly to the ground, able to breath, but unable to move otherwise.

Will looked over at the gang, all prone on their back, and then at their guns lying in a pile. Without a word, he selected two guns, took a position standing over the gang, and then administered justice in a way that the murdered pacifists would have appreciated. "I can't leave Winnie alone too long," Will said to Hank, handed him the gun, and then started jogging down the rutted trail out of town.

"Guess that means that we get to take care of the bodies?" Wolf asked.

"Burial is part of the justice duty," Hank replied. "We can't use the slings in the open like this. A wagon would come in handy."

"Like the one coming out of town?" Wolf asked.

#

For many years, this incident on the outskirts of Oliver was unknown outside of the community. Within the community, it was recognized as an important part of Oliver's history and remained so well into the 2100s.

The gunslingers had arrived at the worst possible time for the town of Oliver. All but one of their armed citizens were on a town hunting trip. The only weapon they had left in the village was an antique rifle holding only four bullets and wielded by an old man with uncontrollable tremors. But together he and his neighbours sabotaged the gunslingers' putt-putts that had been left unattended outside the tavern. They then freed the women and children while the gunslingers were busy with the firewood traders. The whole town, with its four bullets, was ready to be part of an ambush at the church when the young child keeping watch on the gang reported that they had been captured. Soon afterwards, the old man heard the steady beat of the execution and he was the one who brought out the wagon and took the bodies to the town's cemetery.

From the words on the wooden marker over the gang's grave, we know that the old man and Hank had talked. How else could that marker have reported that a member of the RCMP had brought a gang of murderers to justice? Although the grave marker is now long gone, a picture of it can still be found in the Oliver Museum along with some personal accounts of what happened. All accounts agree that a member of the RCMP had captured a gang threatening the lives of Oliver's citizens on July 31, 2082.

Word gradually spread of the incident, and it created a bit of a stir because the RCMP in B.C. had ceased to exist as a police force during the Biker War in 2062/63. It was during that war that bikers were hunting and assassinating the province's police officers one by one. My readers will be well aware of the events of those years, so I won't elaborate. But, although history doesn't state this categorically, the last police officer in B.C. was thought to have been killed in June, 2063. Now, here were the Oliver citizens claiming that an RCMP officer was still alive, and active, 19 years later.

The link connecting the Oliver shootings to the Wilizy legend wasn't made until Justice Wilizy's autobiography was published in this century. In it, he described the whole confrontation in Oliver quite clearly, including the events around the coonskin cap's tail, which had always been considered far-fetched being based as they were on the words of a young villager watching the events from quite a distance. Justice Wilizy was also able to reproduce what his father had said to him and his brothers before he sent them back to their cache of firewood wagons. Hank's speech had made a big impression on Justice at the time and was the prime reason why he gave himself that name and entered his chosen occupation. As to the executions themselves, neither Justice nor his brothers gave them a second thought. They heard the seven gunshots, knew what they signified, and forgot all about the gang. It was only after Justice's autobiography revealed the connection to the Wilizy that *Daniel Boone and the Putt-Putt Gang*, as Hank must have referred to them, became an historical footnote.

My readers might wonder how being a party to an execution did not traumatize Hank's young children. You must remember that the 2080s were a time of frontier living, where rough justice was the only justice available. All children in the frontier were used to hunting, killing and dressing their food. Hank's family wore deerskin and they ate venison. Neither blood nor death disturbed them.

Communities were close-knit for reasons of mutual benefit and protection. People occasionally did behave in ways that could jeopardize an entire community. Being staked out in the hot sun for a day, or being chained to a boulder in the middle of the Fraser River rapids, was a strong message that was rarely ignored. Rough justice was dispensed quickly as a matter of course.

Contrast that with justice today in the 22rd century. Even with truth serums being applied to all accused and all trial witnesses, there are still huge delays between the laying of the charges and the actual trial because of the sheer number of people awaiting trial. The cause, as we all know, is due to truth serum administrators being in short supply, it being an occupation with a worrisome short life span. A serum administrator either dies young or becomes secretly rich for a short time.

Even if your truth serum administrator has not been bought, there are now so many rumours of truth serum nullifiers being available for the right price that any reasonable person would admit that they are no longer fiction, but are fact. And, even if an accused were found guilty, and deported to one of the asteroid penal colonies, do we in fact know that the accused was deported? No-one actually checks. Instead, we take the word of a prison administrator who has every reason to accept generous gifts to pretend that Convict #xx is actually there. And, where would that convict be if not in the colonies? We'd never know, would we? With the

rich having the resources to slip into whatever un-used body sleeve that they wanted to buy, how would anyone know who he had been in his previous body?

So, for those of you who may have been disturbed by young children being part of a lethal court case, or shocked that a trial might last less than 15 minutes before execution was carried out, is that actually any worse than what we have now?

Chapter 18

Will was sitting in a straight-back chair in Yolanda's kitchen, arms folded across his chest, staring off into the distance when Doc and Granny burst into the house. Well, Granny burst in, Doc sauntered in.

Granny went up to Will, pinched his nostrils together gently until he couldn't breathe and then waited for him to look up at her. When Will was in one of his thinking trances, waving a hand in front of his face wouldn't work. Izzy had shared her method of getting Will's attention in such situations with the family. "How is Winnie?" she asked as soon as Will's eyes focused.

"Fine," he said.

"Details, Will. Details."

"The headaches disappeared the day everyone left. She was happy the whole week. She did her schoolwork and her chores every day without me reminding her. We had games of sling tag in the afternoon and I gave her target practice for her ring. In the evening, I'd hook us up to one of her story-bots and she'd read to me. In the afternoon, I'd study my bot and she'd draw pictures, but I don't know what she drew. She took them to her bedroom. That's where Yolanda is now. Izzy's there too."

If that sounds verbose for Will, it was. This was the information that Yolanda had painfully extracted from him one question at a time 15-minutes ago. Will just remembered what she had been most interested in and recited that back to Granny who hustled off to Winnie's bedroom. By this time, Doc had plopped into an overstuffed chair in the living room and had pulled out his whittling stick and knife.

Izzy had told Will once that it was rude to continue to study when guests were over for a visit, so Will unplugged his bot and wandered into the living room where Doc was examining his whittling stick.

"Hand me one of Yolanda's napkins, would you Will?" At home, Doc would whittle whenever and wherever he wanted. Granny didn't care. They'd sweep the floors once a week. At Yolanda's, Doc used a napkin to catch all the little shavings.

"What's this one going to be?" Will asked as he delivered the napkin.

"Beats me!" Doc had explained that all sticks have a beautiful carving inside of them. He'd just cut little shavings off them until the stick spoke to him.

"Are you going to keep this one?" When he had found out that Doc was a prolific whittler, Will had asked if he could see some of his work. Doc explained that he took a stick out of the forest and then he put the stick back into the forest when

he was done. Only occasionally did he keep his art. He kept a few special pieces in his and Granny's house, but no-one knew why.

"Probably not."

"Stick not talking yet?"

"Being stubborn." Doc held his knife up to the stick and made the tiniest possible notch in its center. "How long did it take you to clean the house?"

"Couple of hours. Winnie helped."

"Did it pass inspection?"

"Yah," Will sat down opposite Doc and hunched forward so that he could see the creative process at work. Doc was still eying the notch. "Yolanda seemed disappointed that she couldn't find anything wrong."

"When Yolanda is bored, she cleans. The Wilizy is now spotless on the inside. We had to persuade her that cleaning the outside of an invisible ship wasn't necessary. I expect that she was hoping that she'd have something to clean back here."

"What do you do when you're bored, Doc?"

"Whittle. It's enjoyable when the sticks talk louder than this one." A second notch joined the first but on the other side of the stick. "Granny knits sweaters for the kids for Christmas when she's bored. They'd be great gifts if any of the kids had one arm longer than the other."

"The sweaters don't fit?"

"Not even close. As soon as she sees the finished sweater, she tears it apart and starts all over again. The grandkids don't even know that Granny knits. They've never seen a finished sweater."

"Why does she knit then?"

"Says that she likes it even if she can't knit worth a darn. What do you do when you're bored, Will?"

"I'm never bored, Doc."

"How are you spending your free time then?"

"Studying a human anatomy bot."

"Why?"

"I found out that Izzy can't become pregnant from wireless transmissions from my eyeballs. She seemed to think I was crazy for thinking that."

"I could see her thinking that."

"So, I thought I should learn more about the human body."

"Probably a good idea. Are you and Izzy planning on making babies soon?"

"Nah."

"An even better idea."

#

They were all settled down in the living room. Winnie was standing in the center of the room, excitedly explaining how she had rearranged her bedroom. Granny was perched on the armrest of Doc's chair, Will and Izzy were each sitting at the distant ends of a love seat that was not living up to its name, and Yolanda was in her rocking chair, leaning back against the back pad and smiling at her daughter.

"My bed and bureau are now against one wall, and right opposite on the other wall is the bed where my boyfriend will sleep when I find one. I don't have a second bed yet, so I put down a sleeping bag for him for now."

"And in the middle?" Yolanda prompted.

"I've hung wires all the way down the middle of the room and that's where I'm attaching all of my pictures. Mom wouldn't want me putting them on the walls because they'd leave a mark."

"What are you drawing? More pictures of Izzy?" Doc asked.

"I'll show you." Winnie scampered away.

"Back to her old self," Doc said softly to Granny.

"Yolanda is very relieved," Granny whispered back. "The pictures are just multiple tracings of different parts of her hands and feet. They're all the same tracing except for different little lines on them. But, she's quite proud of them."

Winnie burst back into the room waving three pictures and thrust them at Doc, and then slid behind the chair so that she could look at the pictures with him. Doc looked closely at all three pictures one at a time, then put them down on his legs where he could see them side by side.

"What are these squiggles on this picture, Winnie?"

"I don't know. They were just there."

"And the squiggles on this picture?"

Winnie shrugged.

"Where did you see them?"

"In Will's bot. Are they wrong?"

"No, Winnie, in fact they're perfect." Holding up the first and displaying it to the family, he announced, "The circulatory system of the hand. The second is the nervous system of the hand and the third is the skeletal system of the same hand. Will has been studying human anatomy," he added.

"Wow," Izzy was the first to react. "That's really good, Winnie. Did you know what those marks were?"

"No. There were lots of words, but they were too big for me to read. I just traced my hand and then put the squiggly lines on where they were supposed to go. It's not drawing like what you do."

"Still, good tracing, Winnie," Yolanda complimented her daughter. "You didn't say that you had hooked Winnie up to your study bot, Will."

"That's because I hadn't."

#

In just a few minutes, the mood in the room had changed drastically. Winnie was standing in front of her mom's rocker, her body posture screaming I'm angry. Yolanda was no longer rocking, but was leaning forward slightly, looking intently at her daughter. The smile had disappeared.

"All I'm saying, Winnie, is that it's OK that you copied the drawings from Will's bot, but you should have asked him first if it was alright for you to borrow it."

"But, I didn't borrow it."

"Sweetie, if you weren't hooked up to Will's brain plug then there's only one way that you could have seen those images. By putting that bot into your brain plug

when Will wasn't using it. It's OK to do that, but ask him first next time. That's just being polite. He'd give you permission."

"Mom, I know that but I DIDN'T borrow it." Winnie was now hopping up and down.

Yolanda was trying to keep her voice calm and gentle. "Winnie. You know how we feel about lying..."

"I'M NOT LYING! You're giving me a headache again and I didn't do anything wrong! Mom, why are you always mad at me? I stopped eating the marshmallows but you're still always angry. Now I have a headache and I hate having these headaches."

Winnie paused in her frustration and turned to look at the others in the room. "Now, everyone but Will is angry at me again. I didn't do anything wrong," she wailed as she fled the room.

Silence. An outburst very unlike Winnie.

Granny wasn't going to say anything – she knew that her daughter wouldn't appreciate anything she might say, not that she knew what to say anyway. Will was... well, Will was being Will. No-one knew what was going on in his mind. Izzy was wondering why Yolanda would be always angry with Winnie—her sentiments were clearly on Winnie's side. It fell to Doc to break the silence.

"Marshmallows?"

"Long story." Yolanda unfolded herself out of her rocker and said "Mom can tell you. I don't see any connection whatsoever to the headaches." Then, she left the room and disappeared towards Winnie's bedroom.

About a minute later, Will left the room. He was back soon afterwards. Izzy lifted an eyebrow and he said. "Winnie is wailing and Yolanda is holding her."

"Why'd you go down?" Izzy asked.

"I thought I could help."

"Did you?" Granny, this time.

"I don't know. Winnie stopped slapping at Yolanda's hands, at least."

#

Yolanda collected the pieces of paper from Granny, Doc, Will and Izzy. "I don't want to explain. Not yet. Frankly, I don't believe it. I'll bring Winnie up now. When she's here, think about the thoughts or memories that you've written about on the paper. Don't think about anything else. We'll use these papers to prove what you were thinking if we need to. Yolanda scanned the papers quickly. Please close your eyes to concentrate. Don't say anything to Winnie." Then Yolanda left them wondering what was going on.

Yolanda reappeared about a minute later. Winnie was semi-hiding behind her mom's legs when Yolanda entered the living room again. That was something that would have greatly surprised Granny had she had her eyes open. She hadn't seen that timid behaviour from Winnie for years.

"It's OK, Sweetie. I've told them to close their eyes so that they can concentrate on something."

"But, I yelled and slapped at you," Winnie murmured from her position behind her mom."

"They'll understand. Why don't we stand in front of Doc. Take your time. When you're ready, tell us what you see."

"Doc is carving something with his knife."

"Is he happy or sad?"

"He's happy."

"What is he carving?"

"It's too small. I can't see it."

"That's fine. Now, let's stand in front of Granny."

"Wait." Winnie slipped from behind her mom and clambered up into Doc's lap. Finding it too low, she pulled herself up and put her face against Doc's. "It's a loon." Then she scrambled down and went to stand in front of her granny.

"What do you see?"

"She's looking at me and smiling."

"Is that all?"

"I'm wearing a red and green sweater—it's really thick."

"Anything else?"

"Just a minute." Once again face met face and then Winnie slid down. "There are little reindeers on the sweater."

"And Izzy?"

Winnie giggled.

"Well?"

Winnie giggled again and then motioned for her mom to bend over. She whispered something in her ear and then giggled happily again.

"We'll keep that a secret then, shall we? And Will?"

Once again, a secret had to be exchanged and this again provoked a giggle or ten.

"You can all open your eyes," Yolanda announced. "As I'm sure you now know, Winnie can see what you're thinking when you concentrate. She can also see what mood you're in. She didn't have to borrow Will's bot to draw the lines on her hand tracings because she could see what he was reading by just looking at his head. She can enlarge the image by putting her face onto yours. Everything that she said before to us was the truth. She didn't lie and she didn't do anything wrong. There are some things that I still don't understand but right now, I've arranged for Winnie to receive a little reward for being such a good girl in spite of me doubting what she had said. And this reward is also to make up for all the painful headaches that she's had. Sweetie, we're going to find a way for you to handle those, OK?"

"I'm getting a reward?"

"For being so brave."

"I can't see it in your head. What is it?"

"You'll have to wait. Meanwhile, I want you to go to your bedroom and change into your play clothes because you're going to get all dirty. Will and Izzy will take you to your reward."

Instructions were duly given. Directions to a nearby community were easy to follow. The caution that Winnie could see anything that Will or Izzy were thinking was unnecessary. Winnie flew up the stairs and pulled Will and Izzy out the door.

A sharp-eared observer could have heard her giggling as she skipped down the path sing-singing "I saw Will and Izzy kissing; I saw Will and Izzy kissing..."

"Yolanda said to think of something that I liked doing," Will said lamely to Izzy.

"I like it too, you know."

"Izzy, I wish I hadn't made you so upset..."

"Later, Will. I wish some things too. Let's take Winnie to her reward first. She's going to love it."

#

Doc was staring into the air and whittling without looking at the stick when Hank shimmered into view and rushed by him into the house. "Granny's with her," Doc said to the gust of wind going by.

Winnie had left the house only two minutes earlier. As soon as the door had closed, Yolanda had burst into tears and cried out, "She can't turn it off." Grannie rushed towards her daughter, enfolded her, and then led her away, both of them weeping profusely. Doc had called Hank and then sat outside so that the women could be alone. He threw the shredded mess of gouges and hackings that had once been his whittling stick into the underbrush and went in to see if he could help.

Chapter 19

Some historians have criticized the Wilizy's lack of foresight in not watching Alberta's cities more closely. If they had, these so-called experts claim that the Wilizy would have noticed the wave of construction that took place on the roofs of public buildings in early August. Mind you, that construction only happened at night, and each antenna extension took only ten minutes to install, but these wise-men claim that the Wilizy should have been watching.

I take a more realistic view. Will and Izzy became a couple in October of 2081, only 10 months before. The Wilizy as a group was only formed in April 2082. By August, Hank had created the beginning of the peddler network that would provide the Wilizy with gossip and hard intelligence, although it was not always easy to determine which was which. Wolf's surveillance of the military posts was also operational by this time, but he had few spies to supplement the Wilizy's long-range sensors. By necessity, since their battlefield numbers were limited to four adults, five teenagers, and five children, the Wilizy were restricting their activities to Alberta's forests and rural areas—the areas that were safest for them to operate in. Still, these experts argue that the Wilizy should have been able to predict what Zzyk would do next in Alberta's five cities and then prevent him from that doing that.

I have two words for such critics. Unhappily, I am unable to express those two words in this document due to the High Censor's rules about vulgar language in public documents. I believe there's a time and place for such words, but I must abide by the edicts we live under or the public won't be able to read this story. So instead, I'll just tell you to think of what comes out of the wrong end of the horse after it has digested its food. That's what I say to those critics.

#

Everyone quickly became very active after Izzy warned, "Get all your non-Wilzy business finished in these first two weeks of August. I have six plans under consideration. We could be running an operation any time between mid-August to mid-September."

The boys were cutting trees again and hoping to trade for more fruit and vegetables before summer was over. Winnie was helping as well. Wizard had wanted to build more wagons, but they didn't have time for that. He said he'd make them over the winter and Will offered some wagon wheels that he had collected from Coronation.

Stu found an old dump outside of Kamloops. Discarded metals and plastics were abundant. When Will heard the magic word *metal*, he took a look. Izzy said that he was still smiling when he arrived home. Will started taking all the iron and steel he could grab and ferrying it up to the top of Mount Robson where he had secreted the other metals he had taken from Coronation farms. He didn't know what he was going to do with it all yet, but metals like this had to be stockpiled and concealed. No-one was going to be hiking to the very top of Mount Robson's tree line where Will was depositing his treasures and few solar helicopters could fly that high. Will mentioned that he had also seen a lot of white coffins and that had brought Hank to the dump where he had found rows and rows of stand-up freezers.

Hank asked for Doc's help ferrying a dozen freezers back to the compound and setting them up. A dozen were needed so that the youngsters could have their own freezer to store the food that they'd receive from the firewood sales. Plus, there'd be several freezers for the family as a whole and one freezer to store venison for Winnie's pet. Will would strip the freezers of their power plants and replace them with filaments powered by pinky ring batteries after they were in place.

Will's filament pallets made easy work of transporting the freezers through the ground-level hallways of Hank's compound, past the underground rock-walled bedrooms, and then into the cave system in the mountain behind their home. Doc received the guided tour even into the smaller caves and then to the escape hatch to the outside. It was protected by a security system requiring a password code.

"Will's going to set it up so that the door will open and close if Winnie's pup approaches. I was hoping that you could insert the necessary electronics into the pup's body."

"Shouldn't be a problem," Doc replied.

That led to the real reason why Hank had asked Doc for help. He wanted Doc to give him an honest, blunt opinion on Winnie's health prospects. It did not escape Doc's notice that they were having that discussion deep in the bowels of a mountain where no young ears inside an invisible sling might overhear what they were saying.

"I need more information," Doc said. "I know Granny's thoughts, but not Yolanda's."

"We had known that Winnie was going to be a healer for some time," Hank started. "What we didn't know was that she was also going to be a reader. Granny, Yolanda and Yollie can read general character traits and intentions. Winnie's

powers have much higher sensitivities—she can actually read thoughts and moods. Most importantly, Granny, Yolanda and Yollie can turn their powers on and off at will. Winnie cannot turn hers off. If the people around her have strong emotions, she'll sense them. The stronger the emotion, and the more people that are around her, the stronger the effect will be on her. When her brain can't handle all the noise coming in, she gets headaches. They won't go away until she can find a quiet place to recover. That's what we know right now but this is all new to us."

"The marshmallows? Where do they fit in?"

"Winnie's powers kicked in on her birthday—which was probably a coincidence—and she started seeing things in people's heads. She saw a snippet of conversation in Yolanda's head where I had joked that eating marshmallows would be unhealthy for a 6-year old girl. When all the noise started entering her head, and then the headaches came, she thought it was from the marshmallows. So, she quit eating them, but finding their hiding spots was still fun. But the headaches kept coming back. At first, she got them from Lucas and Theo who were constantly thinking of ways to beat up on each other. Then Yolanda became worried about the headaches and that made Winnie worse because she thought Yolanda was angry with her. Then, as Winnie got worse, everyone else became anxious which made Winnie even worse. Anxiety and anger look the same to her. She can't differentiate between the two."

"What have you told the family?"

"Everyone knows that being angry at someone when Winnie is around will hurt her. We've kept the other news from the youngsters for now. But, we have ten people in the immediate family, plus Will and Izzy, plus Granny and you. The sheer amount of noise that could come into Winnie's head when we're together could be overwhelming to her. So, Yolanda made the snap decision to take the last remaining pup in a cousin's litter. The pup's exact parentage is unknown. The mother was a domesticated dog; a big black wolf has been roaming the area and the pup has the same colour. Yolanda thought that when Winnie became stressed, she could go to her bedroom with the pup and cuddle it. It would be like being in an ocean of calm. I like the idea because I expect that as Winnie grows older, she will have to spend a lot of time alone. What better place to be alone than in the woods? A big black wolf/dog cross will be a powerful deterrent to any human or animal that she encounters that has nasty intentions."

"Do wolves have emotions?" Doc asked. "Won't she read those too?"

"We're hoping that they don't. If they do, we're hoping that Winnie can't read them."

"Any chance that Winnie will learn how to turn off the noise?" Doc asked.

"No success finding a switch yet. Yolanda says that she received her own powers when she was about 10 and learned quickly how to control the experience. We're trying mental thought commands right now. Physical movements haven't worked. Winnie's premature birth might be a factor and, if so..." Hank shrugged.

"I don't know where to find research on this," Doc said. "Psychic powers are not well understood."

"Many people have heard voices in their head over the centuries," Hank added. "They ended up in insane asylums. Granny and Yolanda fear that if Winnie can't

find a way to manage the noise, it will drive her mad. There's a history of that in the family—a toddler who was too young to explain what was happening to her."

From Izzy's journals: Monday, August 8.

Yollie had insisted on coming with me on my scouting trip to Alaska; said it was her job to protect me. I tried to argue; didn't work; turned out to be OK actually. She was good company. We talked about Winnie and her pup. I don't think I'd like a dog that was solid black. It's scary looking. Yollie's more of a cat person, she said. Can't stand the things, myself. Always licking themselves. Yuck.

Yollie said that it was Will who had stopped Winnie and Yolanda from fighting. He knocked on Winnie's bedroom door, poked his head in, and said that Winnie had been making her drawings at the same time that he was studying the bot. Mother realized that Winnie hadn't snitched the bot to make the drawings like she had thought. Then she started asking other questions. Something is going on about Winnie that no-one is talking about. I tried to open that door with Yollie but she changed the subject.

Yollie was happy enough to talk about TG. She told me that he's good with the four IOF babies and is babysitting them most of the day now. TG doesn't claim that changing a diaper is an unsolvable mystery. That's what dissident men did. The women would do all the work; as a reward, men would hit them if the baby woke them up. TG likes the babies because he really misses his own daughter, according to Yollie. I kept my mouth shut.

Yollie couldn't tell TG why I had wanted to look at his home village because I didn't tell her. I still don't trust her to watch her mouth around TG. Frankly, I don't trust him. If I were a guy and I wanted a woman to think good things about me, first thing I'd do is cuddle a baby. Better still—I'd offer to change the diaper. So far, I haven't been able to confirm a single thing about his story. I have six possible plans. Five of them involve having a loyal TG helping us. If I can't find something that supports his claims soon, we'll go with Plan #6 with its higher risk and lower probability of success. I wasn't expecting this trip to his village to help; it was mostly desperation. Perhaps we'd see a sign over a house in the village: *Ivan's daughter is being kept in this house. Rescuers, please enter by the back door.*

We found TG's village easily. There was only one village facing the Beaufort Sea that was at the end of an old highway ending at an old oil terminal. TG had said that The Citadel had an effective military presence at the terminal what with all the oil being shipped out. So, Yollie and I approached at very high altitude and from the vast expanse of the Artic Ocean. I had the ship's long-range telescope in my sling; Yollie had a suite of long range filament sensors in hers. We stopped when Yollie's sensors started blinking, retreated to where they didn't blink, and then hovered in place. All we saw was a sleepy little village and what looked like an abandoned oil terminal. But, Yollie found electronic signals buzzing all around. I decided to stay for a while.

While Yollie tried to pinpoint the sources of the electronics, I took long looks at the village through the telescope. It had one main street with plenty of shops; a school; some big buildings that could be housing anything; a cluster of houses at

both ends of the village, an old airport with a usable runway; an airport terminal building with what looked to be a giant wire dish on top of it; and a series of buildings that had the appearance of mass accommodations but they were plopped into the ground in the middle of nowhere. I also saw a few pedestrians with white skin.

The terminal looked old and unused. I saw lines of circular storage tanks; some cranes; electrical transmission towers; and a lot of different shaped buildings scattered around the terminal. Many of them had antennas or more of the wire dishes on top of them. No signs of humans. But the dishes on top of the buildings were rotating. "Are the electronics coming from the dishes?" I asked Yollie.

"Too far away to be sure," she said. "Do you want to move closer? I wouldn't recommend it."

"Let's stay where we are. It's enough to know that a desolate looking area has electronic signals cluttering up the air."

#

After an hour, I sensed that Yollie was becoming impatient. Other than increased traffic through what I thought was the village's grocery store, I had nothing new to report. We had run out of things to talk about. I had already snuck in my question about why TG could look so perfectly brown when he was actually white. I told her that I was interested because Zzyk had appeared like that too but I knew that his skin colour and the nose were faked. Yollie said she'd ask TG how they had made him permanently brown.

The appearance of a large vehicle coming out of an underground storage area beneath one of the accommodation buildings caught our attention. Long and tubular in shape. Small windows along the sides; big window at the front. Looked like an old fashioned bus. A second bus emerged and followed the first. Both had huge wheels to keep their undercarriages high off the ground. I found it hard to imagine snow reaching that high, but figured that it could this far north.

The busses weren't solar powered; had to be gasoline or diesel. They wound their way into the middle of the terminal grounds and then stopped. People appeared out of one of the busses and milled around. I counted perhaps 20-25. All with white faces; all wearing what seemed to be the same uniform. "Military personnel," I told Yollie who couldn't see the detail I could.

Then, lines of people emerged from the buildings surrounding the busses. I saw four concealed doors and one hidden underground ramp that hadn't been visible before. White faces in uniforms were everywhere. I tried to get a count before the two groups merged together. Perhaps 50 coming out; 25 going in? "Shift change," I said to Yollie.

"6 p.m. local time," she replied.

The reason for the second bus now became clear as the uniforms lined up in front of both busses, entered, and then they were returned to the accommodation buildings where the busses disappeared underground without letting their passengers out.

"Barracks," Yollie suggested.

"With underground tunnels linking them together so that no-one has to walk outside in the winter," I agreed. "The night shift is smaller than the day shift," I added.

"Four more vehicles are approaching. I didn't catch where they came from."

"Me neither." It took me a couple of seconds to refocus the telescope. "Typical Army trucks; they run on gas or diesel. Bodies are jumping out of the back now."

I saw about forty uniforms lined up in military formation and then they split into five groups and each group was marched to one of the five hidden entrances. Two men in different uniforms accompanied each group. I focused tightly on the forty people and finally saw what I expected to see.

"Soldiers?" Yollie asked?

"Prisoners," I said. Probably to clean the facilities during the night shift. The soldiers leading them have weapons of some kind. The men in formation are chained."

"Interesting," Yollie said.

"You don't know the half of it," I replied. "Most of the prisoners have brown faces. I bet they have Alberta noses too."

Chapter 20

Hank plopped his newest peddler wagon full of trade goods onto the Wilizy's stern deck and then Yolanda took the youngsters on a scenic cruise to Chicago. They had never seen flat prairie land before so she gave them a low-level flight that would allow them to see the geographical features on the trip. They landed at Chicago's end of Lake Michigan—the dry end. The lake still held a vast quantity of fresh water, but none near Chicago.

Will and Doc were visiting England's Oxford University. Izzy had wanted Will to go to Chicago too, but she could feel the time slipping away and so accepted the heavy little box that Will had given her to bring back some pebbles and his assurances that the box would keep the pebbles from affecting the ship. Hank was expanding his collection of peddler wagons again. The wagon they'd be using in Chicago was the latest to come out of Alberta's new wagon building industry. Well, if one little shop can be considered an industry. Still, the owner had good woodworking skills and he had enough people asking for a wagon that he was earning a steady income in the form of trade goods.

Granny was in Surrey taping a show on how to diaper a baby. This was part of Izzy's plan to add educational programming to the WZBN. The Baby Channel, as it was now called, was becoming a big success. Izzy had had doubts about that at first, but now the interest was plainly visible when she flew over the little villages and farms of rural Alberta. She saw bright specks of colour in the clothing everywhere. Showing the citizens how to take care of infants was part of Izzy's plan to prepare the population to care for their own children. How those men and women were going to produce children out of sterile female bodies was a problem that she hadn't solved yet.

Izzy was in Surrey too, but she disappeared soon after introducing Granny to the people in the studio. Granny noticed that Izzy had shown no interest whatsoever in being around Autumn (the infant wearing gold) who was going to be the target of the diapering lesson. She found this surprising given how Izzy had been all mushy about babies earlier. She'd mention it to Doc when he returned from England. Perhaps he'd know what had happened to turn her off babies so suddenly.

Wolf was meeting with a farming family that provided the Lethbridge DPS depot with food and occasional labour. The husband's wife had been wearing twitches of Spring's green colour and Wolf was hoping to interest the farmer in sharing what he saw at the depot from time to time. As payment for regular communications, Wolf would offer the family the actual woolen green cap that Spring had worn on the TV show a month ago. Yollie was in the sky as back up. It had been her idea to dangle the cap as a reward. Afterwards, both Yollie and Hank would take up their general sling patrols until the Wilizy returned from Chicago. Izzy had budgeted three days for the Chicago expedition—one to travel there, one to trade, one day to return.

At dawn on the second day, the boys set up blankets showing samples of the different goods that they were offering to trade. They had completed three trips into the Okanagan the previous week, so the fruit and vegetables were very fresh. About ten meters away from the line of laden blankets was a long line of empty blankets. The idea was that a Chicagoan would carry whatever they wanted to acquire to an empty blanket and then deposit what he was willing to trade for it. This way, negotiations would occur well away from the wagon. Lucas was sitting on top of the wagon with a loaded rifle. Theo was sitting cross-legged behind one of the putt-putts that were supposed to have hauled the wagon to Chicago. He had a bow and a dozen arrows were pushed into the lake bed beside him. Mathias occupied a similar position behind the putt-putt on the other side of the wagon. He also had a bow and a dozen arrows. Both boys were proficient with these weapons. Reese and Winnie were the only two youngsters who had not yet met Hank's qualifying standards. Neither had the arm strength to handle a bow safely yet.

Wizard's job was to negotiate. He wore two guns in a holster belt that Wolf had picked up off the ground in Oliver. Yolanda was in the Wilizy with Reese operating the sensors. In the event of trouble, they had overwhelming firepower. Winnie was sitting cross-legged on a blanket under the wagon with her pup.

Lucas began ringing the cowbell hanging off a wagon beam. The Wilizy general store was open.

#

Wizard had three customers browsing. They might makes offers, they might not. He didn't much care. Wizard planned to keep his prices high in order to dissuade them. He wanted to have the full collection of goods available to tempt the customer he was hoping would come.

Three solar cars are setting out, Reese mind-messaged from the Wilizy. All drivers have red patches.

Wizard's armed guards were already on the alert because of the current customers, but they did check their weapons again. Yolanda was a little worried that their current customers might be caught in a crossfire if the gang tried to rob them. That threat quickly evaporated when the customers saw the cars and decided to shop in Canada. At least they took that direction to start with.

With the cars now nearing the blankets, Wizard yelled for them to stop and emphasized the instruction by pulling one of his guns and firing it into the air. Both bowstrings were now taut. "One customer only," Wizard yelled when the cars shuddered to a halt. "Winnie?" he asked quietly.

"Too far away," she replied.

One figure emerged from a car and walked warily across the intervening mud cakes. He was around 11 or 12 years old. His faded black shirt and jeans were ragged, full of holes, and filthy—as were his face, hands, and bare feet. The clothes were obviously handed down from someone else, because he swam inside of them. The red splotches on his cap and on both sleeves may have been paint, but if so, it had been applied a long time ago. The hair that emerged from under his black cap was stringy, light brown, and reached to his shoulders. The most noticeable feature, thought, was his nose. It had been broken at some time, perhaps more than once, and had never been set properly. When he was walking north, the tip of the nose was pointing north-west. The boy held his arms well away from his body while wandering up and down the aisles of blankets. He showed no sign of interest whatsoever in anything that lay there.

Finally turning to Wizard, he asked. "Where you from?"

Wizard pointed to the west.

"Your shooters blooded?"

Wizard knew that he was asking if they had killed before. "Yup."

"You don't have pride in your colours?"

Again, Wizard knew what he was asking. Izzy had given him a full briefing on the gang. The colours were how they marked their territory and their members.

"Didn't know what colours were already here. Came to trade. Not to fight." Wizard was keeping his sentences short and cryptic. Izzy had said that any signs of education would be out of place and would cause immediate suspicion.

"What colours you wear normally?"

"Blood red."

The boy nodded his head. "You the oldest?"

"Yah. What's it to you?"

"What'cha want for her," the boy pointed his chin at Winnie.

"The girl's not for trade."

"Not the girl. You think I'm stupid? A girl in a gang will kill you faster than believing the lies that adults tell. You should dump her. I was asking about the dog."

"Not for trade. Going to be breeding stock." At this point, Wizard had started to improvise.

"What breed?"

"Wolf. They kill quietly. Every boy in our gang has his own wolf."

"They fight among themselves?"

"Not unless I want them to." Wizard wasn't sure if the boy was talking about the boys in his gang or their wolves. He was scrambling like crazy now.

"Must get a little bloody," the boy grinned.

"How we get the colours. Real blood. You use real blood too?"

"Sure."

He's lying. Winnie's voice in Wizard's head.

"You going to yammer away all day or you going to trade?"

"What are those things?" the boy once again pointed with his chin. He was very carefully not moving his arms.

"Peaches."

"They any good?"

"Sweet."

"How do I know you didn't poison them?"

"Pick one and throw it over."

The boy did as instructed. Wizard pulled his knife out of his boot, sliced off a sector and ate it. "Juicy. Prime time to eat them now. In a month, they'll be moldy and then you'll get sick eating them." He tossed the peach back. "Free. Don't eat the pit. You can plant it in the ground if you want. If there's enough water, it'll grow into a tree. With this sun, in a couple of years, you'll have a tree that will give you twenty or thirty peaches. Use their pits to grow more trees and then use their peaches to grow even more trees. No-one else in this area will have any peaches to sell. Anybody wants to eat a peach has to come to you. Just don't let them take the pit away."

"Why you telling me this?"

"Growing peaches is what we do. Got tired of stealing and killing. Lost too many brothers."

"What'cha want for trade?"

"Heard you had good weapons. I have to fight off another gang soon. One with adults and copters."

The boy ate the peach slowly, chewing all around the pit. He used his sleeve to wipe the juice off his chin and then tossed the pit back to Wizard. "If I want this, I'll trade for it. You be straight with me. I'll be straight with you."

"We're leaving tomorrow at noon."

"I'm leaving one of my boys behind."

Wizard nodded his head. "What's your name?"

"Boys call me Boss. You?"

"Wizard."

Boss walked back to his solar car without a backward glance. He motioned one boy to remain and then left. For the rest of the day, lots of people and cars started out from Chicago; none dared approach when they saw who was there. At sundown, the gang member jumped in his car and left without a word. He did jam a stick with a red snatch of cloth attached to its top into the mud first though.

#

The idea of having only the Wilizy youngsters appear in Chicago had been Izzy's. She knew from unhappy experience that even someone her age would be considered an enemy. Wizard had done the rest. The idea for suggesting an

orchard of peach trees had come unexpectedly. Wide-open lakebed, moisture deep underneath probably, and lots more fresh water available if they could transport it. Lots of bodies to help with the farming. A monopoly on the product. All of this had flashed through Wizard's mind as he was trying to avoid being caught in lies. Everyone was feeling optimistic as they bedded down under the wagon that night. Especially after Winnie had reported that other than the one lie, Boss had shown no signs of being anything other than a normal kid. "He is scared about something though. I couldn't see what it was."

One car approached the peddler wagon at sunrise and stopped at the red flag. Boss. He yanked the flag out of the mud and waved it in the air, once, twice, and then three times. Two solar cars started to make their way out of Chicago, but very slowly. As they approached, it was apparent that five large boys were pushing each car while tiny drivers steered. When the cars reached the flag, the large boys unloaded ten boxes and placed two of them on each of the five blankets. Then, the two cars returned to Chicago. Boss cleaned out the Wilizy wagon's stock of peaches, placing the flats onto each blanket evenly. Twenty flats of peaches, ten large boxes of what appeared to be pebbles.

"Not going to haggle. This is all we can offer. It's what you need and will win your battle for you. I want more than these peaches though in return."

"What?"

"I want you to tell me how to plant the pits and what to do so that they'll grow. Next year, I want you to come and tell us what we're doing right and what we're doing wrong. I'll give you the same number of boxes of these then."

"What's in the boxes?"

"Does your pinky computer work?"

Wizard nodded.

"This pebble will disable your ring. I'm going to show you how to do that. The pebble won't blow up; it's not going to hurt you in any way. Disabling your pinky computer won't be permanent. All you have to do is walk away and the ring will come back to life."

Lucas brought the rifle up to his shoulder even though they already knew what the pebbles would do.

Boss tramped a giant circle in the mud bed with his feet. "Stand in the middle," he said to Wizard. "Your boy can shoot me if I hurt you."

Boss then picked up one pebble, holding it between his thumb and finger and stepped off about 50 paces. He pulled a slingshot out of his back pocket, showed it to Lucas, placed the pebble in the sling, and fired at Wizard. The pebble landed beside Wizard's left foot.

"Is your pinky ring working now?"

"No."

"Start walking and count your steps until the ring starts to work again."

"Twenty steps."

"Usual for pinky rings. Bigger objects need more pebbles to be close to them. Pebbles kill the power of anything they're close to—that's why we had to push the solar cars over the flats. The cars worked again after we took out the pebbles. You get a copter on the ground and it will never rise again if you can keep it surrounded by pebbles. You'll have to kill the adults though in a different way."

Truth.

"You were holding it carefully."

"Just to show you that I only had one. They're safe to touch. We've never had any problems with them."

Truth.

"How do you make them?"

"We don't. Don't know how to make them; don't know why they work; only know how to mine them and how to keep that mine a secret."

Truth.

"Can they bring down a helicopter?"

"Only if you can shoot some pebbles inside the copter."

Truth.

"What if you made a giant boulder of pebbles?"

"What would be the point? How would you shoot it?"

"Right," Wizard added quickly. "I wasn't thinking." Actually, he had been thinking, but about technology that Boss wouldn't know anything about.

"You leave yourself some stock?"

"A bit. We'll mine some more to replace this."

Truth.

"That was a good shot, you made."

"Best sling-shooter gets to be boss. Stupid rule. More important for the boss to be smart."

Truth.

"Deal," Wizard said. Will had asked for ten pebbles. Wizard had acquired what looked like thousands of pebbles for twenty flats of peaches.

"Deal," Boss said. He stepped back from Wizard, faced Lucas, pulled a knife out of a boot, slid it across his palm, put the knife away, and held up the palm, a slight leakage of blood now showing.

He's expecting you do the same thing and then clap palms together with him. You better not wait and don't flinch when you make the cut.

Wizard didn't. For the rest of that morning, Wizard taught Boss everything he had learned the night before about peach farming. Will's tiny little box wasn't going to work for taking thousands of pebbles home. But, Will was back home by then—his trip to England a disappointment. He arrived at the peddler wagon that night, created an invisible tow rope about 100 meters long and used the Wilizy to tow an invisible wagon holding the pebbles well below the Wilizy all the way back home.

Chapter 21

Izzy wanted Will to go to California the next morning so she called everyone to a debriefing meeting immediately after Yolanda and the boys arrived home from Chicago. Wizard was widely praised for his quick thinking. For obvious reasons, Hank stored the pebbles in the remotest cave that he had.

Hank and Yolanda accepted Will's offer to take Winnie with him to Stanford University where he would conduct research on how the pebbles worked. Izzy hadn't thought that either Hank or Yolanda would approve of Winnie going so she hadn't objected to it herself. Perhaps that would prove to be a bad decision. Izzy was now down to three possible plans—unlocking the mystery of the pebbles was crucial to two of them. She needed Will to solve that mystery quickly. Since no power-based tool could function near a pebble, she wondered how Will was going to determine their composition. A chisel and a magnifying glass?

From Hank and Yolanda's perspective, why shouldn't Will take Winnie to California with him? He had already taken care of her for a week successfully and Stanford University was on the top of a deserted mountaintop. Their biggest concern was what Winnie would do to entertain herself. They didn't want her bugging Will—Izzy had been somewhat manic about that. So, what would Winnie do for the three days and nights Will expected to be there? She'd be by herself most of the time.

Doc presented the clinching argument. "Winnie has to learn how to be by herself so that she can de-stress. You can see that the trip to Chicago and back has been hard on her. What better time to learn how to amuse herself? Besides, everyone else at the compound will be preparing for a battle and she's going to pick up on that anxiety."

So, Winnie packed up a box with her favorite game bots. Hank gave her the picture bot on dog training that he had borrowed from the New York City library collection. Some stuffed toys and a random collection of balls were included for the pup and each of the boys offered to lend Winnie one of their new slingshots for flinging the balls. Winnie chose Reese's because it was the easiest to pull. Yolanda made up a food hamper and included some dried meat for the pup because it wasn't hygienic to be carrying around melting chunks of venison. Will showed up with a transportation sling that was custom made for the pup. Winnie had wanted to fly the pup inside her own sling, but Will said that could affect her control. Will was already going to be pulling a heavy, lead-lined box from a tow cable, so adding the pup's transportation sling to the tow cable would be no problem at all. The family all lined up to see Winnie off—like any other family would do when they were sending their youngest daughter off to university.

The trip down to Stanford was uneventful. As soon as they arrived, Winnie wanted to start training her pup, so Will showed her where he would be studying. He reminded her that the dog training book had said that she should use body movement commands rather than her voice to tell the dog what to do. Then, he put out a big bucket of water on the wide expanse of what used to be a lawn but was now a flowering meadow, and left her alone with the pup and Hank's training bot.

From time to time, Will would check to see how she was doing. Winnie was moving quickly through the book's training commands—sit, lie down, stay, and heel. Fetch was the most fun for the pup, so she played that a lot and Reese's slingshot was a hit for both of them. Then, when the pup drank heavily and lay down to rest, so would Winnie. Will watched them—both lying in the grass, soaking in the sun, sound asleep, the pup's legs twitching now and then in a dream.

It was after one of those naps that Winnie awoke to see the pup eyeing a brown rabbit partially hidden in the underbrush. Many rabbits were around, but the pup had its eyes on just the one. It looked up at Winnie, and a big pink tongue appeared and licked slowly around its jaws. Winnie thought for a minute, opened her mouth and then snapped her jaw shut and the pup took off. After the pup was finished eating, Winnie took what remained of the carcass and threw it into the sea. Neatness was important in a Yolanda family. She would do that four more times that day but the pup only hunted if she were given the jaw-snap command.

Winnie also spent a lot of time wandering around the empty halls of the university. The biology wing was particularly interesting because she found a skeleton that had moving parts. After playing with the arms and legs, Winnie decided to check if she had the same bones as the skeleton.

That evening, when it was time for Will to read her a bedtime story, he looked up to see Winnie holding a big thick book instead of a bot. "This has the same pictures of a hand as the ones that I traced, Will. Would you read me the words?"

"Nervous system of the human body?" Will asked. "This book would take a very long time to read out loud, Winnie."

"Could you just explain some of the pictures then? Please?"

So, Friday evening, Winnie fell asleep in Will's lap, listening to him explain what the nervous system was. Will laid her gently into a sleeping hammock and then went to see what was wrong with the pup. As soon as he opened the outside door, the howling ended and the pup was lying under Winnie's hammock by the time Will returned to her temporary bedroom.

Saturday morning, Winnie was up early, ate out of Yolanda's hamper, and then took the pup outside to play. One more carcass was thrown over the cliff and after a while, Winnie got bored and came into the physics lab. Will was concentrating and didn't see her. He came out of his trance to find Winnie sitting at his feet, his shoes and socks off, and her fingers poking and prodding at his left ankle.

"What'cha doing?"

"Looking for your nerves. I can't find them in the pup's body."

"Different kind of body," Will said.

"Did I hurt you a minute ago? I think I pressed too hard because you jumped."

"I don't remember that."

"OK."

Will went back to his thoughts. When he came back to full awareness, his socks and shoes were back on, although his shoelaces were not done up. Winnie was sound asleep on the lawn, cuddled with the pup who once again was dreaming of something that involved running. Saturday night, she asked him to read about the nerves in the hands and the arms, the pup lying at Will's feet. Again, Winnie fell asleep in his lap, and again Will carried her to her temporary bedroom. The pup led the way this time.

The final day started about the same with breakfast for all, including the pup whose rabbit diet was still known only to Winnie. The rabbits were all in hiding whenever the pup was on the lawn now but that didn't seem to make much difference.

Will warned Winnie that he'd been needing his arms and hands later in the day so if she was going to go exploring for nerves, she should do it in the morning. He

rolled up his sleeves to make it easier for her. He came out of his trance once to find her poking at an elbow that was tingling a bit.

"Sorry," she said. "This one is hard to find because it's tucked behind the bone." Will looked down to see Winnie peering at an anatomy book opened to the page showing the nerves in an elbow.

"It just tingled. Didn't hurt." Then he went back to his problem. He came back to life with his sleeves rolled down, the buttons on the cuffs done, and Winnie once again asleep on the grass. The pup was awake and sitting motionless next to her, eyeing a rabbit. Will watched, wondering if the pup would lunge for it. When it hadn't budged after 15-minutes, Will left to go to the mass spectrometry lab to find out what was inside those pebbles. He knew what wasn't inside the pup. Rabbit. The pup wasn't much of a wolf if it wasn't interested in a rabbit.

Stanford had anticipated that power to their labs might be lost occasionally. That's why their mass spectrometry lab had built-in bicycle-powered generators. Fifteen minutes later, Will knew how the pebbles worked. He also knew why lead-lined containers would keep the effect of the pebbles away from power generating equipment. That left him some time to explore what Wizard had raised in his briefing. What would happen if the pebbles were made into a ball? Will was 95% certain that he knew and, like all good scientists, he would test his theory with an experiment that night.

Sunday night, Will read to Winnie about shoulder nerves and then let her watch his experiment. He talked about how a scientist should always keep detailed records of his experiments, and Will had not only made written notes but a visual record as well. Winnie wanted to see the experiment again, and then went to sleep in her hammock with a smile on her face, and the pup already asleep on the floor, her feet twitching in a chase of some kind. Had Will stayed a few minutes to watch Winnie sleeping, he would have seen her legs twitching in a chase of some kind as well. Had he watched closely, he would have seen that Winnie's legs were twitching in perfect synchronization with the pup's.

Monday morning's trip home was slowed by the addition of four large books in the transportation sling carrying Will's lead-lined box and the pup. Three books were on human anatomy (Circulatory System, Nervous System, Skeletal System) and one book covered the anatomy of dogs. With Will's assistance, Winnie had signed the books out from the main library quite properly. Pictures of the library cards, with her childish signature *Winnie W*, are stored in many libraries now as part of the Wilizy legend. These are the only paper records I could find of Winnie's life from the years before she took her adult name.

Chapter 22

Monday afternoon, August 29. TG was sitting on the rocking chair on the porch of the cabin housing the four IOF babies – taking the opportunity to relax while the babies napped. He was watching two youngsters walking down the dusty trail to the cabin. He hadn't seen them before, but both were aboriginal and they

probably were visiting one of the families in town. This had happened before so he didn't think anything of it. But, he did notice the costumes that they were wearing and that piqued his curiosity.

The little girl, probably about 4-years old, was swimming inside a white, short-sleeved shirt that hung down to her knees. Something was written on the breast pocket, but she was too far away for him to read it. The tot was carrying what appeared to be a child's lunch box. White but with a red cross on the top. *Playing doctor*, TG concluded.

The young boy's costume was immediately recognizable from the gun belt around his waist and the two toy guns in the holsters. He even had a sort of sombrero on his head. *Cowboy*.

The two walked directly up to the foot of the porch steps where they stopped. "Mister?" the little girl said.

"Hi," TG replied. "What'cha doing?"

"Playing dress-up."

"Doctor Winnie?" TG asked. She was now close enough for him to see the stitching on the pocket.

Winnie nodded. "My auntie said that some babies are in this house and maybe you'd let us see them?"

"Sorry, Doctor. They've just started their nap and it's hard to get them all to sleep at the same time. Who's your cowboy friend?"

"That's Reese. He's my older brother. He's not a cowboy. These were the only toy guns we could find. He's my body guard."

"Hiya, Reese. You're Doctor Winnie's body guard?"

Reese nodded. Eyes staring at TG. Hands at the ready.

"Relax, Reese. I'm unarmed."

Reese didn't relax. He did step back though.

"Does Reese talk?"

"Body guards aren't allowed to talk. They should just guard bodies. That's what my mommy said."

When TG didn't keep the conversation going, Doctor Winnie put her lunch box down on the ground and sat down on one of the steps by TG's feet. Reese sort of coughed and she stood up and sat at the far end of the porch, her eyes on TG's face.

"Relax, Reese. I would never hurt your sister."

"Are the four babies yours, Mister?" Winnie asked.

"No. I'm just babysitting them."

"Is babysitting fun?"

"Yes, it's fun."

"How did you learn to babysit? Did you practice on a baby in your family first? I can't do that because I'm the youngest in my family."

"I never learned how to babysit. I'm just helping."

"Could I help you babysit the babies when they wake up?"

"Perhaps. If you're still here and if Reese says it's OK."

"How long before they wake up?"

"Maybe an hour."

"There's a bot in my doctor's box. A lady with red hair said I should wait here while you read it. I'm supposed to tell her if you approve or not."

Doctor Winnie didn't sound like a four year old any longer.

#

Izzy waited high in the air for TG to finish reading the plan in the bot. Initially, both Yolanda and Izzy were going to provide security for Winnie. But after Reese learned that Winnie's visit could be a little dangerous, he said that he could be her bodyguard. He hadn't had a chance to be part of an operation yet, and he had passed all the tests on the ring weapon, so could he, huh, could he? The adults considered the idea. Two children playing dress up were better than one, and Izzy could provide all the security they needed, so Yolanda said OK. However, she did insist the Reese focus on the body guarding and not do any talking. Once Reese started talking, he might never stop and who knew what he might reveal.

Izzy had been close enough to hear the whole conversation on the porch, and of course, she had received the mental messages from Winnie. It was true that TG would not hurt her; it was true that TG found babysitting fun. Also, Winnie had caught the image of a newborn baby flashing through TG's brain when Winnie had mentioned learning how to babysit by practicing on a baby in one's own family.

Izzy already knew from seeing the brown-faced prisoners in Prudhoe that TG had been telling the truth about the IOF and The Citadel collaborating. She knew from Yollie that almost his entire body had been immersed in a vat of brown dye and that his nose had been surgically altered when he had arrived in Edmonton. In time, the dye would work its way out of his system. Izzy had verified as much of his background story that she could hope to. What she didn't know is whether TG would betray them. Just because his life history was true, that didn't mean that he wouldn't do exactly what Zzyk had put him there to do.

Izzy had two plans remaining under consideration. Both started with TG being involved in rescuing himself and his daughter. Both plans required TG to copy some files that would seriously hurt Zzyk's plans for the future. Winnie knew where in the plan that *loyalty test*, for the sake of a better description, was placed. If TG revealed happiness after reading that he'd be copying some files, they'd know that he could be trusted and the plan could proceed. If TG showed unhappiness about copying those files, they'd pretend to start the rescue plan and then leave TG in a disabled copter somewhere on a mountain side.

Izzy had expected TG to read the bot in front of Winnie. But TG entered the cabin and shut the door firmly behind him. He came out half an hour later, put the bot back into the medical box, and said to Winnie. "Tell Izzy that I approve."

Winnie could only tell Izzy that he was telling the truth. Izzy was left with two choices: Risk everyone's lives on the words of a man that she still didn't trust, or pretend to trust TG and use his rescue as a diversion for an entirely different operation.

Chapter 23

The Wilizy kept no written records of their preparations for the battle that would take place on Monday, August 29. At least, I was unable to find any such records. I do know, of course, what happened. And so probably do you. But to reveal the battle as it unfolded, from this point on, I must rely on the visual and written records that were recovered from Zzyk's offices decades afterwards.

#

Zzyk was deep in the bowels of some Edmonton building in the early hours of Monday, August 29. He had several command center offices in Edmonton, as well as in Calgary, so it's difficult to know exactly which one he was using that night. It would have been a private office with a heavy door and a sliding glass panel that allowed him to give orders to the adjoining communications center. The Wilizy's 1:30 a.m. attack was supposed to be a surprise. The fact that Zzyk's command center was fully staffed at 1 a.m. reveals that it wasn't.

With Zzyk was his executive assistant, Rick. Also in the room was a woman who we believe was named Ingrid but that might have been her code name. She was the geneticist from The Citadel that Zzyk had worked with for decades. There were rumours that they were much more than business associates, but nothing has ever been substantiated. As far as the Wilizy knew, Zzyk was a neutered evil gnome.

Ingrid was in her late 50s, or perhaps early 60s, which would make her younger than Zzyk. She had the average height of an IOF citizen, but not the colouring. Whenever she appeared in public, which was rarely, she wore a brown wig and used clothes to cover as much of her white skin as she could manage. She had a male beautician handle whatever make-up had to be applied. There were rumours about him as well, but again, nothing has ever been substantiated. Her hair would have been flaxen when she was young, but it was now silvered. She would have been a Nordic beauty in her youth. Now, she was an angry, aging woman with substantial power. When Will had been living in the IOF as Zurt, Ingrid had been his volunteer-mother.

"Are forces deployed around the childcare centers now?" Zzyk asked absentmindedly.

"Fully. We'll let the Wilizy enter the building and then you can order the explosions." Rick had opened some discussions about bringing the children out of the childcare centers ahead of time, but Ivan's identification of the kind of target that Izzy had chosen to attack had arrived too late for such distractions. Zzyk ruled that it was better to blow the building and the children up and blame it all on the Wilizy. More children could be made next year to make up for the losses.

"Any idea yet which childcare center the Wilizy's kidnap team will attack?"

"No. Our last message from Ivan remains the one when he was leaving the little house where the four babies are being kept. The message was in clear on the Baby Channel. *The hairs have been planted. Send the detonation signal at exactly the time that I designated earlier. Do not accidentally detonate my hair. I can tell you what Will has been using for energy/power.*"

"What are the chances of that message being discovered by the Wilizy?"

"Negligible," Ingrid spat. "They're all in the field preparing to attack. Ivan's been communicating via the Baby Channel for a week now, although not in the clear

like this. Nobody watches that stupid thing this early in the morning. I do not understand how the Wilizy can take away his pinky computer but give him an unsupervised job in a house that has a live camera feed! Tell your people to be careful Zzyk. Surely, they're not that stupid!"

"But, it's Ivan who's telling us what they're going to do."

"I've said it before. I will say it again. Ivan betrayed his heritage when he married that commoner. He can't be trusted. He should be discarded after we've killed all the Wilizy"

"But, knowing about Will's inventions would be very useful."

"That won't matter when Will is dead. You'll still have access to my people's armaments, like we agreed decades ago."

#

"Ten minutes to the Wilizy attack," Rick announced.

Zzyk looked up from trimming his fingernails. "Give me the Baby Channel on the big screen. Where's my entry team?"

"Coming across the US border now. The Aboriginal Nation's border patrol doesn't even look that way any more."

"Stupid, stupid people!" Ingrid spat.

"You should be able to see them recover the babies," Rick assured. "They're sleeping in a back room. The entry team has been told to hold the babies in front of the baby channel camera, put a light on them, and then get them out fast."

#

With five minutes to go, a baby care nurse rushed into the room where the camera was still recording. She was fumbling with her pinky ring. "Izzy, Izzy, answer me Izzy." Taking off her ring, she held it in front of her eyes and then threw it to the ground. Looking around wildly, she spotted something on a bureau and grabbed it. "Izzy, Izzy. Emergency. Answer. Answer!"

"This is not a secure line. Get off."

"Izzy. TG's a traitor. He sent a message to Zzyk in the clear. Abort. Abort. TG's a traitor. Abort. Abort."

"Explode Will and Izzy's hairs," Zzyk ordered.

Izzy's voice came clearly through the device that the nurse was holding. "All forces. Abort! All forces. Abort." Then, Izzy's voice was almost drowned out by the howls of a male voice. "Will's burning up," Izzy could be heard screaming. "Will's on fire. Help us. Help us."

Then Izzy began screeching too.

Zzyk, Rick and Ingrid listened intently for the full minute of Will and Izzy's deaths. When Izzy's screams abruptly ended, the Command Center staff burst into spontaneous applause. Rick and Zzyk had huge grins on their faces.

"Did you hear that bit at the end, where she kind of hiccupped for a bit before going into her final death scream? That was great! Replay the tape," Zzyk yelled through the window.

Zzyk's office and command center were once again scenes of backslapping and excitement. Ingrid even smiled briefly.

"Our entry team is on camera," an officer in the center announced. Zzyk and Rick paused in their celebrations to watch. Four shadowy figures entered, searched the house, and the soldier in charge spoke into the baby channel camera. "No babies are in the house." He then left the room to obey his instructions to leave quickly.

"Rick, where are my babies?" Zzyk asked.

"Replay the tape from when the nurse enters the room," Rick bellowed to the command center. "Mute the audio."

#

"See. The nurse put the phone down and went into the back room. She didn't come out." Again, Rick hollered to the command center. "Stop the replay! Bring back that entry team. Tell them to find out if the house has a back door."

"Did we get any kills at any childcare center, Rick?"

Rick had to leave to check the military net personally. "Negative," he said when he came back into the office. "There were no attacks."

While they waited for the entry team to return to the house, Ingrid spoke up. "So, if I understand this correctly, you didn't kill any of the Wilizy who were going to kidnap babies and you haven't recovered any of the four kidnapped babies from their house in the Aboriginal Nation. All you have is a tape of two people screaming. Why are you celebrating?"

Rick paused to see if Zzyk was going to answer, and then, in his place, stated as calmly as he could. "We didn't capture or kill the other Wilizy because Izzy had time to abort. An unexpected advance warning allowed the nurse to rescue the babies. But, what we do have is Will and Izzy's voices on tape screaming in agony and Izzy telling us that Will was on fire. Only the three of us know how they were going to die. Not even Ivan knew. How could Izzy fake the sounds of Will burning up if they didn't know that was going to happen?"

Zzyk stepped in. "Rick, I want voice analyses on the tapes to confirm that the voices belonged to Will and Izzy. Bring me that nurse's pinky ring. Bring me the phone that the nurse used. It's possible that it has a video feed on it. Find out how the nurse got them out of the house."

Rick nodded and hustled away.

"It was all a fake, you stupid, stupid people."

Chapter 24

Rick slid the window open and poked his head into Zzyk's office. "The entry team is on the way back to Edmonton with the nurse's pinky ring computer and the phone. The ring's battery was dead so the sergeant couldn't access the phone's contents. The other phone did have a video feed. The sergeant said that he saw two people screaming and some flames giving off a light purple smoke. There was a back door to the house and it's a short run into the woods. The sergeant didn't have time to search the woods for the missing babies as per his previous orders to leave the area quickly."

"Analyze the voices on that phone as soon as it comes in. Confirm what the sergeant saw." Zzyk waited for Rick to leave and then turned to Ingrid. "Light purple smoke is an indicator of potassium. Exactly what your hairs contained, so surely..."

Rick knocked on the window again, "Ivan is trying to reach you. He said it was important."

"Private feed," Zzyk instructed. "No listening in by command center staff. Close the window. Then come in." Rick was seated in Zzyk's office in time to hear Zzyk responding to Ivan's question about the status of Will and Izzy.

"Yes, we believe that both of them are dead. Do you have any idea where they were at the time they died?"

"Staging area #1, wherever that was. I never did find out which childcare center they had targeted. Didn't they attack?"

"Izzy managed to send an abort message. You didn't hear that?"

"I wasn't on their communication network. Izzy never trusted me, but the woman in charge of my security was sweet on me. She loved seeing me play with the babies. After a while, she let me play with them by myself."

"Foolish."

"Compared to the IOF and to The Citadel, they were naive and foolish. But that is now all behind us now, right? I'm going to place my phone on a stand in front of me so that so that you can see me."

There was a moment of silence while the Zzyk and the others digested the view.

"What is this, Ivan? Where are you?" Rick asked.

"I was remembering how our agreement was that if I killed Will and Izzy, I would be reunited with my daughter. Do you remember that?"

"Yes, of course." Zzyk replied.

"Well, I have followed my orders. But, it strikes me that there's a certain hair still embedded in my scalp that might explode accidentally. I thought we should eliminate that possibility."

"What's in your right hand, Ivan?"

"It's called a dead man's switch. As long as I keep my thumb on this button, nasty things aren't going to happen to one of your buildings. If I became too tired to continue holding it, or if I heard people coming down the hallway, or if I were somehow incapacitated by a hair falling out of my scalp, I might release the switch. The Wilizy had a lot of explosive materials in their storerooms. I stole as much as I could put in a copter and I have those explosives right here in this tiny little room with all this expensive computer equipment. I had enough explosives to scatter around other important rooms in this building too. This whole building will come down if I want it to."

"Ivan, I don't recognize the room," Zzyk said. "Would you like to tell me where you are?"

"Ask Ingrid. I can wait."

"Turning off the feed to you now, Ivan," Rick announced. "I think this is just a big misunderstanding."

"Yah, I think so too."

#

"Ingrid?" Zzyk asked.

"He's in the main computer room in my genetic research building. The computer room contains all the genetic computer programs that we've been running for decades. The computers control absolutely everything in the baby creation process. Next to this room are the thousands of test tubes that we use to start the creation process. Further down the hallway are the rooms with the incubators where embryos in the test tubes are placed so that they can receive nine months of nutrition. On another floor are all the labs where we are planning creation of the new types of babies that we are going to produce for you. All of the results from our experiments are stored in paper, and on computers on that floor. Throughout the building, we have equipment that has been especially created for this process. The computer files have off site back-ups, of course, but the specialized equipment in that building cannot be found anywhere else in the world."

"And if we lose this building?"

"It will set us back years. Perhaps a decade."

"How did Ivan get in?" Rick interjected. "How did he know this building even existed? Isn't it buried underground?"

"The building has an exterior alarm that cannot be turned off once it's been activated without entering codes that I control personally; every room has a motion detector attached to an alarm that cannot be turned off in the same way. Zzyk, we can't lose this building. I've spent my whole career creating what's in it."

"Rick, handle this. Disarm Ivan first. We can worry about how he got in later."

#

"Ivan. First, congratulations on a wonderful operation. We're thrilled that Will and Izzy are dead and it's all because of you. Of course, we're going to remove that hair. Hang on just a sec while Ingrid gives me the disarming code." Rick slid a paper over to her and waited.

"Ivan. I have Ingrid's code and it's a little complicated. We want to be sure that you take your time speaking it into the hair's little computer's brain. It operates just like the brain-band explosive that you disarmed. Read it twice. I'm going to hold up the paper now."

Ivan read the code as instructed and Rick lowered the paper. "Time to see if Ingrid was telling the truth," Ivan said. He held up his right hand with the dead-man's switch so that it was directly in front of the camera, reached with his left hand to the left side of his head, felt around a little, and then yanked. Ivan waited for a second, and let the hair fall to the ground behind him without examining it.

"Rick, let's talk now about my daughter. She's here in Edmonton, right? Ready to be delivered to me?"

"Of course." On that count, Rick was telling the truth. As Zzyk's executive director, he had to plan for all possibilities in an operation. It was possible that Zzyk would keep his word about reuniting Ivan and his daughter. It was possible that he'd murder both of them. It was also possible that Zzyk would want to appear that he was keeping his word, at least for a while. So, Rick had had the girl brought from Alaska to Edmonton where she had been stashed in one of their infant care centers until he knew what Zzyk was going to do. Ingrid had a team watching her.

"Name the time and place and we'll have her there. But, Ivan, she's too young to be waiting for you all alone in the dark, so how about we put a nurse with her?"

"Not a chance. Here's what we're going to do instead, Rick. I'm going to change this dead man's switch to a voice activated switch set to go off in two hours. When I leave this building, I will reactivate its alarm system but with a new password that only I will know. I'm going to get in my copter with my daughter and fly northwest. If I arrive safely in the Arctic Circle, I will send a message to this phone that will deactivate the switch. I will also inform you of the new password to what is now **my** building. You don't know the number of this phone, or the message that I'm going to send, so you can't deactivate this switch. Any intrusions by DPS forces into **my** building will set off the explosives. If I am somehow delayed or killed before I reach safety, this building is going to be rubble."

"So, we have to believe that you won't disappear?"

"Rick, listen to me. I'm telling you exactly where I'm going. I'm returning to Prudhoe with my daughter. I'm going to beg my people to forgive me. I am going to explain that I have killed one of the biggest threats that they will ever face. I am also going to tell them that I know what Will has been using for energy/power. I think they'll take me back."

"You and your daughter could stay in Edmonton, Ivan."

"Not with Ingrid here, Rick. You know that wouldn't work."

"Back to where and when, Ivan." Zzyk intervened.

"I'll be outside this building, standing next to my copter in 10 minutes. When I appear, you are to land, drop her off, and then leave. Remember, Zzyk. You can kill me, but if you do, you won't be manufacturing babies again for a long time."

#

It was well over 2 hours into Ivan's flight home and Zzyk was sitting alone with Ingrid. Ivan had phoned in the disarm signal and DPS security was now sweeping the building under Rick's supervision, removing the explosives and trying to determine how Ivan had entered the building. Ivan's helicopter was now flying over the Beaufort Sea.

"The video analysis definitely showed a lilac cloud in the flames of both people who were burning," Zzyk said. "The voices are definitely theirs. Are you convinced now that Will and Izzy are dead?"

"They couldn't have removed those hairs from their bodies beforehand without setting themselves on fire," Ingrid replied. "It has to be them in the video. I do wish we could find their bodies though."

They lapsed into personal contemplation. Like two married spouses, they didn't need to talk to know what the other was thinking.

"About Ivan learning about the building..." Zzyk opened.

"Yes. I confess. I showed it to him. I thought it would make him think better of me and what I was doing for our people."

"He wasn't impressed that you've accomplished something that the world has never seen before?"

"No. He can't forget that I had his wife killed. She didn't deserve him. Her children would tarnish our race. The child was tested. She had only average intelligence. How could I allow his child and wife to live when I had discarded

others like them? Maintaining my authority is more important than the lives of a few stupid people."

"One must always keep control with an iron fist." Zzyk trotted out his own mantra.

"Precisely. People are inherently stupid. They must not be allowed to ruin it for those who are not." Ingrid just couldn't stand stupid people.

"The tracker that the child was carrying. Something she ate?"

"A cookie. The bug gives no trace of being active, at least not that any normal instruments can pick up."

"Your people are now awaiting instructions."

Ingrid nodded.

"Give me a live feed to the Prudhoe command center," Zzyk ordered. A few seconds later, "Prudhoe, where's the copter now?"

"Hovering at 300 meters above the ocean, 40 kilometers out, waiting for our permission to proceed, Sir."

"Stupid, stupid man. Wouldn't he know that I couldn't let him go back?"

"Your orders, Ingrid?"

Ingrid looked at Zzyk and shook her head once again in disbelief. She ran a finger across her throat.

"Prudhoe, destroy the copter."

"Sir, copter sees the missile launch. It's trying to jink up and down to avoid."

Five seconds later. "Target has been destroyed."

"That's all, Prudhoe."

"I don't know how I could have given birth to such a stupid, stupid boy."

Chapter 25

Noon on Tuesday, August 30, the day after the deaths of Will, Izzy, TG, and his daughter. Rick was giving Zzyk a progress report. Ingrid was in her lab checking for damage.

"Further analysis by a second team confirms that Will and Izzy were on that tape and the fire was lilac in colour," Rick reported. "We haven't been able find any charred bodies in initial sweeps of the area surrounding the care centers."

"Any chance of finding them?"

"We have no idea how close their staging area was to a care center. So, if there's an abandoned copter, then yes, we'll find them. If not, finding the remains of two burnt bodies somewhere in Alberta's woods is unlikely."

"WZBN?"

"Soldiers have been spreading your acidic liquid over all of our western security fences. Will's transmitting compound is not difficult to see so they're spraying your counter-compound directly on the affected surfaces and it eats through to the metal in minutes. We'll be finished spraying the length of the border in a couple of days, but WZBN has already gone off the air. At 10:46, if you're interested."

"My babies?"

"Hidden. Unlikely to be found soon."

"Estimated number of Wilizy remaining?"

"Two less than what they had yesterday. They could have had hundreds of followers by now. We have no idea of their numbers. But, they have no leadership and no science now. They are doomed."

"Don't relax security."

"Re-activate plans to invade B.C. through the Aboriginal Nation? I toured the border areas last week as I mentioned to you. Security is very lax."

"No. I'll deal with them later. Ingrid's project takes first priority. Her building?"

"Some possible traces of tampering with the main electrical feed into the building, but that's just a suspicion. What we do know is that someone bored a hole through a side door—big enough for a hand to get through but not a body. We do not know the purpose of that hole. The door itself was cracked open with a crowbar that was left at the scene. There was no attempt to hide it or to remove fingerprints. We're processing the crowbar now and we expect to find Ivan's prints on it."

"And then, he walked around the building wherever he wanted to go?"

"Appears that way. No sign of tampering with any of the security systems in each room. Each has its own *turn-off* password by the way, so he would have had to know 20 or 30 passwords to wander through the entire building."

"No master code?"

"No. We turned the system back on and it works as designed. Every room is secure. The security system should have worked. "

"But it didn't." Zzyk showed no emotion.

"It didn't. But it is working now."

"How do we fix it so that there can't be another entry?"

"We could try and find a technical genius but the one we used to have is dead."

"Yes, I forget that he was a genius in his own right. Just stupid in his choice of women. He'd be able to find a way, but no-one else can?"

"Possibly. I've put Ivan's replacement on the problem."

"He's checking to see if there were any attempts to hack into the computers in the building?"

"Yes. He says that no computer access was logged by anyone that evening, either within the building or from outside the building. No files were opened; no files were removed; no files were created; no logs were changed; no passwords were created or altered."

"Your gut?"

"I don't think Ivan had time to do anything. We know the exact minute that he left the baby house. We know the speed that his copter was able to fly and how far he had to go. We know the exact minute that he was sitting in the computer room talking to us. We calculate that he had only 20 minutes inside the building. He would have needed a fork lift to move all that explosive material into the building quickly but we saw no signs of a fork lift. Just distributing those explosives by walking room by room throughout the building would have consumed that 20 minutes. He would have had no time to tamper with the computer systems."

Rick continued what he thought was a compelling argument. "Besides, he's dead and unable to benefit from any tampering. We saw him climb into an empty

copter with his daughter. He was the only one who could have flown it to the Arctic Ocean. The bug inside the child showed him flying steadily northeast on a direct path. I saw Prudhoe's radar tapes from the point where they picked up the copter. Ivan was trying to avoid the missile seconds before the explosion. He didn't have enough time between the missile launch and the missile strike to grab his daughter and jump out of the copter. Prudhoe has confirmed that the copter was destroyed. They found floating debris right where it should have been. The conclusion has to be that Ivan and his daughter was inside that copter and they died when Prudhoe blasted it out of the air."

"But to be absolutely sure the building's computer system is secure..."

"We're going to restore every computer record in that building from offsite backups that were made less than 24 hours before."

"Was that the new man's recommendation?"

"Yes. He suggested it without prompting."

"Encouraging."

"Yes. Igor is going to be easier to work with than Ivan. Completely supports Ingrid's plans. Shares her beliefs, which is not surprising because he's one of our friends. He can't wait to start."

"So, he's an arrogant, full-of-himself, supreme-being egg head?"

"Pretty much."

"Little things now, Rick. Give me the bad news if there is any. Did you recover the hair?"

"No. But it could have fallen down a vent that was behind Ivan's chair. I didn't see the point in taking the building's heating system apart to find it. It's inert now."

"The explosives that the Wilizy had?"

"Stolen from one of our armories."

"Ah. And the armory records were doctored to hide the fact?"

"I'll be dealing with that this afternoon."

"Do you have time to set up for this evening?"

"Already done."

#

"My fellow Albertans." Zzyk started his address at 7 p.m. Tuesday evening. People in Alberta's cities stopped to shake their heads—trying to dislodge a tinny little voice speaking in their brain.

"Do not be alarmed if you hear my voice inside your head. This is Zzyk, your elected leader of this wonderful province."

City people shook their heads again, wondering what was happening. A tinny voice was speaking inside their head about some elections that no-one had known about.

"I am talking to you tonight to give you some wonderful news. For about a year now, the citizens of Alberta have been living under the threat of a small group of wackos who called themselves the Wilizy. You may have heard of two of these people. The young girl is known is Izzy and, although she looks normal, she is, in fact, a promiscuous slut. You may have seen her prancing around in a racy costume pretending to be a princess. She's not a true Albertan of course. You

would have realized that as soon as you saw her pasty white skin and scraggly red hair—that combination is a strong indicator of uncontrollable obscene behaviour. Will is unfortunately an IOF native who has had some mental health issues. He's a magician of sorts who pretends to invent things. Most of the time, he is harmless. But recently, he began creating explosive devices and I found out that he and Izzy were planning on using them to slaughter innocent children while they were playing with their toys in one of our day care centers."

"The DPS took immediate steps to stop them, of course. Our babies are Alberta's biggest treasures, and as you know, the IOF takes great pride in creating a life that is safe for all of our citizens, especially babies. The fact that these two crazies were planning on murdering babies is a sign of how unhinged they had become in recent months. The DPS was on guard, as always, and I am happy to report that they ensured that no babies were harmed in any manner."

"We arranged to meet with Will and Izzy and they have agreed to seek help in one of our hospitals. They have also agreed to stop broadcasting their demented ravings on what has become known as the WZBN. They themselves took down that network at 10:46 this morning. I would have preferred that they give you some warning first because some of their broadcasts were mildly entertaining. After all, babies do amusing things. But, the wanton slut and the deranged magician admitted that they had hurt those babies badly when they had kidnapped them several months ago and then imprisoned them in a tiny room that was so freezing cold that they had to have wool caps just to survive. You should not be concerned about the four little babies that they were recording. They will not have to suffer the indignity of having their personal lives broadcast all over the province any further."

"Will and Izzy are doing well in their comfortable rooms in the hospital. They asked me to tell you that they are deeply sorry for upsetting all of you with their deluded talk about taking over control of the province. Now that they are off their hallucinogenic drugs, we are hopeful that they can be cured of their insanity. Perhaps in time, they can lead normal IOF lives. Citizens of Alberta: You no longer have to be concerned about being attacked by an indecent, lustful animal and forced to do filthy sexual acts to satisfy her lust. Nor do you have to worry any longer about children being blown up by explosives created by mad Will's unbalanced mind."

"I am pleased to recognize the great restraint that the people of Alberta have shown this past year in tolerating these two lunatics. The fact that you accepted them in the province, and that some of you even talked with them, is a sign of how far we have come as citizens in tolerating undesirables. As a reward to everyone for the sacrifices our citizens have made, I am turning off everyone's brain-bands from now until 2:00 a.m. tomorrow morning. Please join me in the streets of the province in celebrating the end of the reign of terror imposed on us by Mad Will and Slutty Izzy."

The tinny voice stopped talking, and to a person, the citizens of Alberta who were within range of the special antennae on the tops of the province's highest buildings, rushed out into the streets yelling and cheering. There, they found free stimulants waiting to help them enjoy their happiness even further. Rural people went to bed wondering what had happened to the Baby Channel.

#

"Did you have a wild night, last night?" Every now and then, Rick would ask Zzyk a stupid question just to get some private enjoyment.

"Last night?" Zzyk asked disbelieving. "Of course not. Ingrid and I spent a quiet night as usual."

"The people of Alberta today have the biggest group hangover that there's ever been."

"Hangover?"

"A hangover is what happens to peoples' bodies when they over-indulge in illicit liquids and pills."

"Even the Command Center staff?"

"I gave them a day to recover."

"Seems somewhat generous."

"When you fired that shot of joy juice through their brain-bands, every citizen within range became deliriously exhilarated. Almost all of our staff wear activated brain-bands. They reacted uncontrollably just like everyone else in Alberta."

"I see. Of course. So, no-one is working at all?"

"No. But, all of our inquiries about Will and Izzy are finished. Everything was confirmed as we thought. Same thing for Ivan. The western security fences are back to normal. WZBN is destroyed. Everything is the way it was a year ago."

"All because they wanted to kidnap more babies. Do we have any idea why they would do something so illogical?"

"They were going to give them away to families as gifts, I suppose. Izzy had left that poster behind advertising free babies after she escaped."

"What a strange creature."

"Perhaps she'll get cured in the hospital."

Zzyk looked intently at Rick and thought until he was satisfied that he had reached the correct conclusion. "What's the status of the new brain-bands?"

"On schedule."

Chapter 26

"Stu, you know everyone but TG, I think," Yolanda said. "Stu, this is TG, the newest Wilizy manager—he's in charge of anything dealing with computers. TG, this is Stu, the WZBN's manager."

The two men shook hands and then sat down in fold-up chairs that were in a circle around the kitchen table. "TG's daughter Liset is playing with Winnie below. They've been staying with us in the Wilizy after TG was blown up on Monday. We're hoping to keep his continued existence a secret for as long as we can." Yolanda looked around to see who was missing and stopped when she heard a flurry of activity on deck.

"TG, you've worked with Wizard, Wolf and Yollie. You know Doc and this is my mother—we all call her Granny. She was in the Wilizy control center but I'm not sure if you met."

"They did. Hank's on the way. He's sorting out who's going to be in charge at the homestead," Doc informed the group. Doc and Granny headed to the Directors' section in the living room. Wizard, Wolf and Yollie found chairs in the galley.

"Lucas, Theo, Mathias, and Reese are home. TG, you met Reese when he visited you with Winnie. I think it's Theo's turn to be boss but Hank will remember. The four boys and Winnie were part of the operation, but they weren't active on the final days. We would normally include them in a debriefing, but they've already had their chance to comment. Everyone who is here today was active in the final stages of Operation... what are you calling it, Yollie?"

"Operation *Dead Man Walking*."

Yollie stood and bowed to the applause. Yolanda saw but pretended not to see Yollie's hand lingering on TG's hand when she sat down.

"Here's Hank now," and she blew a kiss at her husband as he found the last empty seat in the living room. "Will and Izzy are seconds away. They've just finished the taping in Surrey." At that point, the deck door opened and Zorro and Princess Melissa entered.

"A thousand Albertan men are lined up around the block at Edmonton's main hospital hoping that you'll escape," Wolf teased. "Most are carrying signs, *Please molest me, Izzy*."

"Can you imagine the nerve of that gnome?" Izzy waved her hands at everyone and headed for the stairs. "Have to get out of these clothes. I smell like a pig; going to shower; back in a few."

"Will, Izzy might appreciate help washing her back." Yollie said. "She told me that she found it difficult to reach some places."

"It's possible to reach every part of the body without help, Yollie." Will replied and then he too disappeared.

A scraping of dog nails on the stairs announced the arrival of a black wolf pup followed by Winnie and Liset who was climbing at toddler speed one step at a time. "Stu, I don't think you've met Winnie yet, and this is TG's Liset. She's about 2?"

"Almost 2 and four months," TG corrected.

"Liset is such a pretty name," Granny said.

"I like it too. It was her mother's."

Thought it would be, but Granny just smiled.

Winnie brought Liset in front of Stu and extended the toddler's right hand, then her own. Stu obliged.

"Winnie, you should introduce your dog too." Yolanda prompted.

The dog in question stopped sniffing at Hank's shoes, loped over to Stu's chair and sat down. "Uncle Stu, this is Patella. I named her after a bone in her leg. It's by the knee." The dog raised a right paw and Stu obliged again.

"Mommy, Liset is hungry. Can she have another chocolate pudding?"

"That's up to her father."

"Uncle TG?"

TG looked at Yolanda, who opened the fridge door, pulled out some carrot sticks, and held them so that only TG could see.

"Only if she has some carrots first."

Winnie looked at Liset briefly. "That's OK, she likes carrots too." Food was handed out, the dog's head was patted all the way round the table, and the trio

disappeared only to be replaced by a rushing Izzy. "Meeting is called to order," she said at the top of the stairs. "Will is showering now. In case anyone really has to know such details of our lives, our shower does not have room for two, and Yollie, Will did offer to help me shower. Witch!"

"Scrawny Butt."

"First order of business: the genetics lab team. TG, you get to go first." Izzy sat at the bow end of the table and the mood in the room turned serious.

#

TG began his commentary from the point after he had used the Baby Channel to tell Zzyk that he had successfully planted the hairs on Will and Izzy.

"I slinged into Edmonton as quickly as I could. Will had bored the hole in the genetic building's outside door, scattered some of the Chicago pellets inside, and pried the door open at midnight. By the time I arrived at the lab, he and Wizard had used the pellets to completely deactivate all of the main floor's security systems and had carried in three pallets of explosives. They had mined all the rooms, and then retreated, vacuuming up the pellets one room at a time so that each room's security system would be operational again. They were waiting outside the building when I arrived. Will wiped down the crowbar, handed it to me to grab, and then he and Wizard left. I figured I had at least 15 minutes to create my private passage into the computer network and that time was more than sufficient."

"I set up my chair in front of a handy vent and then made the call to Zzyk. That went as expected. After they had agreed to bring Liset to my copter, I pocketed the healthy hair I had yanked out of my head and went outside. I used Will's filament vacuum to remove the pellets off the computer room floor and stored them directly inside the lead-lined carry bag with the other pellets. I'd take the pellets and the filament into the Wilizy later. There had been a risk that the DPS could have arrived before I could leave the building, but Will was on watch, and we had plenty of time. I loaded Liset into the chopper and took off."

"Questions? Doc?"

"Why won't they know that you meddled with their computer system?"

"They will look for electronic tampering—changes in the files, entry logs, and so on. I made changes to the boards that sit inside the hardware box. No electronic logs are kept when boards are removed or installed because the computer isn't operational at that time."

"Which means?"

"I now can control every computer in that building from wherever I am at the time. The genetics building computers give me a second access point to the IOF's entire computer network. I had other entry points that I set up before defecting but this one will be the safest. I still have to be careful that I don't reveal my presence, but I know what trip wires they have, so that won't be a problem, for now. Even if they suspect that their network is compromised, they can't stop me from getting in unless they replace every board and chip in the genetic building's computer system."

"And the likelihood of them suspecting?" Doc was being curious, not doubtful.

"The man replacing me is arrogant. Since he can't conceive of anyone deceiving him, he doesn't prepare for that possibility."

"But, you did make copies of some files, right?" Doc pursued.

"Yes, but Will and I copied those earlier in the week. Perhaps Izzy should explain. It was entirely her idea."

"Carry on, TG" Izzy said.

"Izzy had sent a copy of her overall operational plan to me on the 22nd. That's when I met Reese and Winnie although I didn't suspect that they were Wilizy. The original plan called for me to make copies of the IOF's genetics software program on the night of the operation. The timing would have been extremely tight, and my copying would have been difficult to hide, but I liked being able to hit the IOF hard, so I approved the plan without saying anything. Liset would be rescued. That's all I wanted."

"But Winnie returned to the baby house 15-minutes later with a hand-written note from Izzy asking me two questions: *Would it be easier to make a copy of the back up file instead of the actual file? Did I know where the back-ups were stored?* I knew immediately that this was a much better plan, so I didn't have to think. Winnie was with me the whole time waiting for my response, so I told her that the answer was *Yes* to both questions. The next day, Doc removed my poison hairs and gave me a new brain plug. Then, Yollie showed me how to fly a sling and make myself invisible. It felt good to become part of the Wilizy."

"Why was it better to make a copy of the back-up file?" Stu asked.

"The back-up storage site contains back-ups of **all** of the IOF's operational programs. They've protected the building from earthquakes and fire and since they have no computers inside the building that are connected to the outside, they've protected the building from hacking. But, the building wasn't protected from Will and me slipping into their building invisibly during the day and then spending the night copying all of their best kept secrets. We now have a copy of every important software program that is run on an IOF computer."

"You're up next, Yollie. Tell us about the babies."

"Nothing much to it. Early in the evening, I snuck the babies out of their bedroom. Then I watched as TG sent his message via the baby network to Zzyk about not exploding his hairs yet. I waited, did my act with the phones, took off out the back door, and joined Mother in the Wilizy. The babies are staying with friends in the Shuswap. A family there may take them. They're not sure if they can handle four babies and all the broadcasting that will have to be done. Plus, they don't want Zzyk's goons dropping in unannounced. It may be best if we tape the shows rather than have live feeds so that we can edit out anything that might disclose their whereabouts. That was Stu's suggestion, by the way."

Stu stepped right in. "This will be especially important when the babies start wandering around the house and yard. We'll need to have multiple cameras on the house and yard and somebody will have to do a lot of editing to put together a usable show. You might think about making the show more along the lines of *Highlights of the Wilizy Babies*, for example, rather than just taping 18 hours in a baby's day."

Granny piped up. "You could throw in some of the lessons on child rearing right then at the exact time that a parent would normally step in, rather than broadcasting the lessons separately."

"Who wants to draw up a proposal?" Izzy asked. "Yollie, are you interested in being part of this?"

"No. Granny and Stu know more about this than I do."

Izzy looked up, saw two nods, and said, "Done. No rush on the changes. The babies are barely mobile right now. Let's get the baby channel back up and running first. Then make plans for adjustments as they get older. First priority is security for the host family; second priority is creating an interesting show. Next up is Will."

"Me?"

"Yeah. Tell them how we escaped being assassinated."

"I didn't plan this part, Izzy."

"Yeah, but without you, it couldn't have happened. You're up."

"Well, I went to the Stanford lab to learn how to neutralize the pellets and, to do that, I had to know what they were made of. That took a couple of days. I was sure that lead-lined containers would make them safe to transport and they did. When I returned from California, Doc used one of the pellets to turn off the power in TG's personal hair bomb and I exploded the bomb to find out how Zzyk was going to kill us. I had thought poison at first, but it was a potassium fire instead. Then, Doc used pellets again to safely remove the other two hairs in TG's head and we stored them together with some pellets until we had to tape them burning."

"Izzy had already talked with the B.C. studio about setting up a fake campsite where we would be killed. So, they were ready for us a week before the operation. Izzy and I went to Surrey and taped the scene of our deaths. First they taped shots of the hairs burning and then we had to tape the screaming part."

Izzy jumped in. "My throat was becoming raw because the director said we weren't sounding realistic enough. So, he tried all sorts of tricks to make us scream horribly. At one point, we both got goofy and Will started tickling me and I was tickling him, and I got a hiccough right in the middle of a wonderful scream. We ended up laughing out loud. The director said that he'd keep the hiccough. He put it all together somehow. We never did hear it."

"So I placed the video of us dying on the phone that Yollie was going to use to contact Izzy and that was about it," Will concluded.

"Seeing no questions? ... Yolanda, please."

"I was in charge of the Wilizy for the last stage of the operation—TG's and Liset's deaths. Granny and I were operating the ship by ourselves. This was a potentially dangerous part of the operation because we didn't know how TG and Liset were going to be killed. We did know that the copter was going to be uncomfortably close to the Wilizy when it happened."

"Will had stayed at the IOF genetics lab to guard TG's helicopter in case the DPS were able to arrive at the lab before he came out. That way, we'd know for sure that they couldn't plant anything in the copter. We were sure that they'd plant something on Liset. Will accompanied TG out of Edmonton in case he was trailed. Meanwhile, Hank, Yollie, Wizard and Izzy were on a four compass point watch around a temporary landing spot in the Northwest Territories. TG landed the

copter and Will immediately attached the copter to the Wilizy with a very long tether that we thought would keep the ship safe from whatever Liset was carrying. That whole switch-over of power lasted about 10 seconds which was far too short for it to be noticed if they were tracking the copter's flight path."

"The Wilizy had no problem hoisting the dead copter into the air and I kept a slow steady pace towards the Beaufort Sea. Four Sling Warriors were always watching the compass points. Doc had changed places with TG in the copter when it landed and had come equipped with Chicago pellets in case what she was carrying had a battery. Doc?"

"I couldn't lay Liset out to examine her but I had a good enough look. Searched her hairs first, but that was a very low probability. I saw no recent incisions, which ruled out a bomb. That left the risk of a tracking device and Will's sensors reacted over her tummy. My pinky finger down her throat brought it up and onto my shirt. I left the shirt and the tracking device in the copter and slinged up to the Wilizy with the child. Back to you, Yolanda."

"I towed the copter some miles into the Beaufort Sea until we were challenged. TG talked with them, but they wouldn't know that he was in the Wilizy and not in the copter. When Granny saw the flash of the missile through our long-range sensors, I raised and lowered the Wilizy as quickly as I could. They killed a dead and empty copter. We hauled up the tow rope and came home."

"Seeing no questions... Wolf, you're up."

"I was in charge of replacing the WZBN transmission equipment. Will had said that it was only a matter of time before Zzyk put us out of the transmitting business and so he had been thinking about installing an indestructible transmitter. The idea for the tower came from his trip to Paris. Will was collecting a lot of scrap iron so he figured out how to make it into a tower while Dad and I worked on where we would put it. In the end, we settled on putting it on top of Mount Robson because the signal would reach all over Alberta from there. Dad and I lasered out a narrow, extremely deep hole to serve as a foundation. Then, the week before the operation, Will started creating an iron tower. It had a large number of wagon wheels and the iron pipe just slid through the hubs slick as anything. We added some stabilizing wires but it's strong on its own because of the deep, narrow hole. The TV signal from B.C. comes into a box at the top of the tower. Will's done something to the wagon wheels so that they can protect the tower in case Zzyk decides to attack it. Even if Zzyk manages to destroy the top half, the bottom half is deep inside the mountain. It would be easy to get the transmitter back up and running. Will?"

"The transmitter is now broadcasting an announcement to citizens that there will be a special show on the WZBN station tonight. They'll be able to see it either at 7, 8, 9, 10, or 11 p.m. tonight."

"Seeing no questions... the chair will move on. Anything further about Operation Dead Man Walking? No, then. Yes, Yollie?"

"I have a question for Will. Will, what prompted you to start studying human anatomy?" Blind men could have seen the ice forming between Yollie and Izzy.

"Well, it all started after Izzy showed me her breasts one day when we were alone on the Wilizy."

There was a giant sucking sound in the galley when everyone inhaled.

"I was all confused about some things, and Izzy didn't like it very much when I compared them to suspension bridges."

"Really?" Yollie asked while people tried to keep a straight face.

"Yes really, because they do have the same..."

"It's not important to know why you thought they were like suspension bridges, Will. What's important is that Izzy deliberately showed them to you. Or, was that an accident?"

Izzy rose out of her chair, went to the sink, grabbed a dishtowel, returned to her seat, and covered her head and face with the towel.

"No. I thought it had been an accident, so I closed my eyes so that she wouldn't get pregnant, but she had taken her shirt off in front of me on purpose."

"Really? And she just stood there, letting you see her bridges, all suspended? She must have been happy about that."

"Well no, I don't think she was because her face looked like this" At this point Will made a gruesome face and that ended any chance of the meeting ending on a serious note. Granny started cackling and that spread though the group as quickly as lies could come out of Zzyk's mouth.

"And when she said that I couldn't get her pregnant just by looking at her, I realized that making babies couldn't be done wirelessly like I had thought."

More guffaws from the men. One female voice said "If only."

"So, I knew that I had to learn how babies are made for real."

"Does Izzy let you see her suspension bridges now?"

"Yes, we made up. So, I get to see them occasionally, like today when she came out of the shower and grinned at me before putting on her top."

Izzy climbed under the table and scrunched in as small a ball as possible under the dishtowel while a tsunami of OOOOOs rumbled through the room.

"She even let me touch them once and they aren't hollow like I had thought."

The laughter and hoots drowned out the sounds of Izzy slamming her palms repeatedly against the floorboards.

"I believe this is known as a Got'cha," Granny said.

Izzy climbed back onto her feet and removed her dishtowel. Tears were streaming down her face but they were from laughter. "You got me. And it happened exactly like Will said. It's funny now, and I couldn't help laughing under my towel at how silly I had been. But I realized something a little while ago. I let myself become mad at Will and kept being mad at him for weeks. And every time I thought about it, I made myself madder and madder. And all the time I was mad, I was miserable because I was missing Will but I was too angry to do anything about it. That's why I couldn't come up with a plan for TG. As soon as Will and I made up, the plan just made itself. So, I'm going to try and not get as mad, or as easily, as I used to. For those of you have an obsessive interest in my body, I have two things to say to you." At that, she pulled the bottom of her shirt up to her neck and then pulled it back down. Some people claim that the hummingbird's wings beat faster than any other natural act. That's no longer true.

Bowing to the applause, Izzy said, "I believe that's a got'cha right back at you."

"Could you help me find my way back home, Granny? I believe I've gone blind," Doc said.

"Serves you right for looking, you old goat," Granny replied.

"I hope my sight will recover in time to see the show tonight."

Chapter 27

Only one copy of the script of Will and Izzy's first show still exists. It's in rough shape and some pages are completely missing, but the essentials of what the people of Alberta saw that evening of September 1, 2082 are apparent. I couldn't find a digital copy of the full show. As you know, there are thousands of copies of the closing 5 minutes.

#

Izzy: Hi, my name is Izzy.

Will: And my name is Will.

Izzy: For those of you live in the cities and heard Zzyk's message about the Wilizy being destroyed, allow me to introduce ourselves. I'm the promiscuous slut with the pasty white skin and scraggly red hair. Will is the deranged magician.

Will and Izzy: Together, we're the crazies. *[Pull back on the shot as both Will and Izzy walk around the stage acting crazy.]*

Izzy: *[Zoom in on both Izzy and Will as they resume center stage.]* But not crazy enough to believe anything that Zzyk ever says. He never met with us like he said.

Will: We didn't volunteer to go into a hospital, we don't take drugs, and we don't mount operations where innocent children might be killed.

Izzy: Zzyk had an operation though. He sent a man to assassinate us. I don't think the plot worked. Did it work, Will?

Will: *[Will pinches himself.]* Nope. I'm still alive. Are you dead, Izzy?

Izzy: *[Izzy pinches herself.]* Nope, I'm still alive. Folks, we have something to tell you. *[Izzy motions camera to zoom in. Speaks in a whisper.]* Zzyk lies a lot. We never believe a word he says. You shouldn't either. Like when he tells you that he was elected the leader of Alberta. We all know that there were no elections.

Will: But, we're not here to talk about Zzyk.

Izzy: We're here tonight to celebrate our escape from Zzyk's assassin. As part of that celebration, we're going to tell you about the programs that you'll see on the Wilizy Broadcast Network in the coming months.

Will: The WZBN channels have been out of operation for the last two days because I was installing a new transmitter tower on the top of Mount Robson. We couldn't warn you in advance because Zzyk would have tried to destroy the tower before we had it finished.

Izzy: But, we're telling Zzyk where the transmitter is now because we're hoping that he will attack it. You'll have to send some of your big planes to do that, Zzyk, and when you do, we'll have a little surprise for you! So please, feel free to attack our transmitter.

Will: Izzy has already destroyed half of Zzyk's fleet of airplanes, so he knows that she can do it. It's going to be very hard to destroy our new transmitter because it's now part of the mountain.

Izzy: Do you really think that you can destroy a mountain, Zzyk? Coming up now is a close up picture of what Will's transmitter on top of Mount Robson looks like. *[Insert wide-angle shot of the new transmitter tower and hold for 8 seconds.]*

Will: *[Voice over.]* Now, here's a close up picture of my transmitter. *[Switch to close up picture and hold for 8 seconds.]*

Izzy: *[Voice over.]* We think the tower looks cool, so we've made this picture of the tower and Mount Robson part of our WZBN logo. This will be our new screen that comes up every hour when we change programs. *[Display the new WTZN screen and hold for 8 seconds.]* The Wilizy isn't out to hurt the citizens of Alberta. We're here to put some enjoyment in your lives through the Wilizy Broadcast Network. We'll continue to broadcast our shows to you in spite of Zzyk's efforts to assassinate us.

Will: We're not going to talk much longer about Zzyk. We actually want to tell you about all the new programs that you'll be able to see on the WZBN soon.

Izzy: But you need to know some things first.

#

Multiple pages of the script were missing at this point. We know from anecdotal accounts from viewers that Izzy gave a riveting explanation of how Alberta people were conditioned from a young age to avoid certain behaviours that Zzyk didn't want them to have. Like touching other people. And enjoying themselves. She reassured them that this conditioning was not permanent. She talked about their brain-bands and how they can only work under certain situations. She told them how they don't work under other conditions, like when people touch someone else or enjoy themselves by wearing bright colours and watching the WTZN shows. Then, she described what Zzyk had done to get the people onto the streets yelling and cheering that the Wilizy were dead even though only a few of the urban citizens had ever heard of Will and Izzy.

I know that there were several references in this part of the show to Zzyk treating Albertans as stupid, stupid people at which point Will would walk around like a robot behaving every command that Izzy gave. These scenes were very amusing and Will was enjoying himself. Few people realized it, but Will was developing quite a sense of humour as he freed himself from his brain-band upbringing. The robot scenes in the show were his idea.

Will gave a personal account of what happened when he took off his brain-band but warned the viewers that the Wilizy didn't want Albertans to take off their own brain-bands. Doing so would be dangerous, as the DPS would hunt them down. Izzy reassured them that their brain-bands couldn't stop them from enjoying their lives more. Those comments were the lead-in to the list of programs that the WZBN would be transmitting in the upcoming year.

The promos on the new shows are also missing from the script that I uncovered. The promos were simply shots of Will and Izzy sitting on two stools in the middle of an empty stage and talking. (The entire show was done in this simplistic fashion.) But we do know that in the fall of 2082, the WZBN did start broadcasting shows/lessons on literature and poetry, history, ballet, music from different historical eras, what babies are like as they grow older, how to dye clothes, gardening tips, and tips on canning. All of these shows were custom-made for the

people of Alberta through Stu's group. The New York Public Library content was also drawn on heavily. The educational shows started at 1 p.m. in the afternoon and ended at 9 p.m. The baby channel started at 8 a.m. and ended at 7 p.m.

#

[Wide shot of Will and Izzy walking out of a previous fade-to-black and into camera shot. Show close ups of what they're wearing. Will is now in his black top and black shorts, and Izzy is in her white shorts and emerald green top.]

Izzy: We've waited until the end of the show to tell you about our favorite two new programs. You'll notice that I'm not wearing ankle sheathes, *[close up of Izzy's legs and hold for 5 seconds]* ... and Will's not wearing any ear gear *[close up of Will's head and hold for 5 seconds]*.

Izzy: I've never worn any covering on my ankles and Will took off his ear gear when he escaped from Zzyk and learned the truth about ankles and ears. You've been taught that you have to cover up these parts of your body, but the truth is that you don't. You've been taught that these parts of your body have something to do with sex. They don't. Zzyk is trying to make you into stupid, stupid people. *[Will impersonates a robot again. Hold the shot while Izzy continues with a voice over.]* We think that he enjoys watching mindless robots.

Izzy: Here are some pictures of people who live outside of Alberta. Look closely at the men's heads and at the women's legs. *[Scroll pictures of B.C. people: 30-second clip]*

Will: One of our programs next year will explain why Zzyk told you that you had to wear sheathes and ear gear and how we know that those have nothing to do with sex; we'll also tell you what you can do if you don't believe those lies any more.

Izzy: Here's a secret. *[Izzy motions camera to zoom in and speaks in a whisper.]* You can take those pieces of cloth off and not be zapped. You won't suddenly turn into a slut or a pervert. All you'll be is a person who refuses to be treated like a mindless robot. Why don't you wear bright clothing instead of ear gear and ankle sheathes? You'll feel better. If the babies Spring, Autumn, Sky and Fire can wear bright colours, why can't you?

Will: And in our favorite new program, Izzy and I will show you that it's all right to touch. Again, you'll find out how Zzyk programmed his robot citizens to fear being touched, and you'll see pictures of people in other places of the world who touch each other often. Watch again as we show you pictures of these people who live outside of Alberta. Notice how so many of them are touching each other. *[Scroll pictures of B.C. people: 30-second clip]*

Will: You can see that I'm holding Izzy's hand right now. I enjoy being with my girl friend. I like holding her hand. I am not a pervert because I do that.

Izzy: I like holding Will's hand too. Sometimes we walk arm in arm like this. *[Will and Izzy walking arm in arm: 15 seconds]*

Izzy: I am not a slut now because I walked arm in arm with my boyfriend.

Will: And, I'm not a pervert either. One of the best ways to enjoy being with another person is by dancing with them. There are slow dances and quick dances. There are two people dances and large group dances. You can even dance by

yourself. In the next months, the WTZN is going to show you a lot of dances and give you lessons on how to do them yourselves.

Izzy: Robots don't dance very well. Watch what happens. *[Will being a dancing robot: 30-second clip]*

Izzy: People all over the world dance. Only Albertans are not allowed to dance.

Will: Izzy and I are going to demonstrate three dances tonight. The first dance is called a Jive. The music is a song called *Johnny B Goode* and Chuck Berry sang it in the 1950s. The dance has some touching of the hands, lots of twirling, and there's a beat that is guaranteed to get your feet moving.

Izzy: Our second dance will be a Slapper—the dance that was popular just before the world went crazy. The name of the song is *Slap me Charley, it's snowing outside*, and it was recorded by a group called The Icicles. Contrary to the name of the dance, you only pretend to slap your partner. The dance is very energetic and it's full of gymnastic-type moves. Will and I have created our own ending where Will throws me up in the air and then catches me when I do twisty things coming down. You shouldn't try to do that ending until you've had a lot of practice. Just create an ending of your own. We've changed into these shorts and tops so that we can move around easily in the first two dances.

Izzy: Our last dance will be a waltz. It's a slow dance for a man and a woman who are willing to touch each other. Will and I will be back in our fancy Zorro and Princess Melissa clothes and I'll even have high heel shoes on. The song is named *Unchained Melody* and Bobby Hatfield of the Righteous Brothers sang it in 1965. I think it is one of the best love songs ever sung. A waltz is a dreamy kind of dance where both man and woman are always touching each other, but quite properly. It can end very romantically if both dancers want that to happen. You aren't ready for this kind of dance yet, but you will be by the end of the series. The waltz is going to end our show tonight. But, everyone will have a chance to watch a special finale to our program.

Will: For those of you who live in Edmonton, Red Deer, Calgary, Lethbridge, or Medicine Hat, here's what we'd like you to do. At about quarter to 11 tonight, go outside and find a place where you can look into the sky above your city.

Izzy: Why don't you go outside in a group? Form a circle. Hold the hand of the person next to you and look up at the sky. I don't actually know what's going to happen. Will has been very secretive and I can hardly wait for 11 p.m. to come.

Will: At 11 p.m., the people in the cities will see my Assassination Day gift to Izzy. If you aren't near a city, watch the WZBN and you can see my Assassination Day gift just like the people in the cities. You should start watching the WZBN at 10:45 to be sure you will see it.

Izzy: Remember, if you live in a city, be outside by quarter to 11. If you live elsewhere, tune in to the WZBN at quarter to 11.

[Keep mid range shots for the first two dances. In the waltz, get close ups of their steps and how they hold each other. Show their faces. Near the end, pull gradually away so that you can see the couple dancing. Fade stage lighting almost to black but keep a little back light on so that Will and Izzy will be in a silhouette. In the final seconds of the dance, Izzy will rise onto the toes of her front foot, raise her back foot and lean towards Will's face. Freeze on the silhouette just as their lips touch, hold for 5 seconds, and fade to black. For the special ending, add the different

background at the end of the dance, hold on the silhouette for 5 minutes, and fade to black.]

Chapter 28

My readers will be very aware of Assassination Day, so I don't have to tell you about it or how it became an established holiday in Alberta. But, you may not know that in Coronation, an evening of barn dancing has been held faithfully every September 1 since 2082. At 10:45 p.m., Coronation citizens gather in an open field, form a circle, hold hands, and watch the sky while the kiss that woke the province is replayed on all of their electronic devices. If you ask the right people politely, they may show you the actual pair of moccasins that Izzy wore that summer day in 2082 when she and Will visited the community.

But, on the evening of September 1, 2082, no-one knew how popular the Assassination Day celebration would become. As word spread of their promo show ending with Will and Izzy waltzing, some watched just to see what everyone else was talking about. Then, when news spread quickly about Will's Assassination Day gift to Izzy, people from all over watched the WZBN website's clip of that dance over and over as the couple kissed passionately while a shower of coloured sparks of light cascaded down out of the sky, each exploding with tingling concussions only to create even more cascading flashes of light until the sky was full of multi-coloured sparkles.

For years afterwards, people would still watch the famous 5-minute clip, and share with friends where they were, what they were doing, and who was with them at 10:55, September 1, 2082. Now, I am given a granny chair to sit in as the little girls in my family gather around me to celebrate the day. Their mothers, grandmothers and I join hands, form a circle, and watch the clip. I still remember my first Assassination Day with the full moon forming the romantic silhouette against the dark mountain background where I lived and then the sight of Will and Izzy kissing passionately under the cascade of what some refer to as Melissa's diamonds. I must confess that even in my advanced years, I still get tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat.

Parent Advisory

Sexual attraction and how Wilizy characters respond to it is a consistent theme in the first five books of the Wilizy series. Sexual attraction is a major part of teenagers' lives today and creating Wilizy teenagers who lived without such temptations and urges would make them appear phony and incomplete. I have included sexual attraction within the Wilizy series so that readers can see that these characters do encounter this and do have problems dealing with it. I recognize that this aspect to the story might be uncomfortable for young teenagers and their parents. On the other hand, this content provides an excellent opportunity to discuss human sexuality from the non-threatening perspective of how imaginary teenagers handled it.

Throughout this series, readers will encounter no explicit sexual content. Characters struggle with their mutual sexual attraction, but this aspect to this series is all about how they deal with those desires and not about the sex itself.
