

Canadian Caper

~ 1 ~

As they drove onto the bridge to cross the Fraser River into Vancouver in mid-afternoon, Jack could hear Meg's eager anticipation through her lilting Aussie accent.

"There are some other things you should know about Virginia."

Jack glanced into her large, bright somewhat edgy eyes. It was just a fortnight ago that they'd met; the nascent glow of their first encounter had yet to fade.

"She's gay, for one."

"Is that a problem?"

"No. I don't think so. It's just that she has a partner living with her now. I didn't meet her last year when I visited Virginia after I first arrived in Canada. But when she told me about her, she seemed happy. So, she'll probably be there."

"Well, does that complicate things ... I mean, I don't know Virginia. What's she going to think about your bringing me along?"

"To be honest, I'm not sure. When I called to tell her we were coming, she sounded a little hesitant about our visit. But I don't think she'll mind. It may have just been the surprise. And I assured her that we're only going to be there for a short time."

"Anything else I should know?"

“Well, let’s see. She plays the harpsichord.”

“The harpsichord!”

“Yea.” Meg laughed. “She says that she likes the precision that it demands from her when she plays.”

Jack glanced over at Meg, grinning. “And you say she’s a Professor of Mathematics?”

“Yea. At the University of British Columbia!” She was smiling. “And Jack, she was a best friend—really like a big sister to me—when I entered the university in Christchurch. She was just finishing her PhD thesis. . . . I think you’ll like her.”

“I’m sure.” He grinned. “But the question is: do you think *she’ll* like *me*?”

“HA! Jack! Yes! Yes, she will. But, I should warn you, she’s sort of high-energy, intense. Never has much time—or patience—for small talk . . . There’s the house!”

Jack pulled the car off to the side beneath one of the large shade trees lining the narrow residential street. Beyond the sidewalk, in a small fenced-in lawn, was a modest bungalow with two dormer windows symmetrically projecting out over a sheltered wooden porch that extended across the entire front of the house.

Jack stayed one pace behind Meg as they passed through the gate, and up to the porch. Meg rapped the door knocker. Almost immediately the door swung open. Staring at Jack with an outward smile and a brief intense gaze was a tall thin woman with short-cropped hair and no makeup. She quickly turned to-

ward Meg with open arms.

“Meg! It’s good to see you again.”

“Virginia, this is Jack Smith.”

She held out her hand. Jack took it in his, and felt the momentary chill from her long, thin fingers wrapping around his hand. “Virginia. Glad to meet you. Meg has talked a lot about you.”

She gave a quick glance at Meg, then back to Jack. “Meg and I have very few secrets between us. Come in!”

Jack instantly caught sight of the harpsichord. It was given pride of place in the center of the back wall. Otherwise, the room felt more like an office, with a desk to one side, and books filling several tall bookcases covering nearly all of the remaining wall space. The hardwood floor was mostly hidden by oriental rugs, with a couch, two end tables, two chairs and a coffee table the only other items in the room.

“We didn’t have any rain the last two days, so I made some sun tea. Would you care for some? It’s been chilling in the refrigerator.”

She had spoken rapidly, with the same Aussie accent as Meg.

“Yea. That’d be nice, Virginia.”

Jack nodded. “Thank you.”

“Would either of you care for lemon or sweetener?”

Jack smiled. “Not for me, thanks.”

“Meg?”

“Yea, I’d like a little lemon?”

“Fine! You two get comfortable and I’ll be right back.”

Jack looked over at Meg, who seemed to be silently asking for his thoughts. He smiled and nodded.

Virginia returned with a tray that she set on the coffee table. “I made a few scones this morning. Just help yourself!”

As Jack reached out for one, he felt her stare on him.

“Tell me, Meg, where are you and Jack going from here?”

“Up to Glacier Bay National Monument.”

“Taking the ferry?”

“Yea.”

“I know that Meg knows, but Jack, do you know that this coastline is in a rainforest?”

“No, I guess I didn’t . . .”

“Well, you better get prepared for it. It will likely rain everyday on your trip.”

“OK. But we have rain gear, so we should be fine.”

Meg reached for a scone. “Virginia? Will we get to meet your partner? I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten her name.”

Virginia turned away with a stern, hard inward look, and took a deep breath. She recovered her stoic poise and looked down, absently swirling the squeezed lemon slice in her tea. “No. No, I don’t think so.”

There was an awkward silence that filled the room.

Meg set her glass down. “Virginia, what happened?”

She looked up at Meg with a dour expression and hesitated before she spoke. “Her name is Elizabeth May Beckwith.” Her voice was sharp: “She’s a fraud!”

“What happened, Virginia?!”

She turned briefly toward Jack, back to Meg, and then looked down as she took another deep breath. Jack looked to Meg for what he should do. She was leaning forward on the edge of her chair and intently watching her friend. “Meg, maybe I should go get the car filled up and . . .”

Virginia cut him off. “It’s OK! . . . Like I said, Meg and I have no secrets . . .” He nodded. She stood up and walked around the room to the harpsichord where she ran her fingers along the keyboard.

“I just learned of this sordid affair not long before you called, Meg.” There was a sardonic melancholy in her voice now, her anger momentarily quelled. “I guess I haven’t completely absorbed it yet . . .” She drifted into a heavy, audible sigh . . .

Meg held her gaze, fixated on her friend. They remained silent and waited . . .

Virginia, shaking her head, abruptly turned back toward them, and forced a wry smile, as if acknowledging her foibles in an unspoken ‘What the hell!’ *mea culpa*.

“I think I’d like a little something stronger than tea. Would you care to join me?”

Meg and Jack looked at each other. Jack sensed that Virginia had a need to talk. He spoke. “Sure,

may I help?”

“You can open the wine while I get the wine glasses.”

Virginia reached up on a shelf and pulled down a bottle of dark red wine, and in constant motion, spoke laconically: “Here, Jack. The corkscrew is in that drawer.” She left the room.

Meg gathered up the dishes on the coffee table, placed them on the tray and trailed after Virginia. Jack followed her with his eyes until she was out of the room. He took the wine bottle to the coffee table. As he began to open it, he could hear the muffled inaudible conversation in the other room.

Meg and Virginia returned and set the glasses on the table. Virginia retook her seat. She looked straight into Jack’s eyes.

“Meg says you’re a good, trusted friend, and the two of you may be spending quite a long while together. So, I believe that it would be better, if I’m to relate this sordid affair to her, that you should also hear it. It’s not *your* affair, of course. But I think it best to clear the air—if I may speak metaphorically—since there may be events to unfold while you’re here.”

Jack poured the wine, stood, and offered them both a glass. He sat back silently, cupping his own wine glass in both hands.

“It began in what I thought was a happenstance meeting. I went to an afterwork bar downtown to meet with a representative of a publisher. We had briefly met in my office and discussed a textbook that

I was planning to write. He called the next day, and told me that after talking to his editors, they were interested, and he wanted to discuss the broad outlines of the textbook in a little more detail. I thought the bar was an unusual place to meet. But he said that he had business that afternoon and he didn't know how long it would take to conclude. He asked if I would meet him there around 5 o'clock. I was already talking with another publisher, but I thought I'd listen to what he had to say. And I didn't really have a good reason not to meet with him, so I agreed.

"While I was waiting for him at the bar, this woman . . ." She shook her head in an aggressive sigh. "Elizabeth! . . . She sat down beside me and started to make conversation. It was all small talk. The weather, and the like. I was bored with her and I would have left, but I kept thinking that the publisher's rep would show.

"After a time, her conversation started to become more personal. 'Where did I live?' 'What did I do for pleasure?' 'Where would I go, if I had unlimited wealth?' . . . Then, she looked at me . . ." Virginia paused and, as she'd done before, took a deep breath. Meg and Jack were silent.

"You can always tell, you know. It was a look of interest in me . . . physically."

She took a sip of wine.

"I haven't been able to put it all together yet. What I know for certain is that . . . Hmph . . ." She

took another sip and added ruefully: "... as the Brits would say—Elizabeth has ‘pulled a big—a real *big*—swifty’ on me.”

Virginia rose and paced across the room, taking short, frequent sips of wine.

“I embarrass myself when I think of how easily I was deceived. And how I let it go on for so long!”

She paused at the back of the room and picked up a porcelain cupid doll with a female body. She smiled at the image, then set it back on top of the harpsichord.

“Elizabeth has stayed here with me off and on for more than three years. She would sometimes leave for weeks at a time. I guess I realized that she always seemed to need money whenever she showed up, but I dismissed it. Each time, it was the same story. An ailing mother in Edmonton. I fell for it. I guess I wanted to believe it ... But it all makes sense now. She was just using me as a patsy in one of her swindles.”

She emptied her glass and returned to the seat across from Meg and Jack. “Can I have a little more wine, Jack?”

He gave her a sympathetic smile as he poured.

“Thank you.” She took a sip.

Meg had hardly touched her wine. “How did you find out, Virginia?”

“Ya know that book deal I was telling you about?”

“Yea.”

“Well, I got an endorsement from my major professor in New Zealand, and I landed a contract. But not with the publisher whose representative was supposed to meet with me in that afterwork bar! He never showed up that night, and I never heard from him again.

“However the book was a success. I targeted the largest academic market, which is for an introductory textbook. I guess my timing—with the help of that endorsement—was right. Within a year it was one of the top selling mathematics textbooks among universities in Canada and New Zealand, and adoptions in Australia and America were growing. I was even beginning to get some adoptions in the UK. That meant large royalty payments that were increasing each year.

“Of course, I shared this good news with Elizabeth. But I was surprised by her response. She seemed to know about the book’s success before I had ever mentioned it . . .

“She would always ask for details whenever she came. ‘When do I receive the royalty checks?’ ‘How much are they?’ ‘What did I do with the money?’ . . .

“I received royalties every six months, and she would always show up about that time, just like clockwork. We’d celebrate. I’d take her to the finest restaurants in town! I can’t say that I didn’t enjoy those nights . . .”

She took a drink of wine. “Ah! I was so gullible!

... Elizabeth began to take it for granted that I'd give her whatever she asked for. And the amount of money she wanted seemed to grow in direct proportion to my royalty payments. It was always the needs of her mother, or so she said. I bought her a car, so she could make those trips to Edmonton. I paid for the insurance. Got her a credit card that she was to use only for gas, but *that* didn't last! Her appeals for money had become more than requests.

" 'Her mother was needing continuous care,' she said. She needed the money 'to pay for a live-in nurse'. Like a fool, I acquiesced to her demands!"

Jack sensed the bitterness rising in her voice. She held the wine glass by its base and stared into its contents.

"Then, one day, Elizabeth showed up with the news that her mother had taken a turn for the worse. Her health care expenses had increased dramatically, she said. And moreover she would have to rent a place in Edmonton to be close to her full time. It was finally too much! ... It may have been the tone in her voice. Or the haste with which she arrived, made her 'request' for more money, and acted with such impatience for me to give in! I don't know! ... But I decided that I needed to verify her story."

She took several small sips of wine in succession.

"So, Meg, I let her go. Then, I hired a private detective. He reported back to me shortly before your phone call. He had traveled to Edmonton and discov-

ered that there *was* no mother! Elizabeth had been living with a man—a man of some interest, by the way—and they were just moving into a large house in a ritzy part of town. THAT’s where my money was going!”

“I’m sorry, Virginia.”

“Well, I haven’t decided what I’m going to do just yet. It’s not clear that she’s broken any laws.”

Jack leaned forward. “Virginia, I’m no lawyer, but fraud is fraud. I think you may have some recourse to recover some of that money.”

Meg broke the brief silence that followed. “Virginia, what was so special about the guy she’s living with?”

“The detective brought me photographs he’d surreptitiously taken of the two of them at their house. He’s the same man I was to meet in the bar on the evening I first met up with Elizabeth.”

Jack spoke up. “Do you think he was complicit in this?”

“Of course, he was!”

“But at the very beginning, how did he know that you . . .”

“That I was gay?” She finished what was left of her wine. “I’ve never hidden who I am . . .!” She looked away.

“Virginia, I’m sorry. I . . .”

She shook her head. “It’s OK. It’s a reasonable question.”

Meg spoke softly. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have the proof yet that this man is involved. Tomorrow, I’m supposed to meet with the detective. He’s going to try to get more information on him.”

Jack watched, as Meg stood up and walked over to Virginia and put her arm around her. Virginia’s eyes reddened when she looked up at Meg. Her tight-lipped vexation gave way, as she spoke in an unfamiliar quivering voice . . .

“I don’t have any more to say about it right now. I’d like to get it off my mind until tomorrow. Can we just let it go for now?”

Meg gave a friendly forced smile to Virginia. “Of course, we can.”

“Listen. I . . . I don’t want to obligate you.” Virginia looked over at Jack. The tone of her voice had softened. “Either of you. And I have no right to ask. But if you want to come with me tomorrow, I . . . I think I’d like that.”

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They got off the elevator on the fifth floor. Across the hallway was a row of offices that were identified with simple uniform block lettering in bold relief on the doors. Virginia pointed to an office two doors down.

Martin Wells
Private Investigations

“This is it.” Virginia opened the door to a windowless outer office.

She was greeted by a young secretary seated behind a desk. She stood up as she spoke. “Ms. Rogers.”

“Hi June. These are some good friends of mine. Meg Boyd and Jack Smith.”

“How do you do?”

They nodded.

“Mr. Wells is waiting to see you.”

“Thank you.” They passed into the inner office. A tall burly man rose from behind a desk that sat in front of a picture window overlooking a courtyard.

“Hi Virginia.”

“Martin, these are friends of mine. Meg Boyd and Jack Smith.”

“Hi! Won’t you all have a seat?”

Jack looked around the office. Bookcases, filing cabinets—all neatly arranged, with a couch and three soft overstuffed chairs, facing the desk at slight angles to one another.

“Would any of you like coffee. Or water?”

“No.” “No, thank you.” “Not for me, thanks.”

“Well, I assume your friends are here for moral support? Nothing official, I hope? I mean no lawyers or police officers?”

Jack looked down, amused at the thought.

“No, just friends.”

“I always like to know who I’m talking to, you understand.”

Virginia nodded.

He lifted a folder from his desk and handed it to her. “The man is using the name Walter Scranton. He doesn’t seem to be employed. I talked with them at Knight Hawk Educational Publishing, that he told you he represented, and they’ve never heard of him.”

“Just as I thought!”

“But, there’s more. When I showed them his photograph, they immediately identified him as a Lawrence Oliver. He approached them, claiming to represent a marketing firm called Authors Direct Market that promotes academic textbooks and scientific monographs worldwide. Evidently he showed them a website that he promoted as being connected with over 300 colleges and universities, primarily in the US and Canada. And claimed that they were rapidly expanding into the UK.

“His ploy was that he had the names of all of the faculty at these universities, what courses they taught, profiles of their students, what books they assigned to them, the age and background of each faculty, and a statistical assessment of what he called their ‘professional biases’ that ultimately determined what books they would be likely to adopt. His company was therefore in the business of matching up the interests of the faculty with books they would be inclined to select for their courses.”

“And they bought that?”

“Well, Virginia, not quite. But they did say that he

had a good story. His company presumably focused on the smaller publishers and imprints that would often go under the radar, so to speak. So the service that his company could provide: effectively introducing professors to books that they were favorably disposed toward and that would aid them in their teaching and research; while at the same time giving exposure to underrepresented authors in the market. What he was selling was, he asserted, a win-win game.”

“And how did he make money?”

“Well, that’s when it gets interesting. He wanted to get a listing of their books, particularly the most recent publications. He would feed them into their ‘war room’—as he called it—where they would undergo an evaluation as to where the marketing should focus. His company would receive a one-time fee for each listing they evaluated and was sent out in individualized marketing campaigns to the specifically targeted faculty at all of the locations where they deemed the book a good match.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing!”

“Well, he’s pushing the fact that essentially all faculty these days rely heavily on the internet for information.”

“Still . . . !”

“Here’s the catch. The ‘one-time fee’ was to be paid in two installments. The first, which he would collect immediately, would be a per listing fee of \$1000.

The second would not be paid until after their—and I quote—‘*scientific evaluation*’ had been completed. For the textbooks that they deemed worthy of their individualized, in-depth marketing, the payment of an additional \$1000 per listing would be required.”

“And they didn’t see that as a scam?!”

“The story was convincing enough that they decided to test it with a few new books they had forthcoming. I think they gave him a listing of ten books, and a \$10,000 check. That was the last they saw of or heard from him.”

“What about Elizabeth?”

“Yeah! Ms. Beckwith!” He chuckled. “Well, the house that she and Scranton—or Oliver, or whatever his name is—are sharing is being rented. But I saw that it was still listed for sale. So I talked to the realtor and she told me that a clause in the rental agreement is that, in the event of a sale, the renters would have thirty days to evacuate the premises. I feigned interest in order to gain access to the place. When we entered, Ms. Beckwith was at work at her computer. While the realtor was explaining that I was a prospective buyer and so on . . . I glanced at the computer screen.”

He took a drink of water from a glass bottle that had been sitting on his desk. He motioned to them. “You care for any?”

They shook their heads.

Meg was on the edge of her seat. “Mr. Wells,

please continue.”

“What I saw appeared to be a web design program. She was evidently building a site with images of half-clothed women in enticing poses. When she caught me looking, she immediately went over and abruptly shut the laptop. She was obviously upset with me, but I tried to engage her in conversation. I tried to flatter her with my impression of what I saw, and asked her if she had a business doing web design.

“She stammered a bit and finally blurted out: ‘Yes, that’s it! Now, if you want to look around the house, go ahead, but I have work to do.’ ”

Jack spoke up: “Did you see anything other than those images that would give you a hint as to what the website was about?”

“I got the heading at the top of the page. It was in fancy script: ‘*Welcome to the Wonderful World of Women.*’ I don’t know what that tells ya, really. She could be selling sexy fashion designed clothing. She could be selling sexy women. It could be intended for a modeling agency. Hard to say.”

“Did you try to find the website on the internet?”

“I did. I found a site called wonderfulworldof-women.com. However, it brought up a page that said that the site was ‘under construction’.”

Virginia was suppressing her anger. “Jesus Christ! That woman! What the hell did I get myself into?”

“Virginia, if you want me to pursue this any further, you’ll have to let me know now.”

“What would you do?”

“I would start by seeing if either of them has a record with the local police.”

“Will the police give you that information?”

“I think they can be persuaded. If need be, I believe the folks at Knight Hawk Educational Publishing would be willing to help make the case to them to look into this guy. I would also go see if he has registered his firm in Alberta. As for Ms. Beckwith, that will likely take a little more digging into her background. I wouldn’t be surprised if she is also living under an alias. But if we go much further, we may have to bring in a lawyer.”

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Jack, Meg, and Virginia were seated at an outdoor table beneath a restaurant’s canopy. The shelter extended along the sidewalk for half a block. Beyond, the skies were gray, with intermittent rain keeping the evening air damp and cool.

Meg took a sip of wine, and watched Virginia look down into her wine glass. She had cupped it with both hands, and was gazing into it as if it were a crystal ball. “Virginia, you didn’t eat much of your dinner.”

She looked up and feigned a smile. “Lost my appetite.”

Jack leaned in and picked up the half-empty wine bottle. He offered them both a refill, which they re-

fused. “Virginia?” He began to fill his own glass. “A lawyer can get pretty expensive.”

She chuckled at the thought. “A private investigator can get expensive!” She reached out her glass to Jack. “Maybe I *will* have a little more wine.” He poured. “You know, I had to pay, not only his fee, which wasn’t too exorbitant, but also for a round-trip plane ticket to Edmonton, and three night’s hotel bills, including his meals.”

Jack laughed. “Well, are you going to keep him on?”

“I don’t know. I think I first have to go see for myself where Elizabeth is living. I want to talk to her. To confront her.”

Meg looked at Jack, who nodded. “Virginia? Why don’t we drive over there to Edmonton?”

“No, I couldn’t. I have to teach. The only way I could go is to fly ... Of course, I can’t ask you to do that.”

“How many days can you get away?”

“I teach on Tuesdays and Thursdays. So, I guess four days.”

“Well, Virginia, I went to Jasper from Vancouver right after my stay with you. It’s a day’s drive. And Edmonton is just a couple hours beyond that. Why don’t the three of us drive to Jasper on Friday, and on to Edmonton on Saturday. Then, we could leave Sunday evening and we’d have plenty of time to get back to Vancouver by Monday night.”

“No. That’s too tight. I should just fly.”

Jack chimed in: “Here’s an alternative. We could drive to Jasper on Friday and on to Edmonton on Saturday, and meet up with you there. Then, if you could get a late flight on Monday, you’d have Saturday evening, all day Sunday, and most of Monday in Edmonton. Meg and I can take a trip to Banff on the way back. I know Meg loves the mountains, as do I.”

“Oh, I don’t know . . .”

“That was just a thought. I understand that you may want to see her alone.”

“No! It’s not that. I *would* like you to be there. It’s just that it doesn’t feel right that I should ask you . . .”

Meg reached out and gently put her hand on Virginia’s arm. “It might be nice to have someone to talk to after you’ve seen her.”

Virginia acknowledged the gesture. “OK. But only if you let me pay for the hotels.”

~ 2 ~

Edmonton, Alberta. Jack pulled over to the curb. “Here’s the address. I guess this is it.”

They were all staring at a two-story Georgian house, with a small, well-manicured front lawn, and steps leading up to a columned portico. Meg turned to Virginia. “Are you sure you want us to go in with you?”

“Yes. I think it’ll make it harder for her to be dismissive of me. Ya know, she’s not going to be expecting me. And your physical presence will add some weight, I think . . . or at least some uncertainty for her to have to deal with.”

“What if that boyfriend of hers is there?”

She looked at Jack, as she opened the car door. “All the more reason.”

Virginia rang the doorbell. Again. She tried the door knocker. They were about to walk away, when the door opened just wide enough for Elizabeth to be seen dressed in jeans and a blue, cotton blouse.

“Virginia!” Her eyes quickly flashed to Meg and Jack and back to Virginia. “What are you doing here?”

“May we come in?”

“Who are they?”

“They’re friends of mine.”

“Why are they . . . ? What to you want?”

“May we come in?”

Her posture stiffened. “Not until you tell me what you want.”

“I want to talk with you.”

“What about?”

Virginia looked down, gathering herself. She took a deep breath and looked Elizabeth hard in the eyes.

“We have some business to transact.”

“What’daya mean?”

“You have some explaining to do. Wouldn’t you say? So, may we come in?”

Elizabeth hesitated. Her face was strained. She stepped back and opened the door wide. She motioned them to a room off to the right as they entered.

“Nice place.”

“Virginia, what do you want?”

“May we sit down?”

Elizabeth shook her head, then reluctantly motioned them to a couch and chairs at the far end of the room. When they were seated, she pulled up a desk chair and took a seat opposite. She gestured with her hands and gave an insolent nod to Virginia for her to state her business.

“How’s your mother?”

“Fine.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I’d like to meet her.”

Elizabeth scowled at her. “Did you come her to spy on me?!”

“No, Elizabeth. I’m not spying. I came directly to your front door and looked you straight in the eyes! I hardly call that spying! I think you owe me an explanation for . . . for all of this!”

“I don’t owe you anything!” She stood up and walked to the corner of the room farthest from them. “You are in my house! I will not sit here and be interrogated by you! Now, I must ask you to leave!”

“Leave?!” Virginia rose and walked across the room toward her. “Suppose I don’t leave! Suppose I just

stay here until you confess what you have been doing these past three years with all of the money I've given you?! ... Maybe you should call the police? That would be fine! If you don't want to answer me, you can tell *them* what you've done with the money!"

"Get out! All of you! Get out of my house!"

"There isn't an ailing mother, is there? All those stories! All made up! All for my sake! All to extort whatever you could from a gullible one-time lover!"

Elizabeth turned on her with a venomous, tight-lipped stare. She lowered voice. "Virginia, you and your friends are not welcome here. I will once again ask you to leave."

Virginia cast a glance at Meg and Jack, then turned back to Elizabeth. "I think we can show ourselves out. You will be hearing from me, and my attorney!" As Meg and Jack stood up, Virginia looked back at Elizabeth. "By the way, you might tell your roommate ... Oliver? ... Is that his name? You might tell him that he should also be expecting to hear from an attorney, if not the police!"

~

At the Edmonton International Airport, Virginia, Meg, and Jack sat in a café drinking coffee while waiting for Virginia's flight back to Vancouver.

"Yes, I've already contacted Wells." Virginia spoke with a severe look on her face. "He's going to continue

to look into Elizabeth's and her boyfriend's backgrounds."

Meg spoke in a low voice: "What about a lawyer?"

"He recommended a law firm in Vancouver. He said they could cover anything that may require their presence in Edmonton. He didn't want to speculate on what they may think about my chances of getting back any of the money that I . . ." She leaned down and rubbed her forehead. "Any of the money that I willingly handed over to her."

"And her boyfriend?"

"As Wells said he'd do, he's going to see if he has a record. He felt certain that Black Hawk would want to pursue a case against him."

Virginia's flight was announced on the loud speaker. She stood up. "OK. Thanks to both of you for coming with me."

Meg smiled at her. Jack nodded.

"You two have a good time in Banff! And don't feel that you have to hurry back. I'll be OK. But you know you're welcome any time. Just let me know when you think you'll be getting into Vancouver."

Jack gazed over at Meg as Virginia pulled her luggage toward her gate. She had a concerned look on her face, her eyes fixed on her departing friend.

"Meg?" She turned to him. "Do you still want to take that trip to Alaska?"

She looked down. "Yes . . . But, I don't know. She needs me." She raised her gaze and caught Jack's

eyes searching her thoughts. “I mean ‘*US*’. She needs *US*.”

~

Jack slid in behind the wheel and started the car. He hesitated. “Meg? I don’t know how long it’s going to be before that detective and the attorney take some action against Elizabeth and her boyfriend. But my guess is that those two’ll likely be leaving Edmonton very quickly. Especially, Elizabeth’s boyfriend, after Virginia warned him about the police. Maybe we should stick around here for a few days and keep an eye on them. What d’ya think?”

“I’m willing, but how do we do that?”

“I’ve been told that most detective work is boring. You have to sit and wait and observe and sit and wait and observe, until something happens.”

Meg laughed. “OK, so where do we begin?”

“At the house where they’re living. If they’re going to be leaving Edmonton, they’ll probably have to move a lot of things out of that house.”

“Well, I don’t want to be ‘sitting and waiting and observing’ on an empty stomach. And a little wine would be nice.”

“I noticed a little neighborhood park just down the street from their house. Do you suppose we could set up your tent there?”

“I don’t know. That may be illegal.”

“If it is, someone will surely come and let us know. They wouldn’t do any more than tell us to move on.”

“Can you observe their house from there?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“I’m game.”

~

Jack poured the wine, as Meg set the food on the picnic table in the park. They watched a tall thin man pull up to the house and get out of the car. He was hurrying to the front door.

“Ya know, Meg, that car isn’t the one that I remembered from yesterday that was in the car port.”

“You suppose that’s the boyfriend?”

“That’s what I was thinking. I didn’t get a good look at him, but we’ve only seen that one photograph of him that the detective had taken. I hope it’s enough to recognize him.”

A man came out the front door carrying what appeared to be a small filing cabinet. “We sure could . . . HEY! Where’s your binoculars?!”

Meg rushed back to the tent. The man reentered the house. She came back to the table and handed the binoculars to Jack. “You have a pen?”

“I’ll get one.”

Jack zeroed in, putting the license plate in focus. Meg returned. “That’s a light blue, late model sedan. A Cadillac, I think. The license plate is from Alberta. ‘Wild Rose Country,’ it says. Number BGF-7009.”

Meg copied it down. “What are we going to do with that?”

“Give it to Wells. He’ll know how to trace it.”

The man came out of the house followed by Elizabeth, both carrying a suitcase. Jack focused on his face. “That’s him!” He handed the binoculars to Meg. “Take a look.”

“Yea! Yea! And that’s Elizabeth!”

“How quickly can we get packed?”

“We can just wrap everything in the tent and roll it up.”

They tossed the food in a cooler and quickly took down the tent and stuffed it in the back of the car. Elizabeth and her boyfriend were backing out of the driveway.

“Come on, Meg!”

They rushed to the front seat and drove out onto the street, as the blue sedan began to pull away.

“What do we do if they just keep driving to the east coast, or down into the States?”

“We can follow them for awhile. We need to give Wells a trail that he can pick up on.”

“They’re pulling off here!”

“It’s a self-storage facility.” Jack drove past them and doubled back. He pulled into the parking area in front of the building and watched, as they drove to a lockup, and began unloading the filing cabinet. “Hand me your binoculars . . . Take this down: Unit C49.” He handed the binoculars back to Meg. “See

what all they put in there.”

He got out of the car and hurried into the office. Meg lifted the binoculars and trained them on the lockup.

When Jack returned, he handed Meg a business card.

“What’s this for?”

“More information for Wells.” He backed the car out onto the street and parked by the curb. “Did they put anything besides that filing cabinet in storage?”

“Not that I could see.”

“I wonder what could be so important to hide. They were in such a big hurry to get out of the house. Why would they take the time and trouble to haul this bulky filing cabinet around?”

“I have no idea . . . They’re locking up and getting back in the car.”

“Don’t let them see your face when they pull out.”

They both ducked down in the seat. When they’d passed by, Jack restarted the car and they continued to follow the blue sedan.

Thirty minutes later, Elizabeth and her boyfriend pulled into the long-term parking lot at the Edmonton International Airport.

“We may be too late, Jack!”

They drove passed them as they were getting out of the car. Jack pulled into a parking spot a few yards away. They waited until the two of them had gotten

their luggage and had started toward the terminal.

Jack watched them walking away. “This is the only time I’ve ever wished for a cell phone. You and I may be the last two people on Earth to buy one . . . other than, maybe, the Amish!”

“I own one. I just didn’t bring it with me. I didn’t think it’d work in the States. Or, when I was traveling by boat to Glacier Bay.”

“Well, let’s see if we can find out where they’re headed.”

They trailed behind them until they reached the international terminal. They stood back some distance from the ticket counter, as Elizabeth and her boyfriend slowly moved up in the queue.

“Look at those flights on the Departures board! They could be going just about anywhere!” Jack turned to Meg. “It’s going to take them a little while to get through this line. Why don’t you go find a phone and call Virginia and give her the information on their car and the storage unit, and tell her where we are, so she can pass it on to Wells. If I’m not here when you get back, I’ll meet you at that café we just passed.”

“What if they go to the gate right away?”

“I’ll tag along for as long as I can, but I won’t be able to get past security without a ticket. I think that’s about all we can do.”

Meg nodded and hurried off.

Jack monitored the updates on the Arrivals and

Departures boards. Several flights from Central America were showing ‘DELAYED,’ and a number of the Departures to Central America began to show ‘CANCELLED.’

Elizabeth and her boyfriend were at the ticket counter and placed their luggage up on the rack to be weighed. They were presenting papers to the ticket agent. He pointed up to the Departure board and was shaking his head. Elizabeth and her boyfriend turned to one another and engaged in a tense, animated conversation. He looked angry and frustrated. He turned back to the ticket agent and continued a conversation with him. Finally, he took their luggage back off the rack and the ticket agent handed him—what looked to be—airline tickets. The two of them walked briskly away.

Jack hid his face as they passed by him. He wasn’t close enough to make out their conversation. He looked for Meg. She was walking toward him. He motioned for her to hurry.

“Meg, something happened at the ticket counter. They started to check their luggage, then took it back. I saw where a number of flights to Central America had been cancelled. I don’t know if that’s why. There they are! Let’s see if we can figure out where they’re going?” They began trailing them. “So, did you get hold of Virginia?”

“Yea, she said she’d call Wells. I told her we’d follow them for as long as we could and we’d call

again later.”

Elizabeth suddenly stopped in front of them and turned to her boyfriend. She was gesturing with her hands. She was obviously agitated. Jack and Meg held back and watched. Their exchange seemed to finally resolve itself, and they picked up their bags and walked on. They were making their way toward the hotel shuttles.

Jack looked at the lettering on the side of the shuttle they were about to board. He glanced at Meg and feigned, in a hushed, jocular conspiratorial tone: “When was the last time you stayed in a Sheraton Hotel?”

Meg smiled. They turned and went back to the parking lot to retrieve Jack’s car.

~

Jack and Meg stood at the hotel registration desk. Jack handed the clerk his driver’s license for an ID. “Say, do you know if a Ms. Beckwith has checked in yet?”

The desk clerk copied the license, returned it, and thumbed through a listing. “No. No one by that name. Were they expected today?”

“Yeah, I think so. Her name is actually hyphenated. Sometimes she just goes by her husband’s last name?” He turned to Meg. “Do you remember his name.”

“No. Sorry. But her first name is Elizabeth.”

“Well, we do have an Elizabeth and Lawrence Oliver. They just arrived.”

“That’s it!”

“They’re just down the hall from you in Room 205. Should I give them a ring?”

Jack shook his head. “Oh, no thanks. We can call them later. We want to get settled in first.”

On the elevator, Meg looked up at Jack with a sardonic smile. “ ‘Hyphenated name?!’ ” She chuckled.

“Well, it *could* be true.”

Meg laughed as they entered their room. “I’ll tell ya what. I think we should finish our picnic.”

“That’s a grand idea. I’ll go down to the car and get the food. Maybe, you could give Virginia another call and fill her in. It doesn’t look like there’ll be much more that we can do tonight.”

He started toward the door. “When you talk to her, see if you can get an idea of when Wells—assuming he’s coming back to Edmonton—when he’ll be getting here. This place can get a little pricey.”

~ 3 ~

Jack entered their room with a tray of morning coffee and a bowl of fruit. Meg had just finished dressing.

“Thanks, Jack.”

He opened the morning newspaper. “There’s a late-season hurricane in the Caribbean that is supposed to make landfall some time late tonight or early

tomorrow morning somewhere in Honduras or Nicaragua. That must be the reason for those flight cancellations.”

“Oh!”

“We know that Elizabeth and her boyfriend walked away from the ticket counter with airline tickets. I wonder if they’re waiting here until the hurricane has passed on or if they’ve changed their destination.”

“Either way, if they’re flying into Central or even South America, they’ll likely be here until it makes landfall, don’t ya think?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see them at the breakfast bar. And they still had a DO NOT DISTURB sign on their door. But checkout isn’t for a couple of hours, so I don’t know if that tells us anything. We don’t know when Wells is arriving, do we?”

“No. But Virginia said he’d probably get the early flight out of Vancouver. So, I’d guess he’ll be here any time now.”

“And he’s coming here, right?”

“I assume so. She knows that we’re here and that they’re here.”

“Yeah.”

The phone rang. Meg picked it up. “Hello . . . Oh, hi Detective . . . Yea . . . Yea, they’re still here. . . . Yea, he’s right here. Do you want to speak with him? . . . Oh, OK. . . . Let me write that down. . . . Yea, Ok. Bye.”

She put the phone back on the hook.

“He’s at the airport. He plans to go to the police and see if either of them has a record.”

“Did he say how long he thought he’d be?”

“No. I didn’t think to ask. But he wants us to keep an eye out for Elizabeth and her boyfriend. If they make a move, he wants us to call him. He gave me his mobile number.”

“Well, maybe we should pack everything up and be ready to check out.”

“Jack, I heard someone in the hallway.”

Jack cracked the door open and peered out. “It’s them! They’re walking toward the elevator. They left the DO NOT DISTURB sign on their door.” He quietly shut the door. “I’m going to take the stairs. See if I can figure out where they’re going. Why don’t you get your things together. I’ll come back up as soon as I can. If they’re leaving the hotel, we should let Wells know.”

“OK, I’ll be ready.”

Jack looked out the door again. They were stepping into the elevator. He rushed out to the stairwell.

When he stepped into the lobby, he could see them approaching the concierge desk. The lobby was too open for him to discreetly get close enough to hear their conversation with the attendant. He walked to an empty lounge chair with a discarded newspaper on a table beside it. He sat down and picked up the paper and held it out before him. He smiled to himself: ‘sit and wait and watch.’

Elizabeth and her boyfriend concluded their conversation with the concierge and walked to the hotel entrance. Jack watched until they were outside. He set the paper down and went over to the concierge desk. “Hi. I’m looking for a good steak restaurant nearby. Any recommendations?”

“Yes, sir. He pulled a sheet of paper from beneath the counter. Here’s a list. This one is just down the street. It’s a five-star restaurant.”

“A little pricey, huh?”

“Yes. If you’re looking for a good dinner that is a little less expensive, I might suggest that you consider dining here in the hotel’s restaurant. It’s generally well thought of.”

Jack looked at the list he was given. “Thanks!” He glanced out to the front entrance. Elizabeth and her boyfriend were standing there, waiting. “By the way, is that what the couple that was just here were looking for?”

“No, sir. They wanted me to summon a rental car for them.”

“Ah! So they’ll deliver the car around to the front, then?”

“Yes. Are you interested?”

“No, not just yet. Maybe later. But, thanks.” He held the paper up in the air. “I’ll talk it over with . . . with my wife.”

He hurried back to the stairs and took them two steps at a time. He opened the door to their room.

“Meg! Let’s go!”

She grabbed her bag and hurried to his side. “Where?”

“They rented a car. If we hurry, we might be able to follow them.”

~

As Jack pulled their car beneath the portico at the hotel’s entrance, Elizabeth and her boyfriend were just taking possession of the rental car.

Jack held back until they reached the roadway and turned onto the street. He eased out trying to maintain sufficient distance from them so as to not be noticed.

“Jack, why didn’t they just go get their own car?”

“Good question. Either there’s some stigma attached to it, or they’re just in a real big hurry.”

“You know, I might be wrong, but it looks like they’re heading back to their house.”

“Yeah. Maybe they forgot something. I don’t know.”

“We need to call Wells as soon as we can.”

“Can you get the license number of that car? It looks like late model Ford sedan.”

Meg pulled a pen and notepad from her pack. “Yeah, I see it.”

“I didn’t ask the concierge which rental car company he called.”

“Wells can figure that out, don’t ya think?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Ya know, *he* should be trailing those two. Not *us*. I’ll tell ya, Meg. When this is over, I’m going to get a cell phone!”

~

For the next twenty minutes, they wound their way through the streets of Edmonton, until the Ford sedan turned off the road. They had returned to their storage unit. Across the street was a gas station. Jack pulled in.

“Go call Wells! Tell him where we are and give him the description of their car. I’m going over there and try to see just what’s in that lockup.”

Jack left the car in the gas station and hustled across the street on foot. He tried to position himself at a distance from the lockup, but still with much of its contents in sight. Elizabeth and her boyfriend had pulled their rental car up to the door. While her boyfriend began to remove the lock on the unit, she turned and looked around her. Jack ducked back behind a building.

When he looked around again, her boyfriend had opened the door and the two of them had entered. They were standing before the filing cabinet, obstructing his view. He decided to chance being seen, and quickly hurried to the near side of their car and looked over the hood.

She was holding a file folder. Her boyfriend reached down and pulled out some electronic equipment. They

exchanged some words, but he couldn't make them out. It appeared that they were ready to leave. He hurried back behind the building, and watched as they closed the unit and he locked the door. They got into their rental car.

Jack ran across the street and back to Meg. He was a little short of breath. "I don't know what's in there. Did you get Wells?"

"Yes. He said he would be on his way. He also said that her boyfriend has a record. One that goes beyond Edmonton. He's on file with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service!"

"The what?"

"It's sort of the equivalent of the US FBI. He's been on the lam for two years. The car—that blue Cadillac—was stolen."

"What about Elizabeth?"

"Nothing yet. He said that her boyfriend, whose real name is Max Fielding, had an accomplice in the past, but the identity is still in question."

"Well, what did they do?"

"He embezzled money from a bank where he had worked his way up to being a loan manager. He was tried and convicted, but he fled while he was still released on bond before the sentencing was passed down."

"Wow! Where did all of this take place?"

"Montreal."

Jack watched the Ford rental car pulling away. "I

guess we better stay on their tail. I sure didn't bargain for all of this."

"I don't care so much about this Fielding character, but I'd like Virginia to have some resolution to what that Elizabeth woman conned her out of."

~

They followed Elizabeth and Fielding back to the hotel. Jack trailed them at a distance, as the Ford rental car pulled up under the portico in front of the main entrance, with the lobby facing the right side of the car where Elizabeth sat. Fielding got out of the car, then turned and ducked his head back inside. Elizabeth was leaning toward him and gesturing. He took a quick look over the top of the car, then quickly slid back into the driver's side and began to drive away.

Jack began to follow, but noticed a police car parked just outside the portico. He slowed down as they reached the hotel's front entrance. Meg had a clear view of the lobby. "Jack, there's Wells! He's talking to the desk clerk. And there're two policemen standing there!"

Jack hesitated.

"Meg, we should go in. But I don't know . . . Where you suppose they're headed?" Meg shook her head. "Well, they'll have to come back to their room."

"I'm not sure of that!"

"Yeah. OK, you go see Wells and catch him up on what happened. I'll keep following them."

Meg got out of the car. Jack drove off. She entered the lobby and hurried up to Wells. “Detective, we’ve just come from the storage units, where Elizabeth and that Fielding guy were taking something out of their lock up. We couldn’t tell what it was . . .”

“Wait a minute. Slow down! You saw them?”

“Yes, and we followed them. They came back here. They were just outside!”

Wells looked at the front doors of the hotel.

“They looked in here and—I don’t know—maybe they saw you and the police. But they drove away. Jack’s following them.”

A man in plain clothes stepped up to her and flashed a badge. “I’m Inspector Wallace of the Edmonton Police. Who is Jack?”

“A friend. His name’s Jack Smith.”

Wells chimed in. “Inspector, they’ve been helping to track Fielding and Beckwith. Here’s the description of the car they gave me.”

He took the note from Wells, and handed it over to one of the uniformed police. “Get on this.”

The man nodded and hurried to the front entrance.

Meg was agitated. “Inspector? They had a room here at the hotel last night. I don’t think they’ve checked out, so maybe they’ll be coming back for their things. I mean, their bags.”

The Inspector turned to the desk clerk. “Do you have anyone registered under the name of Max Fielding or Elizabeth Beckwith?”

“No, Inspector. No one by either of those names.”

Meg spoke up. “They were in room 205.”

The Inspector turned to the desk clerk.

“There’s a couple in 205. They registered as Elizabeth and Lawrence Oliver.”

“That’s them! Jack and I saw them last night and again this morning when they left. They rented a car ...!”

“OK, OK.” He took out a notepad and turned to the other uniform policeman. Go check out that room.” He motioned to the desk clerk. “Could you accompany him and see if they’ve left anything in their room?”

He nodded and the two walked to the elevator.

“Now then, what’s your name?”

“Meg Boyd.”

“Where do you live?”

“Right now I have a residence in Prince Rupert, but I’m not a Canadian citizen. I’m an Australian citizen.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Inspector?! Is this necessary?”

“Yes, ma’am. It is. Now please answer the question.”

“I took a short-term teaching job in Prince Rupert. I’m about to go back to graduate school myself in New Zealand.”

“And this Jack Smith?”

“I just met him about a month ago. He’s an American citizen. We’ve been traveling together.”

“And what is your interest in Fielding and Beckwith?”

Detective Wells intervened. “Inspector, they are friends of one of my clients, whom Elizabeth Beckwith has defrauded out of a considerable sum of money. They were visiting her and they have volunteered to help.”

“I see. And you’ve no knowledge of either Fielding or Beckwith before now?”

“None.”

The Inspector’s cell phone rang ...

~

Jack spotted their car as he took a turn around the parking garage. They had pilled into an empty space off to his left against a concrete wall and were hurriedly getting out the car just as he drove up to them. Elizabeth saw his face. *She’d recognized him!* She gestured wildly toward him, yelling to her boyfriend. He motioned them back into the car.

Jack lurched his car forward, pulling it up close in behind them to block their exit. Her boyfriend jumped out of the car, wielding a hand gun.

“Move it! NOW!”

Jack slid across the seat and opened the car door opposite. A shot crashed through the window glass!

A police siren could be heard . . . coming closer . . . Jack rolled out of the car, as the gunman lunged toward the shattered window . . . the police car appeared, the siren wailing, the red lights flashing across then gunman's face . . . police emerged from the patrol car, crouching behind the open car doors with their guns trained on the stunned gunman, shouting:

“DROP THE GUN! DROP IT! GET DOWN ON THE GROUND! LAY FLAT! ARMS WIDE! DO IT!”

~

“OK, Wallace, bring both of them . . . There are three of them? . . . What names did they give you? . . . I see. OK, take them in. We're checking their room now.”

“Inspector?!”

He looked up at Wells.

“You might want to see what's in their car. They took some items from a lockup just about a half hour ago.”

The Inspector went back to the phone. “Wallace. Impound the car and get someone to give it a good going over . . . OK, well, impound both cars. I'll be back at the station shortly. We can sort it all then.”

~

The Inspector waved a hand at Jack. “OK, Smith, you and Ms. Boyd here” . . . motioning to Meg . . . “can go. Sargent? Book those two.”

Elizabeth protested. “On what charge?! I haven’t done anything!”

“I’ll start with aiding and abetting a fugitive from the law!”

Wells spoke up. “Inspector, I think you’ll find that there’s much more to this young lady’s past.”

~ 4 ~

Vancouver, British Columbia. Jack looked at the street sign: ‘Vancouver 54 km.’

“Meg, I really enjoyed the past three days. That area around Banff is spectacular. I’ll probably have to come back.”

“Yea. Well, I’ll be leaving soon for New Zealand. Maybe some day I’ll return too.”

“I couldn’t convince you to stay?”

“No. I want to go to graduate school. If I don’t go now, I’ll probably never go back.”

They passed the last hour on the road to Virginia’s house in silence.

~

When Virginia opened the door, Meg had expected to be greeted by a lingering, remorseful sadness. What a surprise!

“Meg and Jack, my heroes of the hour!”

“Heroes?!”

“I just talked with the lawyer. Come in! I’ll tell you all about it.” She stepped back and led them into the living room. “But first . . .”

In the center of the room, Virginia had an array of *hors d’oeuvres* laid out on the coffee table and a bottle of champagne cooling in an ice bucket.

“Wow! What’s the occasion?”

Virginia smiled, and lifted the champagne bottle. “Jack, would you do the honors?”

“Be glad to!”

They sat down as Jack popped the cork. Virginia held out the champagne flutes one at a time for him to fill.

“I’m celebrating some good news! My textbook has been adopted at both Oxford, England and Yale, and my publisher is asking for more. My Department Chair has put me up for a University research award. And, get this, I have been asked to give a series of lectures at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch! So, Cheers!”

They clinked glasses.

A happy countenance spread across Meg’s face. “That’s wonderful!”

“Congratulations, Virginia.”

“Do you have a date when you’ll be leaving for New Zealand?”

“No. Not yet. I haven’t formally accepted the invitation. It came so suddenly. I’ll have to clear it with the University, but I expect they’ll give me a

leave.”

“I’m really happy for you!”

“Thanks, Meg. Maybe we’ll be able to spend some time together ‘down under,’ if you are still planning to return.”

Meg looked over at Jack. “Well, I . . . uh . . . I expect to start graduate school in the Fall term.”

“Oh, that’s perfect! What about you, Jack? You going with her?”

“Nah, I still have a little wanderlust left in me.” He chuckled. “I need to get that out of my system before I drag someone else into my wayward, vagabond life.”

Meg looked down at her glass. “Now, Jack! There’s a lot to see in New Zealand. Doesn’t your wanderlust call you there? And you wouldn’t be ‘dragging me’ into your life! I’d go willingly. And, by the way, who’s been doing the ‘dragging’?!”

He laughed. “Maybe I could come later. In a few months.”

Virginia held out her glass. “I need a refill! I want to toast you two!”

Jack poured.

“You make a great team. Detective Wells raved over what you did to get Elizabeth and that no-good boyfriend of hers arrested. So! Here’s to you!”

They clinked glasses again.

“I didn’t really want you to put your life in danger. I had no idea how ruthless . . . or maybe it was just desperate those two were.”

Jack took a sip. “Yeah. Ya know, I still don’t know what they were up to.”

Virginia spoke up: “Oh, you haven’t heard?”

“Heard what?”

“Detective Wells has been in touch with the lawyer he recommended, and he passed along what they’ve learned. Elizabeth and her boyfriend were operating an illicit sex business. Apparently, using young Asian and Latina girls, and soliciting Johns on the internet. The irony is how they got caught. They managed to entice a couple of government officials into participating. And when they realized who they were, they began taping conversations and compiling documents to incriminate them. Well, not to incriminate them, but to use it to blackmail them. What they didn’t know was that these government officials were part of an ‘internet sting’ operation. The information that Elizabeth and Fielding had accumulated is ultimately what is going to seal their fate.”

“I had no idea!”

Jack shook his head. “That explains the gun! ... Did your lawyer mention anything about that stuff they took out of the lockup? It seemed really important to them.”

“Yes. It contained file folders with photographs of these young girls they were trafficking. And it also included the documents and recordings I mentioned that they were planning to use to blackmail the government agents with.

“Apparently, they also had on them airline tickets for a flight to Guatemala. The police speculated that they were planning a recruiting mission. It seems that Elizabeth and Fielding were only small-time bit players in a much bigger sex-trafficking ring. The good news is that the information the police are gathering should help them break up at least some of it, and hopefully they’ll be able to follow the leads up the chain to the real bosses.”

Meg was stunned. “That’s disgusting!”

“I know. I never would have thought it possible that Elizabeth could be involved in exploiting little girls like that! I just hope they lock them up and throw away the key!”

“Is there any chance you’ll get some of the money back that she defrauded you out of?”

“No, I don’t think so, Meg. But it’s OK. It was just a bad chapter in my life. I’m moving on.”

~ 5 ~

Jack and Meg were reclining on their sleeping bags that they’d unrolled onto the lower deck of the ferry. They were sheltered from the drizzling rain by an overhang from the upper deck, but could feel the cool breeze laden with mist blowing in off the ocean. It would be an overnight trip up the archipelago to Juneau, Alaska. The grey sky showed no signs of a letup in the rain.

Meg snuggled up next to Jack. “What are you thinking about?”

He put his arm around her. “The incredible adventure that we just had. I know this sounds a bit cosmic, but I used to believe that one could make an authentic life for yourself. One that’s personalized. That comes from somewhere within. I guess I still sort of believe that. But it’s so hard to see it in others you encounter.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not exactly sure *what* I mean. The more I see of the choices people make for their lives, the less I understand.”

Jack briefly glanced into Meg’s bright blue eyes and smiled.

“I often think back to a novel that I read years ago when I was really young. The protagonist was an architect who was defiant in accepting anything he had not himself created. He was portrayed in heroic terms for his nonconformity. The inference seemed to be that his creativity would otherwise be stifled and his life rendered meaningless. I thought about that character often. There was an enigmatic quality to the man. I could never really see him as heroic. And in the end, he seemed little more than a cold, self-righteous, embittered prig, who cut himself off from humanity.

“I’ve known some people . . . my parents, in fact . . . who seemed to think like him. But they had no

artistic bent. They created no noble works, nor anything lasting really. It just drove them into a kind of artificial world of resentment and bitterness. They surrounded themselves with material objects, just for the sake of showing to themselves that they could possess them.”

He gazed back at Meg.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Meg. Me, rambling on about my childhood. I guess I was just thinking how Elizabeth and Fielding were really very much like my parents in some ways. They were all rebelling against society. My parents never did anything patently illegal, as far as I know. But they squandered their lives just as surely as did Elizabeth and Fielding. However, those two had something my parents didn’t have: The devilish excitement of their criminal activities.”

Meg pulled away, propping herself up on one elbow and staring down at Jack. “Jack, you don’t really mean to justify their actions?! After all they’ve done?!”

“No!” He shook his head. “No, I’m just trying to understand.” He leaned back, folding his hands behind his head. “Think of it: Elizabeth, an accomplished grifter. Fielding, a small-time embezzler. I think they were both seeking a new higher high. And they were finding it in international sex trafficking.”

He breathed a long, deep sigh.

“No, they surely led cruel, deranged lives . . . But my parents? They never really lived at all.”

— Milton H Marquis