

Neighborhoods

by Tatum Este'l

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Forward

God gave ancient Israel the way to life, liberty and happiness. He showed them how to live without money, how to live a full life by taking care of your neighbor and the stranger, how to govern each other in small communities, how to live a life of joy and plenty. A modern prophet has brought these same ideas back and has written a book about equality, fraternity, and liberty. In my story, a man by the name of James Clerk Maxwell came across this same book and started writing down his own ideas and promulgating them. He didn't have success at first, but slowly, he got enough followers to put him into the White House and fill the Congress with men of like mind.

I could have extended this book and told of how people fared under the new government started by Maxwell, told of how the new government struggled to keep in power, but that is not my purpose. I started this book as an experiment. I asked myself what I truly believed. What would be the basis of the right way to live as far as I understood life? I started by writing down a few principles learned from the Bible and then organized a people that would be willing to live by these principles. I started with just one anonymous neighborhood, spread the principles throughout the town and then took it nationwide. I knew that these principles could not be lived without conflict, so I wrote about that, but I assumed that most people would want a change that would bring prosperity to the nation, do away with taxes and centralized authority, and let the local people govern themselves. Showing how to set up such an organization and fit it into an interesting story was my goal.

Book One

Chapter One

“A man identified as James Clark Maxwell,” reported the monotoned anchorwoman on the television, “was arrested today as he nailed what he called *The People's Proclamation* to the main door of the Capital Building here in Washington, D. C. It was clearly in imitation of Martin Luther, a priest of the Catholic Church in sixteenth century Germany, who nailed his proclamation to a castle church in Wittenburg in 1517.”

Harold and Gramps chuckled as they sipped their beer and cocked their heads at the news being broadcast on the screen above them. Everyday after work they met at the neighborhood bar and watched the news. They commented with grunts and chuckles as if they knew each other's thoughts.

“James Clark,” continued the anchor, “is the same man who earlier this year was given an award by President Gifford on the White House lawn, for his massive efforts in organizing many neighborhoods across America into self-help groups.”

“Isn't that the guy?” Harold asked.

“Yeah, yeah,” Gramps said tugging at his white beard. “Tried to ... tried to ...

political guy ... third party guy ... third party ... damnable ... damnable.”

“Left some kind of league or principles around here, didn't he?” Harold answered, jerking his nose at the television.

“Yeah, yeah,” Gramps said. “The Browns, the Browns ... down the street. The Kirkhams, the Kirkhams ... they work for 'em.”

“They have a sign in their barbershop window,” Harold said, “about some kind of new union ... fed up with the government kind of thing ... don't recognize the two political parties, the Democrats and the Republicans. Yep, third party kind of thing.”

* * *

Michael opened the door to his apartment, went through the little hall and walked over to his large black leather reclining easy chair in the living room. Throwing his backpack beside the it, he sat down and melted into the chair. The smell of leather comforted him. He pushed back, letting the foot-lift take the weight off his feet. He sighed and bent over to take his shoes off. It was very difficult to breathe in this position. His stomach was getting too big. It got in the way of reaching his feet at the end of his long legs. Shoes off, he sucked in a huge breath as he leaned back. He took a few more deep breaths until he felt relaxed.

He looked around the apartment. The hallway to the outside was to his left. There was an over-crowded bookshelf built into the wall just around the corner as you came in.

That lead the eye to the kitchen nook. It was separated from the living room by a bar and then there was a couch in front of it which made an extension of the little hall way that led to the bathroom and bedroom. Maggie had all kinds of utensils hanging above the bar. No, the newspaper wasn't on the bookshelf or the bar. In the little hallway there was a linen closet to the left and the bedroom door to the right. He listened. Nope, his wife wasn't in the bedroom unless she was sleeping. There was no noise. If that was the case, he could enjoy some time alone. In front of Michael sat a television in the middle of the wall on a table with curtains in front to hide a lot of kitchen things and books. On the right was a large picture window with sides that opened using little handles at the bottom that you turned when you wanted fresh air.

Now, where was that newspaper? Oh, yes. He looked across his right arm to the end table made up of heavy cardboard meat boxes stuffed with DVDs and covered with a cloth made of samplers his wife got from a paint store. They were always giving away wallpaper and cloth samples that came in large folders. Among all the junk on the table was the paper poking out between books and notebooks with the TV remote sitting on top of the pile.

Taking the newspaper, he unfolded it and scanned the front page. He breathed heavy sighs, being thankful for another night to rest from a long day of moving desks and chairs and tables and scrubbing floors at the school where he worked as a janitor. This summer job was a lot harder than just vacuuming classrooms and cleaning toilets, which he did during the fall and winter months. Having to travel to all of the schools in the

district to clean up the garbage left by other janitors was almost too much to bear. The people who had to clean up his school would have an easy job. He kept his hallways and classrooms clean. If it weren't so hot during the summer he could move a little better instead of being so sluggish. He shook the paper to straighten it, and his eyes fell upon a strange article.

“The Senate Investigative Committee today started a series of inquiries regarding the National People's Union originated by James Clark Maxwell who has drawn a lot of attention to himself. He was arrested last week after nailing what is alleged to be a socialist manifesto to the doors of the Capital building in Washington D. C.

“In an interview with the National Press, Maxwell was quoted as saying, 'I did it because what I sent to Congress fell on deaf ears. My intention was not self-aggrandizement as so many have claimed, but merely to bring attention to the fact that over the years in which capitalism has reigned, our national and state governments have failed to meet the needs of the people.' Maxwell said that his union had drawn up certain democratic principles of government, which, if adhered to, would save the nation, bringing all people and the government to a debt-free society.

“It is this union and these principles that are being investigated by the committee. Copies of these principles had been sent to every state representative in the House and every senator. It is believed by Senator Hammond, who is the chairman of the Senate House Committee that Maxwell is trying to gain notoriety for the upcoming presidential election.

“Speaking to Senator Quelmo of the opposition party to ascertain the Senate's interest in James Clark Maxwell and the NPU, the National Press asked why the Senate Investigative Committee convened at this time. The senator is quoted as saying, 'It has come to the attention of the Senate and all of Congress that there may be a large sector of the population that has lost confidence in national and state governments. Our job is to come to know their feelings and assure them that the government and

the two party system is sound. There are already enough government programs and incentives and sound principles based upon a free market economy. Indeed, free enterprise can take care of any economic situation and the needs of the people.'

“Asked what he thought of Maxwell's proclamation, Senator Hammond answered, as he stood arm-in-arm with Senator Quelmo, 'We understand that it is just more socialist propaganda. Socialism has never worked with the American people nor within any other country. It failed in America in the guise of religion in the nineteenth century, and it always failed with socialistic governments of the twentieth century under the names of Naziism and Communism and other socialistic programs.'

“Asked if he had a rebuttal, Maxwell, who now resides under protective custody of the National Security Forces, responded with, 'Politicians have their own agendas. They no longer represent the thinking or the will of the people of these United States, except for the very rich. We no longer have representation in Congress nor in state legislatures.' Maxwell also said that his fight for the people is based less on economic solutions and more on the democratic process which comes of true representation of the people.

“National Press coverage gave a final commentary that the NPU may, for the time being, become a 'PU,' which is to say, a big stink.”

Michael blinked several times. The words had started to blur. He rubbed his face. He wished his nose wasn't so huge. It was bigger than his chin. He might have been Italian or Greek by the looks of him, maybe even Lebanese, but his last name was Miller, and all his ancestors were English, German or French.

He looked out the picture window across the courtyard between the whitewashed arms of the apartment building. His eyes rested upon Murphy's Market just across the street. Ed Murphy, the grocer's son, was hanging large white paper signs painted with red and blue letters onto wooden A-frames covered plywood squares and then with a chicken

wire frame. He had to lift the wire frame, put the paper signs onto the square and cover them again with the wire frame. The signs showed sales on beef roast, laundry detergent, potato chips, lettuce, etc. Listing the items together didn't make sense unless you were to go on a picnic, eat roast beef sandwiches, get your clothes dirty, and come home and do your laundry.

He saw Jeremy Pigsley come out of the Rexall Drugstore down on the north corner, delivering someone's expensive pills, most likely. He mounted his delivery bike and placed a package in the front basket. It is outrageous what medicine costs now, Michael thought. The kid is lucky to have a job. He should have applied with the school district. Might have been working on my crew, getting paid a penny more. Imagine. I'm getting paid the same as a delivery boy.

There was Miss Aiken coming home from work. She strolled down the north walk of the courtyard passing whitewashed urns filled with dead plants. Michael remembered she worked as an English teacher at the same school he worked at. He wondered what she did during the summer months. Maybe she took classes at the university.

There went Harold and Gramps doing their usual thing at The Green Bar between the drugstore and Kirkham's Barbershop. He could see a sign in the barbershop window. He knew it said something about the National People's Union he read about in the papers. He saw it when he got a haircut the other day. There was an office in the back of the barbershop where the union met. It had been a warehouse for Murphy's before the advent of the middleman who now delivered in a big semi.

All of this area used to be farmland a hundred years ago, Michael reminded himself. The grocer had taken advantage of that and had always had fresh produce from the truck farms and fresh meat from the surrounding ranches. Now it was all imported from other countries.

Michael glanced back at the newspaper and found that the NPU had bailed James Clark Maxwell out of jail. Now, where did they get the money? They don't believe in using money. There was a note referring to another page. He turned to it, and there was the Proclamation printed out. He scanned the articles and folded the newspaper and put it down.

Now where is that paper they put on my door? That will explain all this. He looked around the room. He didn't really want to get up if the paper wasn't nearby. He looked at the television. He might turn that on instead. Then he remembered. He glanced at the bookshelf. He grunted as he got up. He went over to the shelves, picked up the paper and returned to his recliner, flopping down into comfort. He glanced over the flier.

National People's Union

Wednesday Meeting

7 PM

Kirkham's Barbershop (in the rear of the shop)

All Welcome

Regain Your Lost Freedoms

Learn How to Free Yourself from too much Government

He turned the paper over. There was the same list he had read in the paper. It was in numbered paragraphs.

It read:

“What we are and what we can do with our intelligence and skills, our talents and abilities, belongs to everyone. We owe Life itself for who and what we are and what we can accomplish. We repay Life for what we have been given when we share. What we can do, what we can grow or manufacture, what we can create, any service we can give, and what we can teach, belongs to all mankind.”

Sounds a bit socialistic, he thought. Let's see what the rest says.

“Proclamation of the People for Creating a Democracy

1. Government has no rights, only people have rights which are inalienable and God given.
2. Government exists solely for the protection of the people, their lives, liberty, and property.
3. Law exists only within Nature and Nature's God. People cannot make laws, they can only discover laws and adopt God's laws. People can only make agreements among themselves or make covenants with other people as to their conduct.
4. Earth is not property, nor any part of it. It cannot be divided. It is one whole. Land cannot be owned. Not even government has the right to own real estate.
5. Authority comes from the common consensus of the people, never through brute force,

not through mercenary, nor by committee.

6. Goods and services, or anything that is grown or manufactured, are the common property of all people.

7. Everyone has the right to all the basic necessities of life, that is, food, clothing and shelter except for those who refuse to work when they are physically and mentally capable.

8. All men are created equal, and therefore, each man's labor is of equal value.

9. Accumulation of goods and services are for feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, healing the sick, liberating the captive, and caring for the fatherless and widow.

10. Sexual intercourse between a man and a woman is a solemn vow of marriage and ends only at the death of one of the spouses.

11. Family, based upon father, mother and children, is the unit cell of society, for which family, government and society was created to serve.

12. Every wife and child in a family has claim upon the father and husband of that family for their support and maintenance.

13. One person or group of people have no more rights than the general populace.

14. People have the right to organize themselves for self-government, for the betterment of society, to serve one another and to provide for the basic necessities of life.”

Sounds pretty radical, Michael thought, scratching his head. I suppose it is better than letting the rich get richer and poor get poorer, though. It said something about

making covenants. He would have to think about that one. He wouldn't want the government to become his god. He thought maybe you should only make covenants with God. But a good handshake should be enough, like it was in the olden days. It also sounded Native American, this thing about not being able own the land. Yet, the Indians were pretty protective of their lands when the white man came. Then it seems like they are replacing paid policemen with constables who are in some areas of the world voted in or appointed by committee, but then this would outlaw committees becoming too bossy if this were followed. He couldn't decide if this were communism or socialism. It had a lot to say about labor. Some of it seemed to come out of a Sunday School class at Church. And that thing about sex, no one would touch that with a ten foot pole. And my wife never lets me forget that I have to support her.

* * *

At that moment, Maggie walked in the door carrying several plastic shopping bags full of things she had bought. She looked exhausted. That was a clear sign of trouble. She gazed at Michael angrily and plopped onto the couch that separated the kitchen from the living room, dropping the bags onto the floor.

“You could have helped me carry these!” she cried.

“I didn't know you were carrying things home.” He leaned forward in his recliner.

“I mean from the door!” she exclaimed.

“Well, you came in all of a sudden,” he said, surprised.

“Come and see what I got.” She smiled. She wanted this to be a happy time.

Whenever her mother or dad went shopping when she was growing up, she had fun seeing what they brought home. She wanted to share this experience with Michael.

“You've been to the Goodwill again, I see. You know we don't have the money to spend.”

“Well, come and see!” she demanded.

Maggie was almost as tall as Michael. He was six feet. Her long face was bordered by long, shiny, auburn hair that rested on her shoulders. Bangs hid her forehead. Her eyes were once described by her grandma as bedroom eyes. Right now, they had that hurt look in them. Michael never got excited about anything she bought. She had been excited about all the little things she had bought at the thrift store. They were as good as new and she saved a lot of money. But she was exhausted carrying all these things home on the bus, which she missed several times. When she missed one bus, she would walk several blocks to catch another, and it would leave before she got there. This exhaustion stole her excitement, and so she depended upon Michael to lift her spirits, but he didn't. His face was completely blank like a store dummy.

After Michael got up out of his chair, which he had to do very slowly, she handed him an orange squeezer out of one of the bags. He sat on the floor beside her and examined it. He couldn't sit on the couch because it was filled with needle craft projects she had been working on for ages. The orange squeezer had the appearance of a malted milk machine, except it didn't have the middle shaft. A long handle came down and moved a one cup on top of another cup in which the orange would sit.

Next she gave him a really neat potato peeler manufactured in Germany. It seemed to be for the left hand, and that was very odd.

“It is sharper than other peelers,” Maggie said.

Everything made in Europe they both agreed was always better.

There was a colander, some pie tins, bags of cloth of which she asked Michael to give his opinion of every color and pattern, some ribbon, different colored yarns, and threads on large commercial spools, enough to last the rest of their years.

“How much did this cost me?” Michael asked, stupefied.

“Just over five dollars. It was really inexpensive.” Maggie smiled.

“Don't you know we could have done our wash with that five dollars?”

“You can't say anything positive!” She pushed forward, ready for a fight. “You're just like your dad. Can't you say thank you sometimes? Besides, we can do our wash at your sister's.”

“I don't like to go over there,” Michael responded. “You know that.” Michael felt so despondent. “What can I do when you're always spending my money?”

“Our money!”

“I don't know what to do.”

“We'll have some change from the bill money,” Maggie said, trying to comfort him.

“I have things I need to buy, you know,” Michael said, defending himself.

“Like what?”

Scratching his head, he said, “I don't know right now. I forget. But whenever I remember what I need, you've already spent the money for it.”

“That's nonsense,” Maggie said.

Maggie got up and went to the kitchen to fix dinner.

Michael went back to his recliner and turned on the TV to catch the news. Maggie, upset, started slamming things around and stomping her feet. Michael responded with, “I worked hard all day and expect to come home and get some rest.”

“Go then!” Maggie slammed a pan onto the table. “Get some rest! I don't want your help. I never get any rest, why should you?”

Michael thought of the meeting of the NPU Wednesday. He thought maybe if he could help to change things at the grassroots level, and this did seem to be a grassroots meeting, if he could secure a future where the rich weren't always grinding upon the faces of the poor, Maggie and he wouldn't fight over finances so much. He mentioned going to the meeting after they had sat at the table eating the lasagna Maggie had fixed.

“Yeah! Right! Anything to get rid of me,” Maggie remarked.

“I'm sorry,” Michael responded, “but it isn't. You could come too, you know.”

Michael felt so guilty at doing something he wanted to do that he had trouble swallowing his food.

“You know I don't like political things,” Maggie said, “and I don't want you to get mixed up with crooked politicians.”

“These people aren't like that, I'm sure,” he tried to reassure her.

“You don't know anything. You're always acting so smart.”

“There are some things I don't know,” Michael said in a patronizing way.

“I doubt it!” Maggie pouted.

* * *

Miss Aiken took the hatpin out of her black straw hat. It made her look like an old spinster, something she projected on purpose for protection. She took off her hat exposing her gray hair, placing the hat in its proper place on the dresser covered with white linen. When she first saw that hat in the second hand store, she just had to have it. When she wore it to work the next day, everyone thought it was a joke. She laughed with the others, but she wore it again the next day and continued wearing it day after day. She soon became known as an eccentric. But that was alright with her. She could better hide her secret that way. Next, she sat on the stool in front of her which was covered with the same light beige flowered upholstery as her couch in the living room. She looked at herself in the mirror with a half-smile, as if sharing a secret with her reflection. She took off her wire-rimmed glasses and put them in their proper place on the dresser. She rubbed her eyes. Looking at the small picture of her late husband, located in the honored place on the middle of the dresser, she kissed her forefinger and touched it to his face. She smiled and shed a tear. It was her nightly ritual.

Dressed in an Army uniform, he seemed to be returning her smile. His loss was so

long ago that there was no one alive but her now that remembered him. No one knew that she used to be married. She was known as Miss Aiken, and that is the way she wanted it. She had remained faithful to him since the war in which he was killed. Keeping their marriage secret seemed to be the only way to do this. Even her mother had never known she had married him. She hadn't approved. They never had a child, but she imagined that one day he would come for her, there would be a resurrection, and they would be able to have children then. She laughed at the thought that people considered her a spinster. But in fact, she was a widow, and it would remain her little secret. Time was passing fast enough, and they would be together again.

That was enough sentimentality. It was time to go to Murphy's Market and pick up a few things.

Miss Aiken walked out of the bedroom and into her kitchen which was open to her living room. She took from the refrigerator the small magnet holding her shopping list, took the list and replaced the magnet. She looked at the orange flier from the NPU which she had stuck onto the refrigerator yesterday. She straightened it and looked underneath to the second page. She wondered about the meeting. She liked to be civic minded and would always attend grassroots meetings for her district. She would consider it. It's always good to keep abreast of what goes on in one's neighborhood, she thought.

She looked at her shopping list again. Everything was arranged with comparisons to her budget and the inventory of her kitchen. She prided herself in having affairs in order.

* * *

At Murphy's, Miss Aiken ran into Mrs. Parks who lived two doors from her. They met in the Italian food aisle, looking towards the meat counter.

“Oh, hi, Frieda,” Mrs. Parks said warmly.

“Hello Blanche. Aren't these sales atrocious?”

“I can only afford the cheapest items, and having to feed a family, it really takes some juggling.” Mrs. Parks picked up some spaghetti and looked at the price. “These prices must be set for singles like you, Frieda.”

“Not on a teacher's salary,” Miss Aiken said, waving her hand before her face. “It must be worse for you. And how is Gary?”

“Doctors are no better than robbers. If only they had to live like we do.” Mrs. Parks replaced the spaghetti and looked for a cheaper brand. “I'm afraid he will be out of work for a while. They may fire him. They told him at work when the accident happened that they couldn't do without him. That means they will replace him if he can't return to work soon.”

They shoved their shopping carts towards the meat aisle.

“Aren't they giving him Worker's Comp?” Miss Aiken asked.

“There's some kind of red tape holding things up,” Mrs. Parks replied. She took some tomato sauce off the shelf and put it in her cart which she knew wouldn't be full today.

“Did you try the welfare office?” Miss Aiken didn't know why she was looking at the Italian food. She didn't like it much.

“Yes, but Gary made too much money last year, so there you have it.”

“Rules, rules, rules. It can make a person angry.” Miss Aiken approached the meat counter. “It's set up for those who govern. What is your family living on?”

Before turning into the next aisle, Mrs. Parks said, “We have enough in savings to live for the next three months, but the doctors and the hospital want it all. We got a loan from our insurance, but there goes our insurance.” She turned her palms to the air and then continued to stroll into the other aisle with, “Catch you later, dear.”

“Okay, Blanche, take care.”

Miss Aiken bumped into Ed Murphy next.

“Ed! How are you, Dear?” she asked, lifting her face to see his. He was a head taller than she.

“Mighty fine, Miss Aiken. And how are you?” He wiped his hands on his apron. He had just put out some meat in the display case.

“I'll tell you, Ed. Your prices are too high, and I can't afford the bus money nor the time to go out into the suburbs and trade at those big chains.”

“You will have to take that up with our suppliers. When my father started this store,” Ed explained, “putting groceries and a butcher shop all under one roof, you know, why, there were no middlemen to deal with. Now things are up everywhere.”

“Well, those big chains can afford lower prices, why not you?” Miss Aiken

retorted.

“Those big chains,” Ed came back, “have bought out the suppliers that will sell cheaper merchandise. I deal with only the best, and I'm afraid it has to come from overseas and below the border. I think I do pretty well with what I can get. And if you want to spend your bus money to get to the big chains, you will find you might as well stay here. But things will change pretty soon, you'll see.”

“Well, the big businesses take all the territory, don't they?” Miss Aiken stopped to pick up some roast beef. “What do you mean things will get better?”

“Come to the NPU meeting. You'll see.” He pushed his cart around to the other side of the meat counter as Miss Aiken looked at some chicken, checking the prices as always.

“I'm thinking about it. I've always been politically active,” she said to the air.

Burt Hanks, the butcher looked over the counter and asked, “Well, Miss Aiken, how are things at school?”

“If you had listened in class, Burt, you could have been a lawyer, a writer, a doctor, who knows? Now you are serving me behind the meat counter. Cut this roast into steaks, will you?”

“Sure 'nough,” he said as he reached over and took the roast.

“There may be a teacher's strike. I can't afford it. Though, I have some savings. I don't know what all the hullabaloo is. Most teachers' husbands or wives are working as well, trying to make ends meet. They're asking for higher wages so the government will ask for higher taxes. You can't make something from nothing. You just can't win that

way.”

“No, you can't,” said Burt. “It takes a concerted effort all around. Here is your roast.” He handed the steaks to her over the counter.

“Thank you, Burt,” she said as she pushed off to another part of the store.

“See you, Miss Aiken,” Ed called back. “Have a good night.”

* * *

Ed heard a commotion up near the front of the store. When he approached the cash registers, he saw a young black man holding a forty-five to Mrs. Sydney's head. She was emptying her cash drawer into a plastic bag.

Mrs. Sydney, a middle-aged woman with short graying hair that curled towards her neck, had an oval face filled out from eating too many desserts. She wore a gray dress underneath her green apron. She was shaking, and not moving fast enough for the gunman, who made constant threats.

The gunman wore an oversized cap with a small bill over an Afro, a black leather vest covering a dark blue shirt, and black leather trousers. He was shaking and cursing and didn't see Ed sneaking up from behind.

When Ed saw what was happening, his Vietnam training took over. He rolled between two registers and crawled around behind the gunman, putting his finger to his lips, motioning to the other cashier, who had frozen with fear. When Mrs. Sydney handed

the bag to the robber, the man backed away, waving his gun, threatening all within his sight. As he stepped out of the aisle, Ed jumped and grabbed him, forcing up the hand that held the gun. The gun went off and shot a hole in the ceiling. Ed clamped the would be thief into a half Nelson where he couldn't move, as they both fell to the floor. The gun went off again, but only into the wall. The black man felt the full weight of Ed as he landed on the floor, knocking the wind out of him. Ed retrieved the gun and dragged the man into his office. Everyone started talking all at once, trying to relieve each other from the shock.

Ed tied the man to a chair and waited for him to regain consciousness.

He did that in one gasp for air. When he realized he was tied up, he started wriggling, trying to get loose. Then he saw Ed holding his own gun on him.

“What you doin' man?” the black man cried. “Call the po-lice. You don't catch a thief and tie him up and hold a gun on him!”

“What's your name?” Ed demanded.

“What's you care?” the man answered. He turned his head slowly, shaking it back and forth. The chair tilted back and he almost fell. When he was still, he said, “Oh, man! What's you doin'? Call the po-lice. They don't tie a person up. At least I'll be free to walk about in a cell.”

“What's your name?” Ed asked again.

“Oh, Hell! It's Mack. Now, let me go.” He looked at the man holding him. He couldn't figure him out. This had never happened before. He'd always been able to get

away in a holdup. "Aren't you gonna call the po-lice?"

"No need for them," Ed said frankly. "We don't need the police. Our community can take care of itself. There is a meeting behind this store on Wednesday night at seven. I want you to be there."

"You want what?" Mack said in surprise.

"I want you to come to the NPU meeting on Wednesday night. Will you be there?"

Mack looked at the power in the man's eyes. He hadn't seen such power in a person before. It was hypnotizing. Here was complete honesty and sincerity. "Yeah, I'll be there. Now let me go," he said.

"I want your blood oath that you will be there. We can use a guy like you."

"Yeah, man," Mack said again. "I'll be there."

"I want your blood oath."

"What's that supposed to mean? Huh? You want to cut me?" Now Mack was getting annoyed.

"We'll finish this here and now. Give me your blood oath that you will be there with me or I kill you right now. It's a simple matter of life or death. Your honor or your death. What will it be?"

"Man, you're crazy!"

"What will it be?" Ed was starkly honest. He didn't flinch. There was no fear in him, and Mack could see this. He was a power to be dealt with. He couldn't refuse the man.

“Okay man,” Mack said with the same honesty. “I’ll be there.”

“On your life?”

“On my life.” Mack trembled a bit, but he got the words out plain enough to be heard.

“Okay.”

Ed untied Mack. He stood up, and Ed handed him his gun.

“What is this?” Mack asked.

“I’m giving your gun back.”

“Man, no one ever does that in real life ... and lives,” Mack grumbled.

“I know I can trust you, Mack,” Ed said. “I’ll see you at the meeting.”

Stunned at what had happened, Mack turned towards the door. He hesitated. He knew he had to pass the cash registers to get out. He would be embarrassed to walk in front of everyone.

“There is a back way,” Ed said, pointing to another door on the left side of his desk. “It leads to the back room where the meeting will be.”

Mack went through the door, across the empty warehouse, and out the back into the alley. He walked as if in a daze. He couldn't understand what had just happened to him, but he felt as though the man had saved his life. He wouldn't tell his friends. They wouldn't listen anyway.

* * *

Mack walked down the street scratching his head. What had that guy done to him? He felt so different. He felt like laughing and crying both. He could walk on air. It's like his neck had grown really long and he was looking down upon all the world from high in the sky. Is that what it feels like to face one's death?

Mack passed a telephone pole on his way home. The pole was covered with posters, fliers and staples. Where there wasn't a piece of paper, there were hundreds of staples glistening in the sun. He recognized one of the fliers. It had NPU typed in large letters. He pulled it off and started reading. Flipping it over, he read the manifesto. As he walked along, listening to rap music coming through his earphones, he read the paper again and again trying to comprehend.

Entering the alley that led to his backyard, he spotted the four thugs he owed the money to. He stopped in his tracks. He was suddenly thrust back down to earth. They all wore black leather vests and trousers, the same as his outfit, with a blue t-shirt underneath, signifying the gang they belonged to. They were calling out to him, "Hey Brotha', you got the money?" The bald-headed one was Tony, the man in charge, then Mikie, who had braids like the Medusa, Leo, whose hair resembled the Sphinx, and Buba, who looked like a gorilla that could tear a man from limb to limb. They all pranced around, smiling, asking for their money, pointing their forefingers to the ground.

Mack turned one hundred eighty degrees, ran out of the alley, and around the corner. He leaned against the wall of the red brick store to catch his breath. He could run

to the intersection and down the sidewalk to the front of his house, but he had second thoughts. He put his head back into the alley to see what the group was doing. He heard one of them yell, "He's goin' for the front door!" He saw them scramble through his yard to catch him coming down the sidewalk. He dashed through the alley, ran across his backyard and into the rear door. He slammed it shut and locked the dead bolt. Running through the house, he reached the front door before any of them and secured it. Going room by room, he checked all the windows to see if they were open. He had to shut his mother's bedroom window, waking her from a nap. She got up off the bed and started following after him and screaming, "What are you doin'? Are you in trouble ag'in?" Outside, the four gang members shouted and yelled Mack's name, telling him they would get him.

"Motha', I can't take no shit f'om yo," he answered. "I got enough f'om these boys. They's afta' my tail, an' I don't know what to do."

He went up to his bedroom to think. He sat on the edge of his bed and found that he still had the flier in his hand. He wadded it up in anger and threw it across the room. His world had been shattered, his life threatened, and his mother was always after him to change. He put his head in his hands and moaned. This hadn't been a good day!

His mother knocked on his door and called his name. "Can I come in?" she asked as she opened the door.

"No Motha'! You cannot. Leave me the heck alone. You are the cause of all my misery," he said without looking up.

“Oh!” she cried. “How can you talk to yo' motha' this way?”

“I got borned, didn't I?”

His mother went off crying and left him alone with his thoughts.

Chapter Two

Murphy's Market took up most of the block. It seemed to be one great red-brick building from corner-to-corner with a twenty foot long glass-brick window that went from the entrance along the top at ceiling height. Most people didn't notice how long it was since there were several stores built within the wall. Tan's shoe repair was the first, followed by Kirkham's Barbershop. These two stores opened into the warehouse of the grocery store. Next was Mister Derby's hardware store, and the Rexall on the corner.

Harold and Gramps came out of the Bar and Grill opposite the Rexall to see a line of people going into the barbershop.

“Couldn't be,” Gramps called out in his harsh, guttural voice.

“Not hair cuttin',” Harold said.

“Got to be,” Gramps started to say.

“That N-PU meetin',” Harold finished the thought. “Shall we?”

“We shall, we shall,” Gramps said, sounding like an engine misfiring.

“Go in there and see,” Harold started to ask.

“What, what's it,” Gramps replied.

Inside, Harold and Gramps could see a lot of people coming in and being seated in metal fold-up chairs that had been neatly placed in rows facing a podium in what used to be an empty warehouse. The podium was near the front where the doors to the grocery were located. Of course, the warehouse hadn't been completely empty, as there were

boxes, crates and pallets shoved to each side of the room.

As the place filled up with people taking their seats, there was the murmur of voices and the clamor of metal folding chairs.

Ed Murphy led Macintosh Jones from the alley entrance to meet his family. He had told Ed earlier that his full name was Macintosh, but everyone called him Mack. Mrs. Murphy didn't look too happy at the prospect of sitting near a felon. She made Ed sit between her and the black guy. It wasn't racial prejudice, because most of their children were of different races. The eight of them had been adopted. There was even a black girl. Mack winked at her, but she folded her arms and raised her nose at him. He only laughed.

Maggie could be heard to tell Michael, "I don't like being dragged into things like this."

Michael responded with, "Well, you could have stayed home, you know. And it's only across the street."

"It was supposed to be our date night, our night out together."

"We're out together," he said, trying to control his emotions.

"That's not what I mean."

"Maggie, I have a feeling this is important."

"I should have brought some needle craft to do." Maggie folded her arms and fumed. "We're involved enough at Church."

Miss Aiken sat with Mrs. Parks and discussed politics about the financial world.

Mack tried to guess what the meeting was all about. "One of them pyramid

schemes, it looks like to me,” he said.

“Not that,” Ed replied.

“Religion?” Mack asked. “I got no use for no religion.”

“No, not that either.”

“It must be politics, which I don't understand a bit. Never could, never will.”

“Most people can't, Mack. That's why we're having this meeting. It's a way to end politics,” Ed explained, “to go around the system.”

“You mean fudge,” Mack said. “I know how to fudge.”

“In the Navy,” said Michael, leaning over into the conversation, “we called it skating.”

Ed laughed. “No, it's not at all like that. We're not trying to get out of work. What we're attempting to do here is to ignore the government and go about our own business of living.”

Ed looked at Mack and added, “and there may be a job in it for you.”

Mack showed his irritation by the way his head bobbed up and down like one of those dolls on the dashboard of a car. He didn't know whether to get up or stay. He breathed out, “I got no use for no job, neither.”

But he had a natural attraction to Ed. Had he been in the military? He had taken him down just like in the movies. He hadn't turned him in to the police, so what was with this guy? Was he a mafia boss? Crooked? Or on the up and up? All Mack knew was that the man could be trusted. He could feel it in his gut. Before the meeting, in the alley,

when he was trying to explain things, Ed said that he would make him very rich. That was good enough for him.

All the commotion of people finding their seats and talking to their neighbors rose to a crescendo and went silent as Bob Kirkham approached the podium. He was tall with blond curly hair cropped short around the ears. His round mouth, framed with large lips, puckered under his bulbous nose. He wore a light tan sports coat, a chocolate tie and pants. He reminded Michael of the poet Alexander Pope, whom he had seen in an English book at the school.

“Hello,” Kirkham's voice boomed over the loudspeakers. “My name is Bob Kirkham. I want to thank everyone who came out to this meeting tonight.” His hands gripped the podium so tight that his knuckles turned white. That was the only sign of being nervous. The rest of him appeared reassured and at ease. “On behalf of the National People's Union, we greet you. Now, whatever you heard or thought, we are not communists, or socialists. By God, we're not even a political party!”

A nervous laugh spread throughout the audience.

“Maybe the Republicans and Democrats have cause to fear because these town meetings are being held all over the continental United States. Although we may be considered political, we are not a third party. We do not want to collide with the political parties as they stand at present. We are a union, and are looking for membership subscriptions, no matter if you are Republican or Democrat. We wish all to join in.

“You've probably heard of citizen's groups before. There are neighborhood watch

groups, those against crime, against drugs, etcetera. There are citizen groups that distribute food to the poor and elderly, and volunteer groups that repair or build housing for low income families.

“What we intend is to organize neighborhoods throughout the United States into these kinds of self-help groups. We want to teach people that they can care for themselves and their communities and get rich while doing it without going into business ... maybe without using money at all.”

Michael started scratching his head thinking that this might turn out to be very interesting.

“If you are old enough to remember,” Kirkham continued, “President Johnson's War on Poverty, or President Carter's efforts in building up neighborhoods, helping people help themselves, transforming slums into safe and clean communities people could be proud of, well, this is what we are doing. We help people become self-reliant.

“You know how hard it is to pay the doctor and the hospital and everyone in between.”

Miss Aiken and Mrs. Parks nodded.

“We do too. We know people go deeply into debt or bankrupt trying to pay health costs even when they have insurance. We have found a way to help people not lose their shirts, so-to-speak.”

Michael leaned over and whispered into Maggie's ear, “I wouldn't mind losing my shirt about now. It is getting really hot in here.”

Maggie elbowed him in the ribs. He just chuckled.

Kirkham continued. “Sometimes it takes a good lawyer to get you through these hardships. You've seen that advertisement where the lawyer comes on and shows all the people he's helped get money from their insurance companies after an accident. We have lawyers that can do that without asking you to pay large sums of money afterward.

“Sometimes there is friction between you and your local government or even the state or federal government, issues such as welfare, Social Security, or the IRA. It takes a good lawyer to smooth things out. There are laws that you don't know about, so it takes a specialized lawyer to figure things out. You are most likely breaking some unknown law every day because there are so many millions of them.

“Most of you have gone to Sunday School,” Kirkham said as he wiped the sweat from his forehead with a white handkerchief.

Michael thought of all the times in Sunday School he had fallen asleep.

“You've heard, perhaps,” Kirkham continued, “in Sunday School about the ancient Jews at the time of Jesus who burdened the people with laws for every little thing. One couldn't breathe or move his little finger without some law or rule having something to say about it. Well, my friends, we are in the same situation today. There are laws to cover every situation.”

Someone in the audience sneezed and Kirkham said, “Even if you sneeze, there is a law that says something about it.” That brought more laughter. Kirkham smiled and continued. “Congress or your state legislature does nothing but sit up on the hill and

make laws, rules and regulations about everything under the sky and beneath the ocean! Forgive me, but that's a pet peeve of mine. All those who have been in my barbershop know about my tirades.”

Harold called out, “We know about those!” and people laughed.

“If we could get the right people in Congress, maybe they will spend more time canceling all those laws we now have and hone and fine tune our set of laws down to what's most important.

“One of the problems of Congress is that they can never regulate buying and selling enough to make things even. There are always arguments on taxes, spending, the deficit, who to bail out of bankruptcy, and how to govern the economy. They aren't worried about protecting people's rights and property. But they are concerned about what we do in the privacy of our own homes.

“I've spoken of the financial hardships everyone here faces. Is there an answer to these problems without going bankrupt?”

Both Michael and Maggie remembered that they had to file bankruptcy only three years ago because of medical bills they couldn't pay. Michael wished Kirkham would open up the meeting for discussion. He would tell them a tale or two.

Kirkham paused, looking at his audience. “Yes, there is an answer. I myself haven't earned a penny or spent any money for the last five years, and I have prospered. I know you have to pay for your haircuts, but I don't keep the money. I give it away. I don't look upon it as mine. And I do all this without breaking any law, as far as it is interpreted

correctly.”

There was a soft shuffle of laughter throughout the audience.

“If you don't remember anything from this meeting, I want you to remember a creed of our forefathers. They colonized this country, not by individuality, but with a covenant to do it together, to help each other. They brought with them a love for their neighbor. In essence, their belief was, that what we are, what we can do with our intelligence and our hands belongs to everyone. We owe Life itself for who and what we are. We repay Life for what we have been given when we share, be it goods, services, talents, abilities, our education, you name it.”

Mack perked up his ears. He recognized a New Age philosophy in all this. Religion shit, he whispered.

“By sharing with others,” Kirkham said, “what we have or what we can do, what we can create or what we can teach, we can solve any problem, be it with our minds or with our hands working together.

“Now, I want to turn the remainder of the time over to Ben Brown. He will show us a movie and give a little speech, as if you need another.”

Again, the audience laughed. Kirkham sat down and a little shorter man, stocky and bald, stood in his place at the podium. He wore wire-rimmed glasses covering thick bushy eyebrows. He stuck out his chin as he smiled at the audience. “Hello, my name is Benjamin Brown, and I'm a banker.” He chuckled at his own joke. “And this isn't an AA meeting for bankers.” His voice was brisk and steppy as though he had to have

everything organized, even his personality.

Brown brought forth more soft laughter from the audience with his reference to Alcoholics Anonymous. He began again. “There have been times in our history that it was deemed necessary by the laborer to unionize to force management to create safer working conditions, provide for competitiveness in the marketplace, increase wages and decrease the workday, and other things to establish a higher standard of living.

“It started with the organization of the Masters as in business guilds or trade guilds in northern Europe. The first laborers to organize were the skilled craftsmen. The unskilled laborers were late in organizing. Several tries were made in England and Europe before it happened here in America back in the Nineteenth Century. The early part of the Twentieth Century had its AFL and CIO, the Truckers and Auto Workers.”

Brown could see questions on the faces of the people in the audience. He responded by saying, “No, this is not about joining or starting another labor union, nor is it the start of a political party.

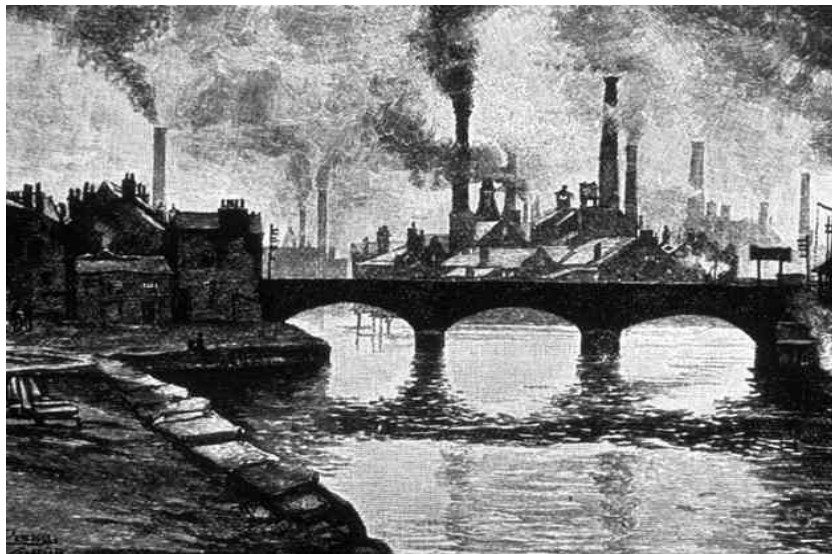
“Now, one of the first organizations to fight for human rights was women's suffrage.” There was a cheer among the women of the audience. “Another was the N double A C P. There have been all kinds of specialty organizations to get Congress to pass certain types of laws, the lobbyists. They want to benefit a certain class of people or clientele. The early labor unions fought for special causes.

“Now what the National People's Union is. It's not a labor union, but a union against the government, whether it be local, state or federal. Here is a union that fights for

the rights of every individual and family, not unlike the Civil Liberties Union, but having a broader perspective and scope, addressing every problem any person or family could have, whatever creed, color or political affiliation. It is a neighborhood organization in which the people govern themselves.

“Here is how we got started, what we're up to and what we're up against.”

Brown motioned to another man who was behind the audience. “Rob, will you throw the switch, please, and we will get this movie started.”



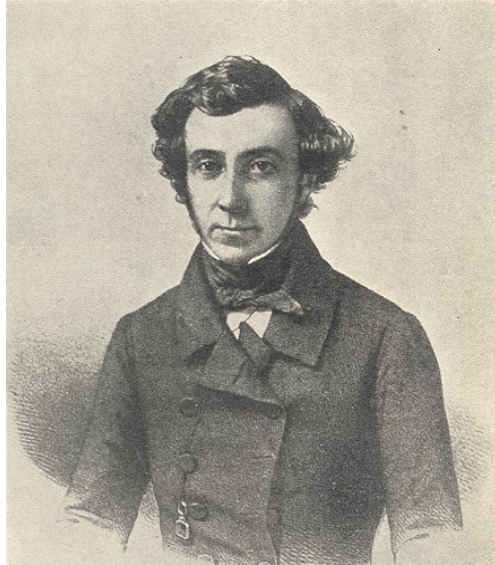
Someone in the back flipped a few switches and the room went dark. A movie screen appeared where the podium used to be. There was majestic music of a symphony as pictures of smokestacks belching black smoke into the sky appeared on a red background. A booming voice, like Bob Kirkham's, told about the birth of the Industrial Revolution. Scenes of dirty, sweaty men and boys working the coal mines and the steel mills flashed by. They showed young girls working in the textile factories operating industrial looms. Blackened streets weaved through the movie, showing the dirty sick, dying from black lung disease as filth poured into their homes from the smokestacks.

Mutilated boys, victims of industrial accidents, having lost fingers, toes, hands and legs or who were blinded were next.

There were pictures of strikes and strike breakers, the National Guard, on the side of big business, shooting, and beating the laborers.

A constant booming voice told about the establishment of unions. It said that the result of unionism in the early 1800s was a series of conspiracy trials between 1806 and 1815 for workers trying to control prices. It showed the riots and demonstrations caused by the industrialization of Great Britain between 1815 and 1819. It said that trade unions were organized but weren't legal until 1825. Pictures of St. Peter's Fields, Russia, flicked by, as from an old silent film, in an enactment of the slaughter of 50,000 people when they were attacked by the Czar's troops.

The booming voice and orchestra blared out, "By the 1850s the Industrial Revolution which started in Britain reached Belgium and Germany along with other European nations. They learned from the mistakes of Britain and gave the laborer better working conditions but with only gradual improvements.



Alexis de Tocqueville



Adam Smith

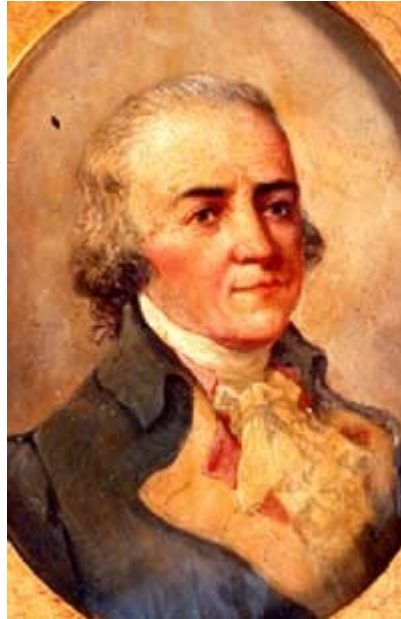
“In 1848, French reformer and writer Alexis de Tocqueville warned that the working class would shake society at its foundations. Socialists proclaimed that workers would rise up and remake society in a grand revolution. But instead, they raised worker's wages, improved working conditions, got a five day work week and holidays, turning society into a class of consumers with leisure time like the rich.”

Adam Smith, living in the 1700's, was introduced. His picture showed large on the screen.

While Michael was absorbing all of this, Maggie was squirming in her seat. Maybe, thought Michael, she's wishing she were back home making a pie or cake for someone, or sitting on her comfortable couch doing some needlework. She had several birthday gifts to make.

Adam Smith was said to be the father of free trade and the Natural Laws of Society. Michael sat as if hypnotized by the movie as it told of this university professor from Scotland who was the original absent-minded professor in disheveled mismatched

garments.



Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours, a prominent Physiocrat, emigrated

to the US. His son founded DuPont

“He got his ideas,” the booming voice continued, “from the French Physiocrates who argued against government interference in trade. They said that the government should give the merchants the freedom to sell on an open market which would prosper of itself when left without government regulations.

“In 1776 when the American colonists proclaimed their independence from Great Britain, Adam Smith proclaimed his Laws of Economics.

“There is a Law of Self-Interest. People, he said, act from selfish reasons. They work for their own good and not for the good of their neighbors. Their motives are completely self-centered.

“Another law was the Law of Competition. Competition forces people to make better products leading to economic progress.

“Then there was the Law of Supply and Demand which lowers prices when there is too much made, driving out inefficiency. Efficiency always produces more products for everyone.

“Adam Smith's economics were called by the French, Laissez Faire. When this was applied to government,” said the booming voice which was working on Michael's ears as irritation, “it created classes, and personal rights became a matter of class. You were either rich, educated middle-class, a skilled or unskilled worker. These classes and the gap they created between rich and poor were considered part of the natural order.

“Government was to take a hands off approach to the social and economic conditions. The working class was to have no representation in government. It was believed that the upper classes were more intelligent and wiser in government and decisions concerning social and economic problems, because they knew how to make money, and they were already in leadership positions in their respective businesses.

“Smith also gave the world an idea that was burned into the imagination of the American people. He said in his work *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, “the propensity to truck, barter and exchange one thing for another,” in other words, the free exchange of goods and services, and even ideas, leads to trust between strangers and prosperity for more people.

“But today, this system has become corrupt and deeply flawed. Marketing in goods and services only to make money caused its downfall. We can only come out of this current crises when we return to the free exchange that made this county great.

“During the colonization of North America, if you didn't agree with government policy, for example, how the land was distributed, or regulations on your crops and other exports, you packed up your belongings and took your friends into new territory and set up your own town and form of government.

“When the first colonists came to the American Continent, they divided up the land into plots and said, you can have this lot, another could have a second lot, another could have a third lot, and so on. They didn't recognize that anyone owned the land, and they had grazing and farming land in common.”

Michael thought, wow, we are pretty far from that philosophy.

“As they pushed west, the colonists bought much of the land from the Indians, some with money, some with the promise of trade, but a good part of the land they conquered. But at the beginning, ownership of the land was not in question. Free for the taking, it became an actual force for organization and that brought about townships. When we realize that no one owns the land, we are forced to organize ourselves into neighborhoods and towns, counties and states to see who lives on the land, who uses it, plotting out zones, lanes and avenues, farms and ranches. All else is chaos and land grabbing.

“Today, there are no more frontiers except those beyond the confines of this earth. If we had the transportation, we could hop on a spaceship, go off onto another world and escape governmental, social, and economic grips. But only those with money could go unless you sold yourself into slavery like many of our ancestors did to get to America.

“The colonizers of North America came here to be relieved from an oppressive government, for religious freedom and because of the economic disasters at home such as a drop in textile manufacturing.

“It was wrong of Adam Smith to suppose that people are basically selfish and act from their own self-interest. Back in the mid-1660's the colonizers of New England were building farming communities and towns in a way that is still relevant in some parts of America today. The whole settlement would get together and build each house and barn together. They would come together in town meetings in the spirit of a true democracy. That still takes place in many rural areas in New England. As these people moved west, they took with them the love of neighborhood and friends, and their spirit of cooperation.

“They were not forced into cooperation as in communism and socialism. They were forced by need and circumstance and by Christian tradition. Today, that spirit of cooperation is alive throughout these United States of America.”

Michael watched the scenes of colonization and westward expansion as pioneers built up cities, farms and factories. He saw people working together to improve their communities, changing them from slums into well-kept neighborhoods. They were not only cleaning up, painting homes, and building parks for children, he saw cooperatives forming where common folk could go and buy groceries, clothes, and other supplies a family might need. It was a mercantile where people could get things they could not otherwise because of inflationary prices. He saw town meetings where people were joining the NPU. He saw a free people marching in the streets, bands playing, in a free

society that spread over the world. Then the lights came on. He blinked several times to readjust to the brightness.

Without introductions, a tall young man wearing a brown woolen suit and white shirt without a tie stood up to the podium. It looked like he hadn't shaved in a couple of days. He had a prominent nose and sunken bright blue eyes. His long face was framed with dark wavy hair that rested on his shoulders. His hair shook as he talked.

“Our purpose in calling you here tonight,” he began, “is to put lawyers out of business and to whittle down governmental control.”

Bob whispered back to Ben, “I thought you said Mister Maxwell wouldn't show up.”

Ben, to Bob, “Just be glad he's here.”

“... and every problem in any neighborhood can be solved when we are organized.” Maxwell continued with, “The big ship of government is manipulated by a small rudder called lobbying. We have corporations buying favors of Congress. Your congressman is no longer your representative when he represents Big Business. We may be able, as a union, lobby Congress ourselves, but that may not work when they have their own agenda beyond representing the people. The laws made by Congress, when they are all added up, prevent the original purpose of government, which is to protect our lives, liberty and property. They protect our property by taking it out of our hands.”

There was a lot of “You said it, Brother!” and “Amen!” and “Right on!” from the audience.

“Since we cannot rely on the government to solve our problems,” Maxwell took a breath and scanned the crowd, “and they never will, they are completely disconnected from the people. We have to have faith in ourselves. We can solve our own problems, and I want to reiterate, when we are organized.

“We need to send a message to Congress that we don't want to be interfered with.”

“Yeah!” from the audience.

“We don't need more laws,” Maxwell said.

Another “Yeah!”

“We don't need more incompetence in dealing in our affairs.”

“Yeah!”

There was a scuffle behind the audience. Michael turned around in time to see a man being ushered out the door by two large football players he recognized from the high school he worked at. They slammed the door and walked back to their seats. He felt quit anxious after that. He wondered why the ones in charge didn't do anything. Maybe they were. Did the NPU resort to mob tactics to get rid of opposition?

Maxwell continued. “We can organize this neighborhood to solve its own problems because,” he paused as he took a deep breath, “we are the only ones that understand our problems. Congress has no wisdom in that respect. All they can do is build laws that hedge up our way, to build dams across our path of taking care of ourselves. Congress cannot see our local problems, and it's none of their business anyway.

“We don't propose to rebel against our government. We need the Constitution for

our protection and the government as it is set up. But if they will not listen to reason, we have to go our own way despite the elected who think they are the elect.

“For example, Congress, instead of taking care of the poor, vote themselves a pay raise above and beyond their needs. Again, if anyone accepts money from the government, they are not free to say how they spend it. There are too many attachments to control that person or organization, such as a college. They have to spend it according to a committee which is completely out of touch with that college.

“Our governments, Federal, state and local, were never set up to give place for power hungry individuals, but to liberate and protect. From its outset, Congress has been plagued by corruption and graft. All our laws are made to uphold Big Business at the loss of individual rights. We need to be organized into a democratic society at the grassroots to prevent the kind of dis-representation we have on Capital Hill.

“The unions grew out of the discontent of factory workers caused by the misuse of power and control. People worked so the rich wouldn't have to. The factory was organized to produce, not products, but a leisure society, the rich and powerful, who have manipulated our government to give them even more power and control over the individual. The working class sought, by organizing themselves, to balance out this power by putting it into their own hands, to be equal to the big bosses. But now even the unions have to suffer from the legislation of *their* big bosses.

“As you have seen from the movie, many people have lost their lives trying to wrest this power out of the hands of Big Business. Big Government, and I would say, Big

Brother, was also in the making at the same time as the unions. Depression and wars strengthened the stand of the Federal Government. Many large cities have been run by mob rule, the mayors being called, Boss Somebody this and Boss Somebody that. States were not less notorious in gaining power over the people with the aid of hired mercenaries. Behind politics is graft and Big Business pulling the strings.

“The Feds can come in and take your land. What do they give you in return? Transportation industries, mining consortiums, you name it. Why, even a city government can nail a notice on your door telling you to vacate because they are widening the road.

“I'll give you another example of misused power. I heard on the news just two days ago that a woman had her children taken away by the Child Protective Agency of our own state because she didn't have her house clean. She had planned on cleaning the house. She did it every day. The inspector came early in the morning before she had a chance. Another mother in California had her kids taken by the police because they were outside a block away playing in their pajamas while she was fixing their breakfast. They would have come when she called. When I was young, the police had to go find me and my two sisters because we had run away on our tricycles. But the police brought us back home where we were spanked by my mother.”

The crowd laughed.

“They didn't take us away.” Maxwell took a breath and headed off in another direction.

“Society makes it impossible nowadays for the mother to stay home. The pressure

for both parents to work is great. And where do the kids wind up? In a day care center where they are not under the supervision of their parents. It reminds me of communism. Government day care centers were set up all over the Soviet Union so the mothers could work. At these centers the children were indoctrinated into communism. In America today kids are being taught who knows what. Schools are filled with liberal teachers who teach out of history books that have been changed to fit the liberal protocol. Samuel Adams and all the founding fathers were criminals according to them.

“Hospitals have become big business. If you don't have insurance, you can't get the care you need or you have to go bankrupt while paying the bill. Some people have become homeless because they couldn't pay for health insurance. Doctors get paid huge sums for spending five minutes with you. They can't spend more than fifteen minutes. They have too many patients. You can only go to an emergency room at a hospital you are assigned to. If you wind up at the wrong hospital, you are thrown out. Life and death is big business. You can't even die unless you have prearranged it with the mortuary.”

People laughed, but Maxwell could tell by the low numbers that they were getting tired. He told them, “I have just a few more words to say.”

“Many people have lost their jobs because of company cut backs. Money is becoming scarce. The airlines are charging for all the extras. Nothing is given away just because a company wants to serve its customers. They can't afford to be friendly anymore. It's all about money. If you don't have money, you are a second class citizen, and you wind up on the streets forcing a begrudging society to take care of you.”

There was an audible groan from the audience.

“There are grocery bills, overcharges on housing, widows losing their homes because they can't pay their taxes.

“The government wants your kids. They take advantage of a corrupt society. Schools brutalize them in football or boxing or other sports at young ages. They get hooked on video games where the main object is to kill. Then the government jumps in and encourages them to join the Army and sends them to all the hot spots in the world under the UN flag.

“There are a lot more complaints we can talk about, I'm sure. Now it is your time to wrest power and control back from the government and put it in your own hands.

“I will turn the remainder of the time over to questions. I'm sure you have many. I hope I can answer some of them. Questions, please.”

Michael was trying to think up a question. He knew he had some a few minutes ago, but before he could raise his hand, a man behind him asked, “What're you trying to do? Set up a Utopia? In the 1800's, there were the Transcendentalists, the Shakers, and the Mormons. Each one tried to set up a Utopia, and none of them worked. We live in America, and it's thriving on the principles our forefathers gave us. Sure, we have problems, but we will get through it. We always have.”

“At a way to go, Gramps!” someone called out.

The young Mister Maxwell answered, “We are only setting up local democracies where the people's rights and needs can be addressed. We're inviting everyone to become

self-reliant and therefore become free from a despotic government. We want to put power back into the hands of the people.

“I know that a lot of people would rather sit around and let the President and Congress take care of things. That's how they gain power. When you put too much power in the government you lose your freedoms. If you don't take that power back, you become slaves to despots, and I for one will not stand by and let that happen.”

Then the school teacher Miss Aiken stood up. “You said in your proclamation that government has no rights. Aristotle said that by nature, man is a political animal, and that there must be governments. And Thomas Jefferson said that it is a necessity, even though it is a necessary evil. Our history has shown that without a strong central government, people decay into anarchy. Please address that.”

“You are absolutely right. But you get a lot of little democracies running this nation, upholding the Constitution, and based upon the principles given to us by our founding fathers, and you won't see anarchy, nor will you see despotism.

“I'll tell you why. Each of these democracies, set up in each city, send, by the vote of the people, delegates to a county organization. They in turn send out, again by your vote, delegates to the state legislature as lobbyists. Then its back to the people. At the grassroots level, Congressional delegates are again chosen. Counties vote for them and then the states, and they send the delegates to Washington, all by the vote of the people. The people are in charge. These lobbyists make sure you get representation. Next question.”

“What about the vagueness of these declarations?” another man asked. “Doesn't that open the door for any interpretation? Natural Law, for example, mentioned here,” and he held up the flier, “in your article number three. Natural Law was the justification of Hitler killing those millions of Jews. Can you deny that?”

“Your name?” asked Maxwell.

“I'm not ashamed of it. It's Fuhrer. My ancestors were Jews from Russia.”

“Just curious as to why you asked that particular question. Let me say something about Natural Law. But first, the vagueness. That is what democracies are for. It is for the people to interpret articles, declarations, constitutions, not to vote someone into office who will do the interpretation for you. That's how we get dictators and oppressive laws.

“Now, according to what we have discovered in studies of physics, biology and chemistry, and in the areas of the mind, philosophy, psychology and psychiatry, there are principles that can be demonstrated over and over without change. These we call laws. No matter,” and he took a pencil from his pocket, “how many times I drop this pencil,” and he dropped the pencil, “you would expect it to fall toward the center of the earth.” He reached down and picked up the pencil and dropped it again. “It dropped again, and will continue to drop as long as I pick it up and let it go again. It is a law. Man cannot legislate gravity. He cannot make laws. He can only discover them.

“Now you take that famous law of Newton, for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. That takes place throughout the universe and also in the hearts and minds of men. It can be applied to sociology. Take a look at history. It is human nature to

retaliate, to seek revenge. We have had enough wars to prove that. Remember the fall of the Berlin wall? How do you think the iron curtain fell? Besides the rantings of Ronald Reagan, it was out of kindness. We have been feeding the Russians our wheat for decades. We have been sending ambassadors of peace from our churches and our colleges and our businesses. Didn't Jesus say to be kind to your enemies? Well, it worked. East Germany was freed from communism plus all the other eastern block nations and then finally Russia herself. It is a universal law. What you sow you shall also reap.

“If you stand back mentally and look at a problem objectively, you are more than likely to see its solution. If you stand back from the earth itself, going out beyond the earth's atmosphere toward the moon, several miles into outer space and look down upon the earth, you see no boundaries.

“One more thing about Natural Law,” Maxwell said, taking a paper out of his shirt pocket. “Our forefathers adhered to it. They were inspired by a higher education. They studied the writings of the ancients, one of which was Cicero who said,

True law is right reason in agreement with nature; it is of universal application, unchanging and everlasting; it summons to duty by its commands, and averts from wrong doing by its prohibitions. It is a sin to try to alter this law, nor is it allowable to abolish it entirely.

We cannot be freed from its obligations by senate or people, and we need not look outside ourselves for an expounder or interpreter of it.

And there will not be different laws at Rome and at Athens, or different laws now and in the future, but one eternal and unchangeable law will be valid for all nations and at all times, and there will be one master

and ruler, that is God, over us all, for he is the author of this law, its promulgator, and its enforcing judge. Whoever is disobedient is fleeing from himself and denying his human nature, and by reason of this very fact he will suffer the worst punishment.”

“Cicero said that as man was created in the image of the great Creator, he had been given that god-like quality of reason which God himself is so endowed. Mankind can utilize a rational approach to solving problems. It is this reasoning of the mind that will lead to common-sense solutions based upon what Jefferson called the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God. It is eternal in its application. It is a code of right reason from the Creator himself. In Natural Law, we are dealing with absolute reality. Its basic principles are comprehensive to the human mind, totally correct and morally right in its applications. It is the Light with which everyone is born. When we live by this Light, no law drawn up by man is necessary. Though we do draw up laws, but when we do, they must be based and established upon these principles I have so stated.”¹

Another man stood up. Michael recognized him as a tenant of the same apartment building where he lived. He had brown skin and long black hair. He said, “I know that land ownership has been a concern of the Native Americans. I am one of them, of the Sioux tribe. We had our boundaries too, even though they may have been flexible. Our problem was the artificial boundaries placed upon us by an invading force from Europe.

“Now maybe I'm a little too civilized. I recognize a man's right to own his own land, his home, and a farm or two.”

The audience laughed at the phrase, “or two.”

“What about private property,” the native asked. “You said you wanted to set up a democracy and that you weren't a socialist. Well, what is the difference if you want to do away with private property? Who's gonna own it? The government?” He sat down.

“Which would you rather own it?” Maxwell continued, leaning over the podium, “The government or the people?”

The native stood up again and asked, “What's the difference if it isn't owned by the individual?” Then he sat down.

“Do you own your own land if you have to continue to pay property taxes on it until the day you die?” Maxwell answered, “or if the government can come and take your land anytime it thinks it has a good cause? The government owns it outright already. It is an illusion to think that a man owns his own land. What we want to say is that not even the government owns the land. If that be the case, the people of this neighborhood can tell the government to take a hike. They cannot tell you what you can do with your land. My interpretation is that as a community, you own the land. Do away with property tax. It's your prerogative. Let the widow live on the land in her own home, having her own lawn and garden. Let a family work the same farm that has been in their family for generations, but let it be worked. If the neighborhood wants a factory or a farm on their land, or cattle grazing, it is up to them, not the government.”

Miss Aiken stood up and said, “I can see if this becomes popular, there will be a lot of battles ahead.”

“Not if we are organized,” Maxwell said. “Arguments are to be settled by the vote

of the people. The majority rules. It has been said that the minority generally chooses evil. If the majority doesn't have the power to control their own neighborhoods, we don't have freedom. All arguments about who lives on the land, who works the land, what the land use is, is settled by the vote of the people. It should be the people's choice, not somebody's you have voted into office. He can easily change the law to suit himself and his friends. It is the people's vote that prevents corruption.”

Another woman got up. Michael was surprised. It was his wife, Maggie. She asked, “What's this about goods and services are the common property of all people? I read that this is the labor theory of value advocated by Karl Marx. And you said you weren't a communist.” She sat down, not looking at Michael.

“Thank you, Madam, for bringing that up. The devil can take the truth and use it to trap people. Surely, you should have also read that this was not originated by Karl Marx. In the Holy Bible of all Christians, it says in Acts, chapter two, verses forty-four and forty-five that after Christ had risen, the Christians had all things in common. They sold all their possessions and parted them to all men as every man had need. They became a classless society.

“Now as to the value of labor, there are a lot of laborers that work harder than their bosses who sit behind a desk for a couple hours a day. Sure, most of the rich work smarter, but it is the poor laborer who works that the rich man may eat. It has always been that the rich man is carried on the backs of the laborer. How much value does the rich man put on the labor of the poor man? Not very much without unionism. Without the

unions, the common man would have become slaves to the very rich.

“Yet, the labor bosses have joined the ultra rich. If you don't pay your dues in the union, you don't work, you don't get paid, but the bosses always do. We have a solution to that. Don't use money. Also, if we uphold, as a covenant, the right for every man to work, working without pay, as long as he gets what he needs and wants, I don't think there will be very many arguments except from the rich and ultra rich.”

A lot of people started laughing and walked out. They couldn't take him seriously after that.

Maxwell called after them, saying, “I can prove it. There are already pockets of our people doing just that. They work without pay and their needs are taken care of.”

“What about the great American dream?” asked someone, “where you can work your way up and join the ultra rich? In America, anyone can put forth the effort and become rich.”

“The problem with that, Sir,” Maxwell said, “is that the family is left behind. Not that they won't be rich too, but seeking riches destroys. It doesn't build families. I believe that every man has the right to work, but if he works for money and not for his family and his neighbors, in my view, he is a slacker as if he hadn't worked at all. He brings on that inequality that was so looked down upon by our founding fathers. Every man was created equal and should remain so. If a man doesn't accumulate riches for the purpose of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, to care for the fatherless and the widow, to heal the sick, to liberate the captive and the debtor, he is a destroyer of families and society.

“I’m sorry for getting onto my soapbox and giving you a tirade. Please, next question.”

Michael yawned. He was getting a bit tired. He hoped this meeting would end.

Mrs. Bergstrom, a social worker, well known in the neighborhood, loomed large in her tight navy-blue dress. Plump and buxom, most of her weight was in her large bones. She had rounded facial features and wore her hair up in curls. Her voice sounded with authority. “What kind of article,” she said, shaking the flier that had been slid under her door, “is this, talking about sex? Why put that in the political arena? Homosexuality and abortion are already there. It seems to me you are meddling with the very definition of marriage which has always been socialized and solemnized by ceremony since the time of written history. And in the next article, you are defending marriage. You are being ambiguous.”

James Clark Maxwell blushed slightly and said, “I know I should keep my mouth shut on this one.”

The audience laughed.

“A lot of people,” Maxwell started again, “may disagree that there is Natural Law. But it exists and has created all of life on this planet. We should learn and live by it. It creates families. I know that ceremony is traditional, but there is one thing that is leveling off the divorce rate. People are bypassing ceremony and taking up residence with each other. There is a loosely defined family when, under that kind of relationship, children are born. What society needs to do is to take responsibility for their actions. There is a

biological and chemical bonding when people of the opposite sex live together. It is very painful when these break up. There are actual chemical bonds that have to be broken, and children are hurt. People need to be dedicated to their support with a father and a mother as it has always been. Society needs to grow up and be responsible. We need to care for each other. Man was made by Nature to mate for life. It is scientifically proven. That's all I have to say about that.”

Another woman stood up and said, “But you can't get that kind of commitment without a marriage license.”

“Thank you,” said Maxwell. “Bless you for that. You have focused my thoughts. I have said that man cannot make laws, that only Nature can do that. But men can make agreements. They can come to an understanding. It has been written that if there is no law that a man should not rob a bank, he cannot be punished for robbing. Now, what if a man has made a covenant that he live by the declaration to support his family and then runs off? He can be tried before a jury of his peers. That is, of the same society who have also made that same covenant.

“Let me say more about Natural Law.”

By this time, people were beginning to yawn. Some more got up and left.

“Man cannot legislate Natural Law. He can't, by committee, tell Nature that gravitational acceleration must now be seventeen feet per second per second. It has always been thirty-two and will stay that way unless the earth changes mass. Man cannot legislate to change the combination of carbon, oxygen and hydrogen that makes up sugar.

It'll never happen.

“Man can domesticate wild animals, and he can domesticate himself, but *never* can he legislate love and care for others.”

“That's where the church comes in,” a voice volunteered.

“That may be so, Mister,” continued Maxwell, “but we as a neighborhood can look out for our own interests. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. It's a shame that the Christian world has looked upon that as corruption. But that is the way men and women are built. Let me tell you an old story.

“There is no difference between Heaven and Hell. In each place there are round tables where everyone sits down to a bowl of soup. Attached to each man's hand is a long spoon. It is too long to reach his mouth, but just long enough to reach his neighbor's. The difference between Heaven and Hell is that in Heaven, everyone is fat and healthy, being well-fed by his neighbor. In Hell, everyone is starving because they cannot get the soup to their own mouths. Not thinking of your neighbor, being stingy, there's a starvation process going on. The spirit starves as everyone looks out for himself. People are literally starving because they can't get jobs or are outcasts. In some areas of the country there just aren't any jobs.

“In Nature, everything is set up to feed your neighbor, to look out for your neighbor's best interest, the scratching of each other's backs. For example, when children get to a certain age, they want to help. They want to serve. It is a very critical time in their lives, but most parents cannot bother teaching them. They have no time to accept the

mistakes they may make, or their lack of skill. But it's built in, you see. It is natural to serve your fellow man, but most parents discourage it.”

An old man by the name of Kruger stood up. He said, “You say in your articles that some members of society don't get to eat. This sounds too much like what I went through in Hitler's Germany. Why, even a wayward child shouldn't be denied food.”

“Is it back to Nazi Germany, my friend?” The long haired Maxwell looked at everyone with a concerned expression. “Yes. I say that those who don't want to work or who refuse to work are not worthy of the same privileges as the laborer. I wouldn't feed them. Doubtless, someone would feed them, but I wouldn't. I expect them to work for their food. What I am talking about is human dignity. People don't like to accept charity, and we need to respect that. Therefore, I propose that everyone work for what they receive. Human dignity needs to be preserved for the welfare of everyone.

“We want to bring the riches of the earth to every individual and to every family. We want to bring everyone onto equal ground, giving dignity and pride back to the poor and responsibility to the rich. We know how to make everyone rich by living the Laws of Life itself. If you give, so shall you receive. Life is that kind of a circle.”

Another man stood up and asked, “And what do you get out of all this? What is your agenda?”

Maxwell gripped the podium and leaned forward. “My agenda is your welfare, as I give all that I have to you. I will not expect you to give to your neighborhood without me giving all that I can. Your question may be political, so I will say also, that, no, I am not

running for any office, nor will I. My main purpose has been my interest in humanity, to organize neighborhoods into self-help groups so they can take care of each other.

“Now Bob Kirkham and Ben Brown will be here in this neighborhood to help you organize. I know these men, and they are not here for themselves. They are kind, unselfish and loving. They will bend over backwards for you. I turn the remaining time back to them. I'm sorry I can't stay. I have to run off to Baltimore to another meeting. I would love to meet with you again and see your progress. God bless.”

The long haired youth ran down the side of the room, out the back door and into the alley where a black limousine waited for him.

Ben Brown stood up to the podium again and announced, “Ladies and Gentlemen, you've just heard from James Clark Maxwell. Give him a hand. He's fighting for you.”

As they clapped, there were some who wondered who he was, but Michael remembered. He had heard of him on the news.

“I want to make an announcement,” Brown said. “Starting at the beginning of next month, Ed Murphy is making this very room available to the NPU and to all those who sign up to join this marvelous union. It will be a place for the distribution of food, clothing and household items. It will be one of the many NPU General Stores going up all over the nation. We will need volunteers from this community to oversee it and to go throughout the city and county to collect the items we will be distributing. All volunteers who have low incomes will be able to receive food and items in the store for free. All others will get things at bargain prices. Some may call it a bargain basement. Well, it's a

start. When we are completely organized, everything we distribute here will be brand new. Even the food will be new and unused.”

Everyone laughed.

“Now, there are refreshments in the back. Visit. Get to know your neighbor. Have some fun.”

There had been a full house when the meeting started. Now only about half the chairs were filled, and that made more cookies and punch for everyone. Yet there were some who left without gathering around the table. Those that did stay knew each other and argued politics with Brown and Kirkham.

Maggie asked Michael if he would get her some cookies and punch. She was tired and didn't want to get up, but when she saw Michael stuffing his pockets with cookies, she stormed out embarrassed. She left Michael to trail behind bringing the cups of punch in each hand.

When Michael arrived home, he was met by a stone-faced wife waiting at the door. Of course, he had the keys. He had to let her in. “Hold these, please,” he said, handing her the cups of punch. She sent him an angry stare and then gave him a lecture on etiquette when at a party and how he embarrassed her in taking so many cookies. His only excuse was that the number of cookies didn't match the amount of people there, and he had to make the numbers even. After arguing until her nerves were frazzled, she remembered that he had Asperger's, but she didn't mention it. He felt so bad that he couldn't eat one cookie. The punch had been set on the kitchen table and left there.

Michael hung up his coat in the bedroom closet with all those cookies still in its pockets.

That night, he didn't get much sleep. She talked incessantly about how she felt like a social outcast. People didn't like her except for a few elderly women. She was afraid that if he took up with this NPU she would never see him again.

* * *

Mack Jones was not able to slip out unnoticed. Ed Murphy took him under wing the moment he stood. Ed jovially introduced him to Bob and Ben as if Mack was an old friend. Mack liked the fraternization on the inside, but on the outside, he was nervous and fidgety. He wanted to run away and cool off with a six-pack and be alone.

“What do you do?” was the inevitable question, but Ed jumped right in and said, “He came to me this morning and I hired him right off. Why, he's managerial material. He will be a great help in setting up the General Store.”

After everyone else left, Mack asked Ed, “What can I do, anyway?”

“Well,” Ed said, “right now, you can start by helping me put away all these chairs.”

Mack couldn't understand why a man like Ed took an interest in him, but Ed treated him as one of the family, taking him home to eat dinner nearly every night. The family had a soothing effect upon him, but when he went home to his mother, he experienced pangs of grief and guilt as he compared his lifestyle with that of Ed's. He saw happiness in Ed's family and none in his. He concluded that Ed had something he couldn't put his

finger on, but he wanted it.

At the Murphy's, little Darla would come and sit in his lap and eat off his plate. No one scolded her. She would smile at him and laugh. It made him feel silly. Before and after dinner, all the children, John, Ruth, Edmund, Clara, Seymour and little Darla, surrounded him and wanted him to read to them, or play games, asking him all sorts of questions such as:

“Why are you so black?”

“Where did you come from?”

“I'm in the third grade. What school do you go to?”

“Can I touch your hair?”

“Why you got an earring in your ear?”

“Do you like pancakes? Little Black Sambo does. Will you read *Little Black Sambo*?”

Mrs. Murphy would have to come and rescue Mack, but only after he had read several books, some of which he had already read the night before.

When he would get home, his mother wanted to know where he had been. He would say, “At Ed's house.”

“Doin' what?”

“Jus' playin' wif the children an' havin' dinner.”

Then she would say, “I don't want you to be botherin' them white folk. Why don't you come home and eat what I fix ya?”

“Yes, Ma,” he would say with a dampened spirit. “I don't know Ma. They perplex me. I got to figure it out.”

She wondered what had gotten into him. He wasn't sassing her anymore. It worried her. Soon, she was following him to Ed's and peeking in the window. Ed caught her and he invited her in. She was too curious to refuse. From then on, she also became a frequent visitor.

1. The 5000 Year Leap by Cleon Skousen

Chapter Three

“Dinner's ready,” Maggie announced.

Michael got up from his easy chair with a groan, leaving the TV on. Walking behind the couch and into the kitchen, he saw there were no plates on the table.

“I thought you said dinner was ready,” he said.

“Why don't you set the table?” she asked.

“Well, I thought that was part of getting dinner ready,” he said, looking at the empty table, disappointed.

Maggie stood at the stove to the left of the small sink still working on something he couldn't see. It smelled like cheese. Michael walked over to the sink and opened the cupboard above, swinging the door toward Maggie's head.

“Watch your head.” He took out two plates.

“Watch it? What's it going to do?” Maggie asked.

He put the plates on the table and went back to get the silverware near her left hip.

“Excuse me,” he said, trying to pull the drawer open before she got out of the way.

“I'm here, you know,” she said.

“Well, I can't get the silverware while you're standing at the stove.”

“You can wait a second,” she said, moving to the right with a scowl.

“You wanted me to set the table.”

“You take no thought for other people.”

“I can't do things with you in the way.” He shut the drawer and set the silverware on the table. He went to get the glasses, but now, Maggie stood at the sink doing something, and the glasses were above the sink.

“You would like me to go away and you could live all by yourself and have a great time. How happy you would be if I left!”

“I don't want you to leave, I just can't do things with you in the way.”

She raised her voice as she opened the oven. “I'm always in the way!”

“Don't generalize the situation. You're just in the way now. You should've asked me to wait until you were ready for me to set the table.”

Maggie took the tuna noodle casserole out of the oven and carried it to the table.

“Then dinner would get cold!”

“No it wouldn't. I'm not that slow,” Michael said as he filled the glasses with water at the sink and took them to the table.

“You're just thoughtless.”

After they both sat down and Michael said the prayer, Maggie mentioned, “You didn't even notice the table.”

“What about it?” Michael asked.

“I cleared all the clutter off the table so we could eat.” She fumed as she tried to take a bite of casserole. “You never notice anything. You're so ungrateful.”

“Oh,” Michael said, taking a bite of broccoli. Then he got up to get the butter out of the refrigerator between them and the sink.

“Where are you going, now?” she asked.

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m still here.” He opened the refrigerator and took out the butter.

“You did too go somewhere. You went to the refrigerator.”

Michael took a deep breath as he sat down. He put a glob of butter on his broccoli and decided to change the subject. Maybe if they could talk about something particular, they wouldn't be arguing.

“That new thrift store across the street will be handy.” He filled his fork with casserole. “I know you like to shop at thrift stores.” He continued dipping into the casserole, one of his favorite dishes. It satisfied his pallet. He had never told her so, but she continued to do things that brought him joy. It just got on his nerves to say thank you or I like that.

“I wonder where all the donations will come from. All the other thrift stores have people just drop things off. Nobody has to go asking,” said Maggie between bites of broccoli.

“I imagine they will come from the people of our own neighborhood.” Michael conjectured.

“I doubt they'll get enough donations from this neighborhood,” Maggie said, putting more casserole on her plate. “Donations usually come from all around the city.”

“Well, where ever they get them, it will be handy won't it? I mean, you won't have to travel all around town to find things. And if we join up, things will be free, won't

they?”

“You would take all the fun out of shopping, wouldn't you.” She unwrapped some homemade bread and got Michael to cut her a piece. “And don't you go and join that NPU. You have a good job. You don't want to go and lose it.”

“There will be free food, too.”

“You shouldn't try to get something for free.” She shot daggers from her eyes at him.

“I could work for the NPU in my spare time, I suppose.” This conversation was getting on his nerves. He looked across her shoulder and out the window at the huge pine tree on the back street. He let his mind go blank for a moment to let it rest.

“And leave me all alone. You would just love that.”

Michael wasn't getting anywhere with her. Then he thought of something. “When we lived near my parents, you were digging all those clothes out of people's dumpsters while walking through the alleys. What's the difference?”

Maggie fumed. “You were just fired from your job and we had no money to speak of. We had to save every penny we got ...”

“I mean, it was free,” he said, gulping down the rest of his water. “I'm talking about getting things for free.”

“I know what you mean,” Maggie said emphatically. “You'd better get a move on. You're going to miss the bus.”

He had fifteen minutes before the bus came to take him to work. They ate dinner

at noon everyday because he had to work the night shift which ended at 11pm. He fixed his lunch out of the leftovers, got a slice of chocolate cake out of the refrigerator, put everything into Tupperware containers and into his backpack, brushed his teeth, went to the bathroom, grabbed his coat and kissed Maggie goodbye. He arrived at the bus stop at the moment the bus arrived. Miss Aiken got off, arriving home from work.

“Hello, Miss Aiken,” he said, glad to be off to work and out of the apartment.

“Hello, Michael,” she responded, stepping off the bus. “Is your wife in?”

“Yes, she's still there. Better get her before she goes off to spend more of my money.” He smiled and stepped onto the bus.

“I need to see her about something.”

“Okay, see ya.”

Michael showed the bus driver his pass and noticed the driver looked perturbed, probably upset at the conversation going on through the door he wanted to close. The bus carried Michael off like a beast of prey.

* * *

Miss Aiken walked down the garden path that used to be a swimming pool to the south door. She felt the pain in her feet and wished the building had an elevator. It hadn't been designed with old people in mind. But she made it up the stairs as she did every day. She walked down the hall to Maggie's apartment and knocked on the door. The doorbell didn't work. The old building had an old maintenance man to go with it. He didn't get

around much.

Maggie answered the door. "Oh, hi Miss Aiken."

"Hello, Maggie," she said. "Would you mind coming over to my apartment. I have something for you."

"Okay. Let me get my keys."

Maggie came back with her keys, locked her door, and followed Miss Aiken to her apartment. They had to go down the south stairs, outside and up into another stairwell closer to the main street and up the stairs again.

Miss Aiken's apartment had the spirit of being in a place of worship, clean and well kept with everything in place.

"Sit down, Dear," Miss Aiken said, "and I'll be right back." She went to the south bedroom and came back carrying a navy-blue dress covered in plastic. "I had it cleaned." She carried it high to keep it off the carpet. "You can have it if you want."

Maggie stood and took the dress from her friend.

"My oldest niece came for a visit and left it," Miss Aiken said in the most polite manner she could muster. "She is about your size and build."

"Oh, Miss Aiken," Maggie said, taking a deep breath. "It looks awfully expensive."

"Don't worry, Dear. She won't mind. She told me to get rid of it. Do you like it?"

"I love it," Maggie said, holding the dress up to her bosom. "I love it. It's so beautiful. Look at all the needlework."

"I knew you would like it because of that." Miss Aiken paused and folded her

hands over her heart. "Drape it over the settee, Dear, and sit down. I have something to ask of you."

Maggie placed the dress over the top of the couch and she and Miss Aiken sat down together facing each other.

"I have a proposition for you." She looked at Maggie solemnly and bit her lower lip. "Maggie, do you work?"

"No," she said. "I have always believed that a woman's place is in the home."

"I see. But I know you have no children at home, and you have all that spare time."

Maggie thought, what spare time? I have plenty to do.

"You see, Dear, I have been given a responsibility which is a bit overwhelming, and you are the only one I can turn to. I need your help."

Maggie's ears perked up. She always liked to help people.

"I'm so civic-minded," Miss Aiken continued, "that I'm afraid I have bit off more than I can chew. I have been put on a council, and I need a secretary. It will only be once a week keeping records straight and all that. You will help train others, and do a little store work. Have you had that kind of experience?" Please say yes, Miss Aiken thought. I'm so desperate.

"Before we were married, I had a job working at Passport Fotos," Maggie answered. "I had to take care of the cash and the records, the chemicals and the people."

"That's good. That will do," Miss Aiken said as she smiled, raised up a little, and squeezed her hands together in her lap. "You needn't respond right now, but think it

over.” She looked into Maggie's questioning eyes. She could guess what she thought. “Oh, you will be trained, and it won't be hard work. We'll have others to do any lifting or hauling. It will be just across the street at the NPU General Store behind Murphy's Market. Do you trade there?”

“Only when I need a little something. We usually shop out in the shopping centers outside of town. We do that once a month, so we save time and bus money.”

“I see. Now, if you work for the NPU, you will be able to get a lot of your groceries free. Also, any other items you may need that we may have. It's on a need basis, anyway.” Miss Aiken paused and looked sincerely at Maggie. “That's how you will be paid.”

“Um hum,” Maggie said, taking all this in. She considered the idea of getting the free food and other household items. Not really free, she thought, she would be working for them. That made her happy. She didn't believe in getting anything for free. And it would help with the inflation. She knew she couldn't hold down a steady job with being sick most of the time. She had a bad heart besides. And she didn't have children at home. She thought she could donate a few hours a week.

Miss Aiken saw the twinkle in Maggie's eyes as they both smiled at each other. She took Maggie's reaction as an affirmation and said, “We will be starting this Thursday after I get off work, if that is all right with you.”

“That's good, because my mornings are taken up with Michael. I have to feed him before he goes off to work. He leaves when you come home. But you know that. I see

you two greet each other every day.” Maggie paused and looked Miss Aiken in the eye. “That’s the way men are. You have to feed them to keep them happy. I often go for a long time before I’m hungry.”

“Oh, I know what you mean. I have had enough men in my life to know that. Men have to be fed.”

Maggie said she had things to do and lifted the new dress thanking Miss Aiken again as they walked to the door. Miss Aiken said she had to get started on her daily routine also. Maggie gave Miss Aiken a hug and said, “Have a good day.”

* * *

Bob Kirkham followed Miss Aiken down the hall to the Parks' apartment. Miss Aiken rang the doorbell. Mrs. Parks opened the door.

“Frieda,” exclaimed Mrs. Parks. “Come in, come in. Oh, I see you brought the gentleman.”

“Hi, Blanche,” said Frieda. “This is Mr. Kirkham.” She turned slightly and pointed to them with the upturned palm of her hand. “You met him and Bob Brown at the NPU meeting a couple of weeks ago. Can we come in?”

“I said to come in, so come in.”

“Thank you,” said Kirkham as he walked through the door.

“Can I see your husband?” Kirkham asked. “Is he in?”

“He's always in,” said Blanche. “He's bedridden. He doesn't get out unless it's to eat or go to the bathroom. He's here in the bedroom.”

Blanche led them to the back room where Mr. Parks lay in bed under an off-white sheet.

“Gary, look who's come to see you. I said they would come, didn't I?”

“Hi Freida,” Gary said, recognizing the only other person he knew.

“Gary,” Frieda said, “this is Mr. Kirkham,” she pointed with the palm of her hand. “He's come to see if the NPU can be of any help.”

“Not unless they can pull some strings,” Gary said. “We're about at the end of ours.”

Kirkham shook Gary's hand.

“We've been looking into your situation, Mr. Parks,” Kirkham said. “I hope you don't mind if we checked up on things.”

“Not at all,” Gary said. “And just call me Gary.”

“Okay, Gary,” Kirkham continued. “And this is it: The doctor you were sent to didn't pay attention to your claim case because you didn't have the right insurance. Besides, he was in a hurry. He had other patients. We checked this out. Because of that, Workers Comp didn't pay any attention to your case either. According to the doctor's report, you have nothing wrong with you, so you don't have a case.

“Now we've found a doctor who has agreed to reopen your case. He is one of us, so I believe he can be trusted. I know he will treat you with respect. Your appointment is set

for ten o'clock in the morning day after tomorrow. Can you wait that long?"

Flabbergasted, Gary's mouth gulped back his emotions like a fish out of water trying to breathe. He swallowed and said, "I don't know how to thank you."

"I tell you what. When you get well and are able, you come and work for us. That will be thanks enough. That way, you can pay us back."

"How did you...?" Gary shrugged. "I tried all different ways to get help. I even went to Vocational Rehab, but they said that I had to recover before they could help me, but then the doctors, as you said, say there is nothing wrong with me, so I get the runaround."

"Well," Kirkham said, "are you a Bible reading man, Gary?"

"I've read some of the Old Testament, some of the New, but I couldn't understand most of it."

"Have you read the parable," Kirkham continued, "where this rich man is about to fire one of his servants because the man is in deep debt, and this servant goes around to each of the man's creditors and pays each one a percentage, thereby relieving his master's debts? Each creditor settles for a percentage of what was owed him by the servant's effective bartering skills. That's all we did. We went around to all your creditors and paid each one a percentage they were satisfied with. Then we talked to your insurance company and persuaded them to arrange an upgraded credit rating for you. They were more willing to give you the right insurance."

"It's all about the money, isn't it?" Gary lay there dumbfounded. "I don't know how

to thank you or how to repay you.”

“Just get well, Gary,” Kirkham said. “Just get well. We will do the rest. We'll have you working in no time.” Kirkham smiled and added, “There is one thing that we would like both you and your wife to do for us, but mostly for yourself.”

“What is that?” Blanche asked.

Kirkham put his hands in his pockets and said, “Ben Brown holds a financial class at his bank downtown. It will actually help you regain a good credit rating. We would like you both to attend as soon as Gary gets back on his feet.”

They both agreed after Kirkham explained they didn't have to be math whizzes to take the class.

They said their goodbyes, and Kirkham escorted Miss Aiken back to her apartment. He said goodbye to her and left.

Miss Aiken gave a sigh of relief, seeing her neighbor get the help he needed. She stood inside her door and remembered that last week Kirkham had talked to her, inviting her to join the NPU. She had been invited to be the president of a women's relief organization. She had refused at first, but she had second thoughts as he explained, “We know you are busy with the PTA, Daughters of the Pioneers, church, as well as being a teacher. We don't call lazy people to be heads of our organizations. We need your organizational skills. And besides, when we are fully organized, there will only be need of this one thing, the NPU.” “Well,” she had said, “if you put it that way,” so they gave her a contract to sign. It said she had to support the Constitution of the United States as

well as the NPU articles. Now as she organized the women of the neighborhood, she had plenty of help. She could delegate some the responsibilities to others. She pondered. It will be easier than I thought.

* * *

Michael arrived home at midnight. He didn't hear Maggie. Maybe she had gone to bed. No, there she sat, on the couch doing needlework. They said hello to each other as he put his backpack on the floor near his easy chair. She always waited up for him, usually watching the British comedies on television, but not tonight. Silence brooded over the apartment. He looked around for the controls.

“Mind if I turn the TV on?” he asked.

“No,” she said without looking up.

He found the controls on the couch next to Maggie. He sat in his easy chair, pushed back the handle to make it recline, kicked off his shoes, and turned on the TV. He surfed the channels until he landed on a science program. They were talking about UFO's and man going out among the stars.

“So what did you do today?” Michael asked.

She ignored him. He watched the television and munched on the cookies that had been left on the end table to his right. He looked over at her and asked, “Is anything wrong?”

“Something important happened today,” Maggie remarked, “and all you can do is sit there and watch that stupid TV.”

“I said, what happened?”

She continued to be silent. He knew she wanted to talk. He remembered the silent treatment she gave him when they first got engaged. She sat without speaking for three hours because she had something important to say. She might be up all night doing this, so he grabbed the controls and tuned the TV off.

“There,” he said. “I’m not watching the TV.”

“Come sit over here on the couch.”

He didn’t want to leave the comfort of his easy chair, so he said, “I can hear you from here.”

“Pleeeeeeese!”

“Okay, okay.” He took a deep breath, struggled to get out of the chair, and walked over to the couch.

“There’s stuff on the couch,” he complained.

“Then move it!”

“Okay, okay.” He pushed aside cloth and thread spools and boxes and sat down beside his sweetie.

They sat there in silence as Maggie pouted and Michael huffed.

Maggie finally got the courage and put her project down. She took his right hand with her left.

“Promise me you won't get mad,” she said with a protective firmness.

Michael thought, oh great! We've got to pay a fine to the bank. He struggle to get out, “Okay. I won't get mad.” But he had to take a deep breath to control his anger.

“I've been asked to work as Miss Aiken's secretary, working at the NPU store across the street. It will be on Thursday afternoons.” Then she took a deep breath.

Michael breathed easier. It wasn't the bank. He smiled and said, “Is that all?”

“That's not all. I will have to be trained to keep records.” She lay her head on Michael's shoulder. He didn't believe in giving comfort, and she knew it. But she said, “Michael.”

“Yes?” He said stiffly.

“I'm worried.”

“I know.”

“Can I do it?” she asked, squeezing his hand.

“I know you can. You've had jobs before.”

“I'll only be working when you are. Maybe it will expand to other days too, and I just don't know if I have the time. I have so many things to do. I want to have some days during the week where I can just stay home.” Tears came to her eyes.

Michael couldn't stand that. He said, “There's always the weekend.”

“You know how they will pay me, don't you?”

“Yeah. Free food.” He smiled. He didn't want to get excited, but he could feel it coming. “You will be right there in your own thrift store and get anything you want. I just

hope you don't fill up our apartment. It's pretty full now.” That did it. Saying something negative helped cool down the excitement.

“Don't you ever get excited about something?”

“Nope,” he lied.

Michael felt a change coming into his life. It wasn't just about getting free food and stuff, he saw himself walking along a cliff, seeing a huge vista rising beyond, and breathing the fresh air. He felt like a pressure was being taken off his shoulders. Part of it included Maggie taking this job. Part of it, the grandiose scheme of the NPU he had seen in the film a couple of weeks ago. He could feel things moving and felt like singing and dancing as if his life had turned into a musical comedy. Christmas was coming, and the energy bringing it was a political machine.

Chapter Four

James Maxwell stepped into the backseat of the black limousine. It had been a gift from the Time-Square Cable News and came with a pretty young roving reporter, Shelly Holloway. She was blonde, wore bright red lipstick and dark eye liner. Wearing an oriental silk dress, which was red, tight, and short, she had to keep her legs crossed to appear decent. She sat beside James with a hand-held recorder.

“Well, James,” she prodded, “you promised me a story, and now we have time. We have a long drive ahead.”

“True,” he said. “We talked enough about my childhood in the last interview. I get to relax tonight.” He stretched his long legs, and figured that all the extra room in the back seat of limousines were made for tall people.

“What I want to know is,” she asked as the limousine started up and drove out of an alley where another meeting had ended, “Your name is synonymous with clean neighborhoods and self-help groups. What prompted you to establish the NPU?”

“I don't really know where my personal philosophy came from, Shelly,” he said. He leaned forward a little and then settled back as the limousine turned onto the freeway entrance. “I told you about my liberal parents letting me have my own thoughts. I was in the fifth grade when I told my teacher that the school should own their own farm and grow their own food for the cafeteria. She told me that sounded too much like socialism. In the eighth grade, I remember telling my principal that the teachers should stop cutting

in line in the cafeteria, that they should wait in line like everyone else.” He laughed and said, “I was a little bully at the time. One day I found myself directing traffic in the lunch line. I got in trouble with that one.”

Shelly laughed too.

He paused, leaned back with his hands on top of his head, thinking how to get his arm around her shoulders, but he slipped his hands down into his lap.

“When did it start?” he asked, trying to gather his thoughts. “I was too young to join the Vietnam War. But I watched the news. I can remember how the government was taking care of things badly. I watched how the Democrats taxed everyone to support the war. I watched the blacks get civil rights. I can remember, as a boy, that the blacks had to sit in the back of the bus. I lived in those times. They couldn't drink at white water fountains or use white restrooms. I guess we thought they had some kind of germ on their black skin and it would rub off on us.

“I saw the Republicans bungle inflation. They couldn't stop it no matter what they did. Legislation wouldn't work. Prices still rose. They messed up the welfare system and Social Security, trying to undo all of Johnson's efforts. I saw unwed mothers live off welfare while others were thrown into the streets because they couldn't find work and weren't eligible for unemployment insurance or worker's comp. Some couldn't get welfare because they were married. A lot of people got divorced so they could qualify for welfare. It wasn't designed to help families who had a father and mother, only single women or single mothers. It wasn't about helping men get back on their feet. There were

no programs to safeguard men. I know. I tried to get help for myself just to get information. I walked into a welfare office one day and asked one of the receptionists how I could get on welfare. She exploded, yelling obscenities. I backed out of that place expecting people to jump me.

“I watched all of this, but in the meantime, what got me started on service projects was my church. They had a farm out in the boon docks northwest of Charleston, South Carolina near the Ashley River. They didn't believe in government welfare and took care of themselves. My stepdad would take me out there on occasions. We cleaned up the barn or repaired fences. One day we cut down trees to make more farmland. All of that land was at one time forest and had been cut down by hand by the members back in the forties and fifties.

“I enjoyed clearing the land like our pioneer forefathers. I couldn't cut down the big trees, so I stuck to the four-inchers. It made me feel like a man, blisters and all.” James laughed. “The women removed the underbrush and fixed us men lunch and dinner. That reminds me of the time when I was a boy in Texas. We visited a ranch owned by my mother's folks. All the men ate first, and then the women. I guess that came from necessity when the men had to do all the work.

“That was my first service project. When I got older and moved to Utah, I joined in painting neighbor's houses and repairing roofs. These things set the example of what I wanted to follow.”

* * *

Michael was home from work. He sat in his big easy chair and turned on the cable news. *In the News* was on. There was the long-haired youth that had spoken at the NPU meeting. James Clark Maxwell. He was having an interview. Michael settled down and listened. Maxwell was speaking.

“When I was in college, I looked for some kind of group to be in. I found the Young Democrats. We remodeled homes for the poor and built playgrounds for little children. We went to political rallies to pick up that old time revival spirit to raise money for elections. This is the time the idea of a national people's union came to my mind.”

“And was it an outgrowth of your association with the Young Democrats, James?” asked the interviewer.

“No, not really. That was only one of the many sources of inspiration,” he said. James set his teeth on edge and grinned. “No, it was the aggravation with politicians who wanted our good works to become a front to get votes from the people we were serving. It was a real eye-opener, trying to talk to politicians and finding out that their main goal in life was to get votes and stay in power, not to help the people they were representing. It was like putting on make-up to appear on this show, for instance.” The audience laughed. It may have been canned laughter, thought Michael. “I would talk to state and federal legislators and senators about projects to help the poor, and all they could think about was how they would look to the public. Then they had to consider their budget. What was it going to cost? Did it cut off funds from their own pet projects? It always did.”

He paused and the lady interviewer took the time to uncross her legs and cross them the other way before asking, “What happened after college?”

“Well, Shelly,” he said as he gathered his thoughts. “You can't do much with a bachelor's degree in political science unless you're going to be a lawyer or a politician. I didn't want to become either. I thought of being a teacher, but not for little kids. And, to become a professor in college was too much school. I wanted to be free, and so I started out on a trek to Washington. I left Berkeley and headed east, hitch-hiking. I got odd jobs along the way, saving my money.”

“What kind of jobs?” Shelly asked, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear.

“Oh, I felt like a Walt Whitman poem,” Maxwell smiled, adjusting himself in the chair so he could look her in the face instead of at the camera, as the chairs weren't exactly facing each other. “I worked on farms, in warehouses. I loaded and unloaded trains. I framed houses. I cleaned stables. I worked as an electrician's helper. I worked in the coal mines and in the steel mills. I got really dirty, but along the way, I found myself working as a volunteer in hospitals, in homeless shelters and in more slum clean-ups. I found myself talking to ministers and politicians, but mostly the common people who make this country great.”

Behind the two was a large window showing an outside audience walking along the sidewalk. One little boy waved at the camera.

“I heard that you went back into politics working for Blaine Stienzinger's presidential campaign. Can you tell me about that?”

“Yes. It was soapbox time. The primaries were coming up, and I was still a Democrat. I longed for the rallies and the push and shove speeches. I thought we as a group could really change the world. I put forth my ideas and told of my experiences. Nobody was listening, especially Blaine. Oh, he was friendly, but you couldn't exist unless you were listening to him. He was there to talk, not to listen. If you wanted him to notice you, you had to listen. Maybe that's why he wasn't elected.”

“And so you changed parties?” Shelly asked, crossing her legs again.

“Well, no. I went to visit the other candidates no matter what party. Now Bill Gifford was a listener, but he didn't like to listen to liberals. He listened and then told you what he thought. He was for democracy and people helping themselves, but he was also loyal to Big Business and had greater faith in the Big Boys to run the nation instead of the people. He became ambiguous if not down-right hypocritical, trying to hold the people in one hand and the Big Boys in the other. It never has balanced out.”

“And so where did you go next?” she asked.

“I lobbied Congress,” Maxwell said, thoroughly enjoying himself, “putting forth my ideas of government-supported programs where all surplus could be given freely to those in need. I asked for welfare for married couples and bringing back Roosevelt's Big Deal.”

“And what happened?”

“There were a lot of people that listened and applauded my programs. But everything turned sour as those programs got lost in adulations. I was given a presidential

citation, and a lot of salty cheese got distributed to those on welfare. I got to tell you about that cheese. The company that made it couldn't sell it because of the salt content. Then the government decided to store it for future disasters. When they found that most of it was molding, they gave it away to the people they said they were caring for. That was the only thing that came of my lobbying.”

“And how did you feel about that?” Shelly asked with a smile of expectation. She leaned forward as though she were watching Houdini trying to escape from a chained straight jacket.

“I got mad,” he said in a mock grimace, as he couldn't express anger at the moment. “I took the articles I had drawn up in the course of my travels and nailed them to the doors of the Capital Building.”

“Mister Maxwell,” Shelly asked, placing a stenographer's pad onto her knee (as a stage prop), “What went through your head that compelled you to put them on paper?”

“As I trekked across America, I talked to a lot of people, asking them about their philosophies of life, but nothing moved me as much as a small book I found in a trash can as I was cleaning up a discarded building. I love books, so I rescued it. It didn't have a binding or a title page, so I don't know the author. It was all about the building up of Zion. At first I thought of the Zionism of the state of Israel. I had often thought of visiting Israel, but I have never been able to leave America. Anyway, at lunchtime, I sat down with a ham sandwich and read it. It wasn't about Israel at all, but the establishment of the New Jerusalem here in the States. It started with the Puritans of New England and went

on to describe the western expansion. It had a lot of religion in it that reminded me of the church of my youth, but the principles were sound, at least to my mind. It talked about a lot of principles I believed in. I took this little book and all the experiences I had gained and started writing down the most basic principles. Of course, when I showed them to the politicians in Washington, they turned a deaf ear.”

“I would like to talk about these principles, Mister Maxwell,” Shelly said, raising her pen up to her mouth, “but for the sake of time, tell me how you ever came up with the National People's Union. How did it start?”

“Well,” James paused to laugh. “It all came about when I went to a warehouse to find work. I met a big Scot, Tom McIntyre, who was as jolly as old Saint Nick. He thrived on trade, and he could talk people out of anything. That's what his warehouse was, a central clearing house for all the things he had traded for and which he used to trade for other things. He had no money to give me, but he would let me work and take what I needed. He gave me an apartment to stay in. Yes, he traded in real estate too, using no money. He wouldn't mind me telling that he was always in trouble with the revenuers. They couldn't get any taxes from him, not in money anyway. He loaded up the IRS office one time with hams and turkeys. He just laughed it off when he was arrested. His lawyers got him off.”

“So, how did your involvement with Tom MacIntyre develop into the NPU?”

“I ate dinner with Tom and his wife every night. We would stay up and talk into the long hours. He told me his ideas, and I told him mine. Our ideas fit together like pieces of

a jigsaw puzzle. I showed him my little book because it looked like we were following all of the principles listed there.”

“Was the NPU an expansion of his trade?” Shelly asked, taking down everything in shorthand like a secretary.

“Tom got stuck in court. They wouldn't let him go until he paid his taxes in money. I tried to help him out. I went to the Democrats again and was rebuffed. I hadn't learned my lesson. Then we went to the press and told our story to them. Money started coming in from people with big hearts. So we went to the people and formed political rallies. We organized the neighborhood Tom lived in as they started giving him their support. We organized one neighborhood after another until we bypassed the courts.”

“How do you bypass the courts, might I ask?”

“The courts won.” Maxwell gestured, momentarily flipping up the palms of his hands. “Tom lost his business. It was disenfranchised, so to speak. But the people took up the slack, absorbing the organization. They put their money together and started the first National People's General Store. It looked like Tom was back in business, but it was run by the people of his neighborhood. He became chairman, and with his expertise, farms, factories, small businesses and even more real estate was absorbed into the Union. It started spreading from city to city as we sent out missionaries.

“This National People's Union is fueled by a lot of little democracies spread throughout the United States. Money is useless in this bartering system, and freedom is our diadem.”

Michael hypnotically took the water bottle from his backpack and took a drink as he saw Maxwell reach over to the coffee table between him and Shelly, grab a glass of water and take a drink.

“Now,” Shelly continued, pulling on her short dress. “Are the people in the NPU paying their taxes? It seems that you still have the same problem. What is happening there?”

“There is an old Chinese proverb,” James Maxwell smiled. “‘If a vessel has no handle, no one can grab hold.’ The IRS tried to go against individuals in the NPU, but the members have no property and have no money, so how can they pay taxes? Yes, the IRS is still foaming at the mouth, but there is nothing they can do beyond physical abuse, and we have the law on our side there.”

“Well, Mister Maxwell,” Shelly said as she put her knees together and tilted herself towards James, “that's all the time we have today. I want to thank you for being on this program.” Then she straightened to face the camera and said, “Ladies and Gentlemen, James Clark Maxwell of the National People's Union has been *In the News*.”

An audience clapped and Michael started surfing the channels to see what else was on. Maggie called out, “Why don't you look on the guide? All you have to do is push one button.”

“I like to *see* what's on,” responded Michael.

“But you *do* see what's on when you look on the guide.”

Chapter Five

Maggie found working at the NPU General Store on Wednesday and Thursday evenings fulfilling. She met many people in the neighborhood and made new friends. The NPU brought people together who usually ignored each other. Having shopped for many years at thrift stores, she was thrilled to be on the other side of the business, sorting donations, cleaning them up, placing them on the shelves and then selling them. She could go at her own pace and no one scolded her. Every other week she trained Mrs. Parks. On alternating weeks, she trained Mrs. Bergstrom. There were other people who helped at the register.

Mack was in charge of inventory. She noticed that he seemed calm and relaxed around her. Maybe it was her personality. People at bus stops often spilled their life stories to her. She never knew why; she would never do such a thing. Maybe it was because her dad had taught her to be friendly and never to be afraid of people. He was always gregarious; some of that must have rubbed off on her.

When it was lunch time at the store, Maggie sat at the table behind the cash register while Nancy Schroeder took over for her. Mack left his chores and sat beside her.

“Half way through the inventory,” he said.

“That's good,” she said. She took her lunch out of a paper bag. It was made up of yesterday's leftovers: artichoke pizza, and some chocolate pudding. She also pulled out a Spanish lime soda in a can. She had found it at a damage resale store.

Mack looked on as she ate. She noticed that he didn't have any lunch.

“I have another piece of pizza,” she offered.

“No, thank you,” he said. “I don' eat lunch this early. Like to wait till I can eat wiff my mom.”

“Oh.”

“Looks like you eat deli-style,” he laughed.

Maggie swallowed. “My husband and I have become connoisseurs.” She took another bite. “Gourmet cooks.”

“Went to cookin' school or watch the food channel?” He laughed again.

“I've watched some on the food network, but mostly I collect cookbooks.”

“My mom, she cooks all the same thing all the time, but she is so good.” Mack's forehead wrinkled up along with his mouth as he emphasized, “Mmmmm, mmmmm, soul food, man, soul food. Rutabaga greens, ham hocks, fried po-ta-toes and un-juns, not injuns, but un-juns. Ha ha ha.”

“You're in a good mood today.” Maggie took a drink from her soda.

“You know, I got injun ancestors,” Mack said, pressing his big lips together.

“Where are your ancestors from?” she asked, taking another bite of pizza.

“F'om New Or-leans.” He thought a bit and added, “White Dove, Lovey Dove. Somethin' like that. My grandma. Great grandma. Dent know my grandma.”

“So how did your family wind up here?”

“Lookin' fo' a betta life, I 'magine.” Mack leaned back on his chair, folding his

arms behind his head and smiled. "Life on the fawm bein' pretty tough."

Maggie offered him a piece of pizza again. "Sure you don't want any?" she asked.

"No, no."

Maggie thought maybe he wouldn't eat with white people or white people's food. She blinked back the idea. "Seems like a lot of us from the city have come from farms. My dad came from farmers in New York. My husband's family came from farmers in Texas." She finished her pizza and opened her pudding cup. Seeing a big piece of artichoke in her lap, she popped it into her mouth and patted her dress with a paper towel.

"Had they known it," Mack started, "life is just as hard in the city. Yes, sir."

"Why do you say that?" Maggie asked, taking a bite of chocolate pudding and unconsciously licking her spoon.

"Ya gotta have friends!" Mack said, raising the pitch of his voice. "Gotta have protection. It's a jungle out they-a, as the song says. Them friends make ya do things you don't want to do."

"Like what?" Maggie asked naively.

"They getcha in trouble wiff the po-leese. Dent evea want to do that. Dent mean to. Jus' havin' fun, and then whollop! They getcha." Mack rolled his eyes.

"My brother has trouble with the police also." She took another bite of pudding and leaned back, holding the pudding in her mouth to savor it.

"What's his play?"

"Marijuana. He grew it on the roof before my dad had a stroke." She cleared her

throat and smiled. "My dad watered his plants for him." Then she laughed.

"What's so funny 'bout that?" Mack smiled, showing his white teeth.

"He watered it with salt water." They both laughed.

"That's good!" Mack smiled. "That's good!"

"Yeah. They keep watching him. They haven't caught him yet. But every night, the police pass his house and call over their megaphone, 'Good night, Walter.'" She smiled.

"He stopped them one night and made a citizen's arrest and wrote a them a ticket in their own ticket book because they gave him a ticket when he wasn't even speeding."

"That's funny," Mack smiled. "I know a white guy who used ta sell the stuff to me an' my friends. His name was Walter."

"Walter Cox?"

"Hee hee!" Mack laughed quietly, almost to himself. "He's yo' brotha? Hee hee! What a small world!" He slapped the table.

Maggie's face went red. She wanted to change the subject and quickly asked, "So how did you learn how to inventory?"

"I'm at Woolco's ever time they has an in-ventory. I usually need a little extra cash."

"Humph," Maggie said before taking another drink of her special Spanish soda.

"What?" Mack's ears perked up.

"My sister Sunshine and I always went to Woolco's during their inventory time to pick up some spending money."

Mack gave a big belly laugh, “Ha ha ha!” He paused and smiled. “Hmmm. I know a white girl by the name of Sunshine. She said her little sister follows her everywhere she goes. She couldn't stand it.”

“That's my sister,” Maggie said in consternation.

“She smokes marijuana too.”

“My brother's, no doubt.” Maggie had a grim look on her face.

“My, my my.”

Maggie and Mack got to know each other as they talked about their families. They met each Thursday at lunch at the NPU General Store. She found out that he was voted leader of a hundred families in the neighborhood whether they were members or not. Miss Aiken, his female counterpart was over the women in the area. They worked together to take care of the needs of the people.

* * *

Michael was voted leader over ten families. Dan Moultry became his partner and went around with him. They visited each family once a month to determine their needs. Of course, not every family would let them visit, but most did, and they benefited from the general store and contact with the NPU infrastructure (doctors, lawyers, businessmen, etc.). Every ten of a hundred families had voted themselves two leaders each. These twenty were also voted in as constables. They patrolled the neighborhood as

well as going throughout the city asking for donations. They prided themselves in being organized, going out every second and fourth Tuesday.

Michael got up early so he could be off. He always skipped breakfast, not having time. He could do this at least twice a month. It had been a hard decision to make, seeing he liked to get eight hours of sleep. Going to bed at midnight or one in the morning produced this difficulty.

“See you,” Michael said, kissing Maggie before he went out the door. “I’ll be back for lunch.”

“See you,” Maggie said as she shut the door behind him.

Michael went downstairs and joined Dan who waited for him outside the main door.

Dan looked like a giant Viking, not taller than Michael, but muscular with long blond hair and a beard to match. His eyes twinkled. He had what Maggie called laugh wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. He and Michael looked like Laurel and Hardy walking down the sidewalk if you saw them from behind.

They stopped first at the Kenningtons, a cheerful family and liberal in their attitudes. They had welcomed the National People's Union, thinking of it as a way to serve their community. John, the father, grew a bush of curly black hair with which he tickled his two kids, Jimmy and Sally who were five and six, each one a small copy of their parents. John's face and tummy were pudgy, but his firm handshake confirmed the muscles underneath. Jane, the mother, was of moderate weight, had a prominent nose and

soft, wide smile, wearing her auburn hair in a pony tail. Her eyes showed a happy but cautious spirit.

They welcomed Michael and Dan with firm handshakes to their home only two blocks west from Ed's store. The children, wearing tense grins on their faces, stood behind their father and mother as if they weren't sure if they could play with the strangers. Jimmy was brave and stepped forward between his parents.

Michael rubbed Jimmy's head and said, "Hello little pike."

"Hello Mister Beaty," he said politely.

Michael and Dan sat down on the dark green sofa while the Kenningtons sat on dining room chairs on the other side of the coffee table. Sally crawled up onto Dan's lap, and Jimmy sat next to Michael. The little boy silently took Michael's pen and pocket notebook to draw in. This arrangement had become a custom for Michael and Jimmy when they came to visit.

"How is your family doing today, John?" Michael asked, smiling pleasantly.

"Fine, we're doing fine," said John, "and you two?"

"Nothing could be better," Dan said, as he hugged Sally against his tummy. Then he looked down and asked, "How are you, little one?"

"Better, thank you," she said.

"Your children are so polite," Michael said, staring at Sally. Then he blinked and turned back to the grownups. He didn't want to be caught starrng. It was a bad habit. His mother tried to cure him of it when he was little, but she never could.

“They're a couple of pills,” said Jane, smiling demurely, but with a sparkle in her eyes towards her kids who giggled.

“So Sally is all better,” said Dan, “and there is no more sickness.”

“Thanks to the NPU,” said John. “The doctor you sent us to took us in with no problem. He did a good job, didn't he, Sally.”

“Yes,” Sally giggled as Dan tickled her ribs.

“Everything else is okay?” asked Michael. “Your job doing fine? You have plenty to eat and all that?”

“Yes, yes,” John said. “Can't complain. Driving tractor is a good job as long as the construction industry keeps going. Governor Talbot's idea of improving the freeways will keep me going for a while.”

“That's good,” Michael said as he glanced over to see what Jimmy was drawing, hoping the child wouldn't use up the entire pad.

“Money's still tight,” said Jane, putting her hands over her knees.

Michael noticed she always wore long dresses with flowers on them.

“Thanks to Ed Murphy,” she continued, “and his store in the back, we've been able to stretch the money.”

“Businesses are booming right now,” Dan said as Sally pulled the hairs on his arms and hands. He tried not to wince. “But inflation is still growing out of hand. I don't know if it's total selfishness or just the way capitalism works. People want pay raises. The unions get it for them, and then companies have to raise their prices.”

“Then there's all this manipulation on the stock market,” John said, folding and unfolding his arms, trying to get comfortable sitting in his chair. “It makes the rich richer and the burden is put on the backs of us common people.”

“Yes,” Dan agreed. “And then the people think the federal government is supposed to solve this problem of over spending.”

“Well, isn't it government policy,” interjected Michael, “to spend like crazy, even asking us to spend like crazy to save the market?”

“I guess that's why the decrease in taxes,” John said, clasping his knees.

“But the state taxes are going sky high,” Dan said.

“That's what our landlord is complaining about,” John said.

“So, how is your relationship with your landlord?” Michael asked.

“He made sure we knew that he owns the land when he found out that we joined that blankity blank union,” John said.

Jane laughed and said, “We assured him that we would keep paying rent. He said that's all he was interested in.”

“Well,” Michael said. “It's not like we're trying to take over. We just want people to know what our interests and values are.”

“There seems to be a polarization growing in the political arena,” Dan said. “Big business against the little man, liberals against the conservatives, militants against pacifists, and all the while, money grabbers escalating the cost of living.”

“I don't think we need to be worried,” Michael observed. “We just need to stand

our ground. Everything will give way as people get educated to the truth and wake up.”

“Yeah,” John said, but immediately changed the subject to the family's approaching vacation. They were going to Disneyland, and the children danced around the room yelling “Yeah! Yeah!”

Jane had to corral her children to her side to quiet them as everyone stood and shook hands. Michael and Dan left with a good feeling about that family. They would report to Kirkham, the neighborhood president, later.

Other neighborhoods had been organized throughout the city with leaders of hundreds and leaders of ten. The city fathers started investigating, fearing for their control over the population.

* * *

A meeting was called by Kirkham for the constables, secretaries, the store clerks, all the leaders under Kirkham to be held at the local high school. One city councilman and a local minister were also invited.

Michael arrived early to arrange the chairs and bring in a podium. Since he worked at the school, he had all the keys. Maggie was there to help him. As they placed the last chair the room started filling up with people from their neighborhood. The room echoed with voices and the sound of moving metal folding chairs as they settled in. The noise rose to a crescendo and then silence fell when Kirkham came up to the podium. Behind him sat Councilman Townsend, who appeared as a well dressed stick figure in a dark suit

and red tie, Reverend Stillson, looking like the Quaker Oats man without his hat, Miss Aiken, Mrs. Bergstrom, and Mrs. Kirkham.

“I want to welcome you tonight,” Kirkham pronounced, “and say welcome to our special guests, Councilman Townsend and Reverend Stillson.”

Everyone clapped.

“I have a few announcements,” Kirkham continued, “and then Reverend Stillson will give us an opening prayer.”

Councilman Townsend looked rather upset at the pronouncement of a prayer, Michael thought. Anyone could see Townsend wanted to say something as he turned this way and that to find someone to complain to, but no one paid attention to him. Michael had to restrain a laugh as he thought how foolish the guy looked. Of course, we have prayer in our meetings. You can't pull that separation of God and state on us. Michael smiled broadly as he caught the councilor's eye. Townsend quickly looked at Kirkham.

“There will be a trip to the NPU's farm,” Kirkham announced, “on the outskirts of the city, out by Castle Creek in two weeks. We will be cleaning the barn, pulling weeds, and clearing some land. For the councilman's benefit,” Kirkham said, turning around for a moment to Townsend, who scratched his nose, smiled and nodded his head as he was recognized, “we have a truck farm that supplies a couple of our stores here in town. This work provides the opportunity for those in need to obtain food and other supplies from the stores. A wheat and flour truck will be here in a couple of days, coming from Kansas. We have a wheat farm out there. We will be needing manpower to unload it at the back of

Murphy's Market. When we can't get vegetables from the truck farm, we import them cheaply from Mexico. You constables will be responsible for spreading the word. We will meet at the barbershop at six o'clock in the morning of the fifth. That's May fifth, next Thursday.”

Can't make that one, Michael thought. But he could go to the farm. He imagined the fresh air out there. The last time it was hot, and all he could smell was the cows. Well, he thought, cool weather is in the forecast. Can't be too bad then.

“Now, Reverend Stillson.”

The reverend stood and took the podium as Kirkham returned to his seat.

“Our Dear Creator and Father in Heaven,” Reverend Stillson began, “we thank thee for thy providence and protection. We ask for thy guidance at this meeting in our planning, and give us the strength to go ahead in providing for the poor and needy. Amen.” He sat down and smiled at the councilman who tried hard to be nonchalant.

Kirkham returned to the podium. “I have asked Councilman Townsend to come tonight to be an observer. There are several concerns the town council has about our organization. They seem to think that we are a radical group set on violence. We want to assure them that our only activity is the safety and security of our neighborhoods. That is why we have chosen a quorum of constables for each neighborhood. We had an incident last week which brought on a clash between the neighborhood and the police. We do not recognize their authority, it is true, but we have no quarrel with them when they live by our rules. We claim we have the right to form our own government and laws, or as we

call them, agreements. And if the police do not want to join us and work with us, we will simply leave them alone, and we expect them to leave us alone. We do not want any quarrels with city government. We work independently from them as much as possible, recognizing only authority given by the vote of the people.”

* * *

As Kirkham spoke, Michael remembered the incident about the police. He and Dan were returning from visiting their families when they noticed a police car patrolling the area. Dan stepped in front of the car and stopped it by putting his hands up and pushing on the air, as if pushing on the car. The patrolman was irate. He got out of the car with his hand on his gun, asking, “What's the trouble?”

“We do not allow people to carry weapons in this neighborhood,” Dan commented.

“What?” the patrolman asked. “Alright, you two, step over to the car and put your hands on the hood.”

When Michael and Dan didn't move, the patrolman drew his gun. When he did that, Michael slowly took up the whistle that was hanging around his neck and put it to his mouth, saying, “You don't have to be afraid of us. We are unarmed. We won't hurt you. I'm simply going to blow this whistle to call for backup. We are duly appointed constables, voted in by the people of this neighborhood.” He blew the whistle.

People came out of their houses and walked over to the car. They had been taught in there meetings to respond to the Constable's whistle. One of the men asked, “You planning on shooting someone?”

A large black woman said, "Surrender your weapon to the constables and we will let you go."

Seeing he had no other option except to start shooting, the patrolman gave his gun to Dan, walked backwards into his car, and shut the door. But instead of leaving he called for backup. Several patrol cars came racing down the street, turning in from every corner. The police stepped out of their cars pointing their pistols at the crowd.

"For Heaven's sake," the black woman said. She turned and walked away. The others followed suit and returned to their homes. Dan and Michael were arrested and taken downtown.

Michael felt relieved when two NPU lawyers showed up at the precinct building and argued their case. He watched as the lawyers and police battled it out. No one recognized anyone else's authority. The police demanded that constables report directly to them, but the NPU told them, only when the police were duly voted into office as the constables were, would they accept police authority. By ten o'clock that night the lawyers had the Michael and Dan out on bail with an order from a judge who was a member of the NPU.

When Michael arrived home he was exhausted and had to explain everything to Maggie. He didn't get the chance to get home by lunch. He thought she would worry herself sick not knowing where he was, but she told him that the neighbors had come over and told her what happened. He told her he had to call his boss at work and tell him what had happened. He was afraid he would be fired, but he thought his conversation

over the phone went well. Maybe he would keep his job. His boss said he understood all about the police. When he went to work the next day, his boss didn't say anything about it and Michael never asked.

* * *

Kirkham continued speaking about the incident. "The sheriff of the county has been voted into office, so we accept his authority. We have a meeting scheduled with him for next week. He has consented to listen to our case. It is our intention to set him up as the head of the constables, so they will have to answer only to his supervision. This will have to do until the laws of the city are changed and the police chief and all policemen are removed or are duly authorized by the vote of the people."

* * *

Townsend took all this in and didn't like it. These people were trying to be a law unto themselves, vigilantes. They weren't following the order of things, that is, using a grassroots way of putting in city councilors by the vote of the people and letting the city government make the laws and ordinances. They were making their own ordinances and having their own elections. This has got to be stopped, he fumed.

* * *

"Let's have some volunteers to work on the farm. Everyone who has time to do that, raise your hands," Kirkham asked. Several, including Michael, raised their hands. Mack took down the names and put them on a list.

"Next, we want to report on those persons and families that stand in need of our

services.” Kirkham leaned on the podium with both hands. “If any need to see me personally, Mack can make an appointment for them. He has become an indispensable secretary as well as leader and president of the constables.”

Several names were put on the schedule for private meetings and reports were given about families in need.

Michael thought that if anyone was in needed, he and Maggie were, but they were already getting some relief from the NPU Store. He was wishing that he could get things they needed without going on welfare. He wanted a pay raise, a better car, a fancier apartment, nicer clothes. A computer and new television would be nice. All of these things of course were in the future, he was promised. All he had to do was wait and be patient. The NPU would win in the end and everyone would be rich. He sighed. It would be nice to retire early on a stipend and just write. He thought of himself as a writer. That would be the best life.

As Michael was daydreaming, the meeting continued. Kirkham had let the reverend take the stand, and he was giving a lesson.

“In the recent events,” Reverend Stillson continued, “notice how both sides were filled with fear and resentment. Human relations should be based upon understanding, but when confronted with opposing views, hostility is the usual result ... unless there is objectivity. That requires an adherence to truth, not as a crusader with pent up emotion, but with what may be called in transactional jargon as the adult ego state. It is a place in the mind where there is calm demeanor and objectivity.” The reverend reached down into

the podium and took a small glass filled with water and slowly took a drink, returning it to its shelf.

“I am reminded of President George Washington. He always waited patiently for a response from within before answering a question or before taking any action. He didn't react to his outer environment, but to an inner one, calling upon the experience and wisdom of a long life of decisions already made.

“Not all of us can recall such a long life already lived. Many of us are too young for that.”

Soft laughter rippled across the classroom.

“There is an alternative to anger and violence,” the reverend continued. “There is a light all may call upon within each of us. That light comes from the Creator of this universe. His light is within reach. We are born with it. Many children will amaze their parents and others with their wisdom. From where does new thought arise? Where comes invention, and new understanding of the elements around us? The wisdom of the poet and philosopher? Indeed, the prophet? It comes from that light of inspiration. All one need do is ask and listen.

“Remember the song, *Lead Kindly Light*? It says,

'Keep thou my feet;

I do not ask to see

The distant scene –

One step enough for me.'

Again it says,

'I loved to choose and see my path;

but now, Lead thou me on.'

“Put your foot into the light and take a step. It is like going by torchlight. You can't see ahead, but only what is right in front of you. Sometimes when dealing with people, that is the only way you can. Be aware of the truth that is in the present moment. The Creator's light will guide you the rest of the way, moment by moment, step by step.

“There may be many obstacles in your path: a mean neighbor, a thief, someone who doesn't understand the NPU. Many times it only takes watching and listening, and an idea will come, a way will open up, and a goal is reached. If you can't go through, go around. If the wind blows, bend. It only takes perseverance and attention to the goal.

“I don't have time now, but each one of us needs to study the Sermon given by Jesus of Nazareth. It is the simplest and wisest piece of wisdom literature that was ever put to pen and paper. Don't be angry. Don't resist evil. Judge not. Ask, and it will be given you. Don't be proud. Be humble. Another thing Jesus said was to be as wise as a snake and as harmless as a dove. What more can I say?

“God be with you in your efforts at bringing freedom to an enslaved people.”

With that, the reverend sat down and Kirkham stood up to take his place at the podium.

“Thank you Reverend Stillson,” he said, looking back at the man. Then turning to the constables and everyone else that attended, “Don't forget next Thursday. We'll meet in

back of Murphy's Market. Until next time then, seven o'clock, the first Tuesday, next month.”

Everyone rose from their chairs, folded them, and put them along the wall as was their habit. Friends gathered in little groups and talked about important things. Kirkham, Stillson and Townsend stood and talked with each other. Michael and Maggie made their way through the crowd. He would put things away later when he came back on Saturday. Tomorrow was a school holiday, a teacher's conference. As they made their way to the outer door, they were met by Miss Aiken.

“You two need a ride?” she asked. “I came with Blanche. It's a big car. I'm sure she wouldn't mind.”

Michael held the door open for women.

“Thank you Miss Aiken,” Maggie said. “My back can't take the bus tonight.”

“Bless you, Dear,” Miss Aiken said as the three walked down the sidewalk to the parking lot. “Have you gone to that NPU doctor? I gave you his name the other day.”

“I'm afraid doctors can't do anything for my back,” Maggie replied as she squeezed Michael's hand, leaning on him to be able to walk upright. “It's a hereditary thing. Doctors just don't know what to do about it except give me pain pills, and that just makes my head feel funny. It never takes away the pain.”

“Well, Dear, I feel for you. You know that.”

“Yes, I know.”

* * *

“It was very enlightening,” Townsend said to Kirkham, shaking his hand. “You seem to have a way with people. We've been watching the NPU in our city. There has been less violence and less crime since you have moved in and started organizing.” He let go of Kirkham's hand and opened the door of the car that came up to the sidewalk. He turned and crossed his arms on top edge of the door. “We will meet again and discuss things and see if we can't come to some compromises. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Mr. Townsend,” Kirkham said.

“God go with you.” Reverend Stillson waved.

The car drove off. “He will need God's help,” the reverend said, “And so will we.”

“I'm afraid,” Kirkham said, scratching his chin, “we are in for some rough weather.”

* * *

Michael, home from work, sat down in his easy chair and grabbed the remote from his new wooden side table recently obtained from the NPU General Store. He turned on the television to watch the evening news. The monotone voice of the local newscaster was talking about the local chapters of the NPU. When Michael heard councilman Townsend's name, his ears perked up.

“... and Mr. Townsend said he met with the NPU authorities. In that meeting it was announced that the NPU was organizing to take over city government using vigilante tactics.”

“The double crossing liar!” Michael exclaimed under his breath. “We said no such

thing.”

“What is it, Michael?” Maggie's question came from the bedroom.

He raised his voice. “It seems that that councilman Townsend is out for blood. He's been lying to the news about the NPU. He says that we're a bunch of vigilantes trying to take over city government.” Michael huffed. “We may have to, for our own safety, but it will be by the vote of the people, not by brute force.”

“What can they do about it, anyway?” Maggie asked, popping her head into the room.

“I don't know.” Michael rummaged around in his backpack for stray cookies. “They do have the backing of the police and judges. I bet they get the state troopers in on this. Maybe even the National Guard.”

“Can't the sheriff do anything? He said in that last meeting he would give us some help.” Maggie poked back into the bedroom to search in all the chest-of-drawers for some particular beads.

Michael found that last cookie from his lunch, took a bite out of it and swallowed. “I wouldn't even want any help from that guy. You know what he said in that meeting?”

“What?”

Michael took another bite of cookie.

“Well, what?” Maggie asked.

“I got my mouff full of cookie,” came Micheal's muffled reply.

Maggie stuck her head back into the living room. “You're not supposed to eat when

you're having a conversation. You always do that. You only think of your stomach!"

Maggie retracted her head back into the bedroom as a turtle withdraws into its shell.

Michael took a swig from his water bottle. "Well, anyway, he said that we were going to have to cooperate with the police and let them do their jobs, and if we wanted to be constables under his jurisdiction, we would have to get permission from the county government to set up a legal vote. How about that? The vote of the people in our own neighborhoods don't count!" He paused and exclaimed, "I say, march on City Hall!"

"Don't be ridiculous," she said. "Haven't we agreed that brute force is not the way?"

"Fighting is brute force. A civil march isn't."

* * *

Kirkham stood at his barber chair clipping Gramps' gray hair. Harold sat opposite waiting his turn watching the television hanging from the ceiling above the picture window. The nightly news had come on, and Councilman Townsend's name was mentioned. Everyone in the room, all members of the NPU, took notice. Pamela Chan, a young Chinese American reporter with slanted eyes and straight black hair passed her shoulders, interviewed Townsend.

"Will the town council take any action against these so-called vigilante groups who call themselves constables?" the news reporter asked, pointing the microphone up to Townsend's mouth.

"The police have made a few arrests in the past," said Townsend, "only to have the

lawbreakers out on the streets again. The mayor's office and town council have been working with the chief of police and the sheriff's office as well as municipal judges to see what action we can take against them. So far, they haven't broken any law except interrupting the police in their duties, which is as great offense as any.”

The camera turned back to the young reporter who said, “Thank you Mr. Townsend.” Then the regular newscaster showed her face and droned on in her business-like, flat, and unemotional voice.

Gramps said, “Townsend, Townsend ... don't like, don't like.”

Harold commented, “He'll do us in all right, the liar.”

Kirkham pushed on Gramps' head to make him bend his neck so he could reach the other side of his head better. “Townsend is a boot licker if I ever saw one,” Kirkham said, glancing at the television. “He doesn't really have anything against the NPU. He just thinks if he can get the city turned against us, they will support him more. He's a ladder climber.”

“Ladder climber, ladder climber,” Gramps intoned. “Licks the dirt right up. Licks. Licks.”

“He licks the boots of the mayor,” Harold echoed.

“He's in bed with him, I say,” a man commented as he shook the newspaper he was reading.

“We ought to do something about it,” another fellow commented, turning to Harold.

“We're doing everything we can in the legal circles,” Kirkham said, cutting around Gramps' right ear with his shears.

“We should march on City Hall,” the man with the newspaper said as he shook it again.

“March, march,” Gramps said. “City Hall, City Hall.”

“Yeah,” Harold said, “ march against City Hall. That will do it. Then maybe they will pay attention.”

“If it comes to that,” Kirkham replied. “We may have to ... someday.”

“Not now? Not now?” Gramps asked, visibly upset, jumping at each question.

“Calm down old man,” Harold said. “You'll make Kirkham miss, and then you'll look quite different.” Everyone laughed.

* * *

Miss Aiken sat on her couch crocheting an afghan for a friend and listening to the news about the town council and Mr. Townsend. She felt so furious it made her ill. We should march in the streets, she thought. “We should get all the neighborhoods together and march,” she said out loud.

* * *

Bob Kirkham arrived home late.

His wife, Clara, poked her head out of the kitchen. “You're late, Dear. You've had a lot of phone calls about that Townsend fellow. I wrote down all the telephone numbers. They're right there by the telephone.” She went back to the sink to dry the dishes. Clara

turned her head in his direction as he came up to her and kissed her. “Your dinner is in the oven,” she said with pretended coldness.

Bob wrapped his arms around her waist. “I'm sorry I'm late. I had to talk to Ken Brown about all the telephone calls I knew I would be receiving.” It was comforting to hold his wife against him. He wished he could forget about the NPU for just one night.

“It's become your life, Bob, hasn't it?” Clara continued wiping the pots and pans and setting them on the counter. With his arms around her, she couldn't bend down and put them away underneath the counter. “You're not the neighborhood barber any more.”

“That's true.” He put his cheek against hers.

She turned around and put the wet towel around his neck and pulled him to her, kissing his lips. “If you want me for dessert, you had better eat your dinner first.”

“I may be too tired for either one,” he said.

She lay her head on his shoulder. “I miss you.”

“I know.”

He took a deep breath. The roast smelled of garlic.

“It's your favorite,” She separated herself from him and went to the oven where she took out the roasting pot and set it on the stove. “It's got sweet carrots and potatoes with it.”

“Okay. I am overwhelmed by the smell, and my stomach is growling.” He took one of the dinner plates she had just put away and went over to help himself to the roast. He remembered that when he had left that morning the kitchen was in disarray with several

days of dishes in the sink. “You've been busy. You cleaned up the kitchen.”

“I've been busy with the NPU. They came over and we had a meeting. The women helped me clean house. We judges may have to start doing our job, along with the constables.” Clara finished putting away the dishes. “There are too many complaints, and people are going to the police or suing other people in the courts instead of coming to us.”

Bob cut a large slice of roast beef, placed it onto his plate and then dished up some carrots and potatoes. He took out a bottle of grape juice from the refrigerator and poured it into his glass he always kept on the counter. He stood there eating a moment, saying, “Mmmmm. This is good.” Clara returned the grape juice and stood near the back door staring at him. He thought he should continue the conversation.

“I'm afraid if we tried out our full authority, we would not only have the city and county down on our heads but the state as well.”

Crossing her arms, she leaned against the back door. “What authority do we have if we don't use it?”

He took another bite of roast, cocked his head and said, “If we have the constables arresting people and holding our own courts we had better make sure we have a state organization to back us up. And,” he paused for a piece of sweet carrot, “we have to decide what punishments we can hand out. Do we uphold the law of the land? Can we throw someone in jail?”

“We will have to have the cooperation of the police and courts, the town council,

the sheriff, etc.” She walked out into the dining room, turned, and said, “Right now, all we can do is annul someone's membership.”

Bob took his plate and followed her, sitting at the dinner table and said, “Right now we need to address Townsend's accusations.”

Clara sat opposite him. She stared at a plate of toll house cookies, a leftover from the NPU meeting she had forgotten to put away. She took a cookie from a plate and said, “Maybe we should just ignore the established governments and go our own way.”

“And deal with things as they come up?”

She took a bite of the toll house cookie, waited until she had swallowed and asked, “Why not? Isn't that the way the NPU is set up, to handle its own problems?”

Bob took another bite of roast and with his mouth full said, “I know you're right, but Ken and I decided to wait and see what cards we have in our hands before we make a play. The town council and the county authorities have got to see that we are serious.”

* * *

Michael came home from work excited. “Did you hear?” he asked Maggie. “We're going to march on City Hall.”

“Yes, I heard,” she said, looking up from her needlework. She watched as Michael put down his backpack and settled into his easy chair. “I'm afraid. What are you going to do? Are you going to march with them? You know I'm not going.”

“I don't expect you to. My goodness. I don't expect any of the women to march, but I know a few who will, and Miss Aiken is one of them. She's an old school teacher and

just the kind of woman who would do such a thing. All the judges, the constables, and most of the neighborhood will be there. We're going to have to make some placards. Maybe you can do your part by helping with that.”

“Miss Aiken said that the other neighborhoods in the NPU will be marching.”

Maggie looked at the work in her lap and made a few more stitches. “It makes me a little shaky to think about it.” She looked up at Michael. “Are you going to march?”

“You bet. I wouldn't miss this for the world.” He grabbed the remote and put it down again. Maybe Maggie needed him more right now.

“I hope you will be safe,” she said.

Chapter Six

Harold and Gramps sat in The Green Bar next to Kirkham's barbershop sipping beer and listening to the news on the new flat-screened television on the far wall. Gramps was laughing, saying, "That's the way ... that's the way," as they watched the riots going on downtown. Much of the scene around the city building was covered in smoke, but they did see citizens fighting with police who were wearing gas masks and slinging billy clubs, hitting people on the heads. The citizens, members of the NPU, had only the sticks from their placards and their fists to fight back. Many tried to grapple the police to the ground.

The monotoned newscaster, Martha McVeigh, who had been broadcasting the news for that station the last twenty years, reported, "Earlier today members of the NPU from all over the city gathered in front of City Hall for a peaceful march and sit in. For thirty minutes they marched around the hallowed marble structure shouting 'Equality and Fraternity' carrying placards. Policemen gathered around the perimeter putting up a barrier between the union and a crowd of hecklers."

Gramps sat in his chair shadow boxing and grunting as he emotionally transferred himself into the guy on the screen hitting the policeman.

"After arresting the leader of the crowd, Robert Kirkham of Kirkham's Barbershop," continued McVeigh, "for not having a demonstration permit, some of the crowd, loyal particularly to him, broke ranks and tried to enter the building. Others sat on

the grass near the door, preventing the police from getting near the intruders. That's when the riot squad came to clear the grounds. As you can see, there was a lot of fisticuffs and the use of clubs and teargas to clear the way to the doors. About half of the marchers were arrested before the crowds were dispersed.”

The picture returned to McVeigh and the newsroom.

“Pamela Chan, our roving reporter will give her view of the riot. We will try to speak to Robert Kirkham later in the program. Pamela?”

The scene changed back to the city building and the young Chinese American, seen frequently in the news, holding a microphone to her mouth. “As you can see, the smoke has cleared and the crowd dispersed. The grounds of the city building have been cleared of rubbish, placards and people. Many of the protestors are in the county jail with various charges. At this very moment a troop of lawyers have converged onto the scene gathered inside to protest the inhumane treatment of the NPU protestors. They have been hired by the NPU. Most of them are members of the NPU. As I said, they are inside the building and arguing with judges, police, and the town council.

“We have a witness, a Mister Thomas Trembley, who watched the the scene from the beginning.”

As Pamela pointed the microphone towards her witness, the camera turned to a heavy set gentleman, mostly bald and wearing a yellow hockey shirt. “What was your impression, Mr. Trembley, of the march and the protestors?”

“It looked like the NPU were trying to take over the town. You should have seen it.

Well, I guess you did see it. They were trying to take over City Hall, force their way through. They were shouting, 'Down with the mayor and his thugs!' There were more of them than of us, so we couldn't help the police. They did what they could to protect us and the mayor and the town council. They arrested some, but most of them got away.”

“You can tell,” Harold replied, “who that station is for.”

“Thank you, Mr. Trembley,” the roving reporter said as she put the microphone back to her mouth. “This is Pamela Chan, your roving reporter for Channel Eight News. Back to you, Martha.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Gramps said excitedly, rubbing his hands together. “Prejudiced, prejudiced.”

The news continued with the weather, then five minutes of sports and then the national news came on.

* * *

Michael sat on the edge of his bunk holding the sides of his bloody head. He'd had migraines before, but this was insufferable. It felt like someone left a knife in his skull.

“They can't hold us in here.” Dan sat next to Michael, trying to comfort him. “Look at us. They have us where they want us. I think I lost my cell phone in all the hassle. I would call 911 if I had it.”

Michael started laughing, but then the pain muffled him. Dan gave him a squeeze. “Hang in there buddy. We'll get out of here in no time. We'll get our revenge.”

Jeff Sanders, a tall thin man sporting a short beard and mustache and pointed nose,

perched on the next bunk. “What are you going to do?” he asked. “Burn up the police station?”

“You should stay with the plan, Jeff,” Dan said. “We will find a non-violent solution.”

“Yeah,” Mark McDaniels added, “some non-violent march this turned out to be.” He touched his temple where one of the policemen hit him with a billy club. “I think we've passed the point of non-violence.”

“Dan's right,” Michael spoke up. “We all pledged to govern without violence. What we need is a plan to disarm those mercenaries.”

“Hey man, we're all constables, right?” asked Henry Arms, a blonde, long-haired hippy, clean shaven and muscular, but covered with tattoos. “We should have a place to store criminals and arrest those who break our laws.”

“You're talking about gun-carrying police,” Sam Hamilton said. His dark hair was smoothed back making him look like a clean cut yuppie. He was medium built, about five foot eight inches, wearing a blue suit and red tie. “Dan and Michael already tried to disarm one policeman in their own neighborhood, but they don't always wear a gun and uniform.”

Dan laughed softly. “I get your point.” He paused and looking the others straight in their eyes, pointed to each one. “A plan is forming in my mind.”

* * *

Three days passed in which the constables were left pretty much to themselves

planning their revenge.

Michael and Dan heard people talking and approaching their cell. Kirkham and his lawyer came in with the jailer who unlocked the doors. They were greeted with Kirkham's hand stretched out to them.

“Are we glad to see you,” Dan said joyfully, taking Kirkham's hand with both of his.

“We missed you,” Michael said. “We were about to give up. Thought we were forgotten.”

Kirkham shook Michael's hand and patted him on the back. “We'll get that head looked at first thing.”

All of the constables were let go, one by one walking out of the cell and shaking Kirkham's hand.

“After three days of haggling over your bodies and your lives,” Kirkham said smiling from ear to ear, “we got you free and clear. There'll be a hearing, but we have that all wrapped up.”

Michael and five others were taken to the hospital emergency room where their head wounds were treated. Kirkham was with them at all times, waiting until the last one was taken care of. Then he drove each of them home.

It was dark outside as Kirkham pulled up to Michael's home. They shook hands in the front seat.

“Thank you, Bob” Michael said. He turned around to Dan and shook his hand.

“We'll see you tomorrow,” Dan said with a big grin. “We got to make plans.”

Michael's hand was a little sore from Dan's tight grip.

“Don't leave me out,” Kirkham said.

“Oh, it's for the family visits,” replied Dan. “We will give you a full report.”

“Okay, Michael,” Kirkham called as Michael climbed out of the car and shut the door. Michael peered back inside to hear what else Kirkham had to say. “Your wife has missed you. She's been well cared for. I appreciate you guys for all you do.”

“Thanks again,” Michael called back, then he said, “Have a good night.”

* * *

Maggie grabbed Michael when he came in the door and cried on his shoulder. “I knew you would be hurt, I just knew it.” She looked up at him. “Let me see it. Are you okay? Come in and take a rest in your chair. Do you need anything? Can I get you anything?”

Michael tried to walk into the apartment, but Maggie forgot to move. She gave a short laugh, embarrassed, and let go of him so he could come in and sit down.

He looked at her standing there expectantly. “I am a bit hungry,” he said. “They didn't feed us in the prison. Only snack food. You probably don't want to fix a full meal this late at night. Do you have any leftovers?”

Maggie went to the refrigerator and looked in, wiping a tear from her eye. “We have some kind of casserole someone brought over. I can stick that in the oven.”

“Okay.” Michael pulled the lever on the side of his chair to let the foot rest fold

out, put his feet up, and lay back, taking several deep breaths. It was good to be back home.

* * *

The next day Michael walked into the school and went to his wing. It felt good to walk the halls again. It was a place where he felt at home, as if he owned the place. Walking down to his janitor's closet, he found it open. Someone's rear was sticking out of it. Long thin bare legs oozed from tight short shorts. The smell of a dirty wet mop assaulted Michael's nose. The girl stood up after pouring dirty water out of Michael's mop bucket.

“Hello,” she said with a sweet smile. “Can I help you?”

“You're in my closet,” Michael said apprehensively, “and I need to get to work.”

“Oh. You must be Michael.” She held the mop as if she needed propping up. “Joe told me if I see you that you should go see him. He's in his office.”

“Oh?” Michael felt a strong grip of emotion grab his throat. He knew he might be fired, but hoped he was just being moved to a different location.

“Yes. He said he wanted to see you as soon as you showed up.”

“Okay, then,” he mumbled. “I'll check it out.”

“Yes. He's down that way towards the middle of the school,” she pointed.

“I know where it is. I've been working here for over ten years.”

Michael turned away, walked down the hall and turned right. The shiny floors reflected the windows and the whitewashed sky. He remembered doing the polishing only

a few days ago. Maybe it was a week ago. Of course, he had been in jail over the weekend.

Standing in front of the dark wood door with its frosted glass panel, Michael took a deep breath and grabbed the brass doorknob he had recently polished. He turned the knob, opened the door and stepped in. The room smelled of red oiled sawdust used to sweep the floors.

Joe sat behind his desk and said, "Hi, Mike. Have a seat." A bit chubby with thinning black hair and facial features that looked like a vice had squished his face, his brow and cheek bones, nose and chin all stuck out. His smile was sardonic, but his eyes had laugh wrinkles at the corners. He said "Have a seat," again when Michael hesitated.

"Who's the girl?" Michael asked after sitting.

"She's my niece. Only temporary until we find a replacement." Joe clasped his hands, interlacing his fingers and set them on his desk.

"You moving me?" Michael leaned forward.

"It's budget cuts, Mike. Budget cuts. You can understand. The economy, you know."

"Yes, Joe, I know." Michael could guess the real reason. It was the march, the NPU.

"I'm not singling you out Mike," Joe smiled.

Michael looked at his boss's nose. It was covered with blackheads. He wanted to reach over the desk and squeeze them all. He didn't know whether getting fired was

making him feel sick or that nose.

“I'm letting Jake Lowery go also.” Joe paused. “I'm sorry. The state legislature and all that. It's been in the news.”

“I heard,” Michael replied, “that the school board voted themselves another raise.”

“We won't go into that, Mike. You can go get any personal belongings from your locker.” Joe looked at Michael with a longing expression as though he wanted to be friends, but something or somebody was restraining him. He stood up and extended his hand. Michael took it and smiled with the right half his face. The other half of himself felt too sad.

Michael walked slowly out of the office, not hearing the good words Joe was saying about him, but hearing only a buzz in his head.

* * *

Dan, Michael, Sam, Jeff, and Henry stood around looking at a garage which had been divided into several rooms, including a bathroom.

“What do you think?” Sam asked. “Being a carpenter and Jack-of-all-trades comes in pretty handy.”

“So this is where we're going to keep them?” Micheal asked matter-of-factly.

“Yes sir.” Sam smiled proudly.

Dan opened and closed a few doors. “They look like nothing but booths.”

“Well,” Sam said, “there's not much room in a garage.”

“How we going to do this?” Jeff asked, his fingers stuffed into his pants pockets.

“How I see it,” Dan said, “is we sneak up on them when they get home and kidnap them.”

“Who's going to watch them?” Henry asked, rubbing his hand through his curly hair.

“We will take turns,” Michael said, “of course.”

“How do we find where they live?” Jeff asked with a scowl on his face.

“We follow them,” Dan said. “We will set up a network of spies with walkie-talkies and follow them. When they arrive home, we move in and arrest them. We'll do one at a time. Everyone will follow one man. One guy follows him from the police station, another pulls up behind as the other pulls away. That way, we won't have just one person following the cop and get picked up. Then, when we find out where he lives, we arrest him the next day.”

“What if they pull a gun?” asked Henry scratching his head.

“We're doomed.” Michael felt a sense of hopelessness.

“I know where I can get hold of some toy guns that look pretty damn real,” Jeff said. “I was stopped by a cop one time as a kid when I was playing with one of them. Stick that in their side and they won't know the difference.”

“As a rule,” Dan said, poking his head out of one of the rooms, “we don't use guns. It will be a lot safer if we don't.”

Dan came out of the room and joined the others. “We might want to contact other

neighborhoods and tell them what we're doing. It would be easier if the whole city is doing the same thing.”

“Then we would have to tell Kirkham,” Michael said.

“Yeah! What about Mack, Ed, and Bob Kirkham?” asked Sam putting his hands on his hips. “If any one of them finds us out, they will be angrier than hell.”

“We'll deal with them when the time comes,” Dan said with a worried look on his face. “We are only doing our duty here.”

“Yeah,” Michael added, “and getting revenge.”

They all laughed.

Michael looked at everyone in their little group. They all seemed to have the same question on their minds, but Michael asked it. “How do we know which cop lives in our neighborhood? And what if there's only one?”

“We're going to have to include other neighborhoods,” Dan said. “We can contact others we saw at the jail.”

“We don't know most of their names,” Michael said, “but I know Jake Lowery. He worked with me at the school.”

“I know Craig Steinberg,” responded Jeff. “He's one of my clients.”

“Good,” Dan said. “We'll contact as many as we can find and tell them our plans.”

“Just hope it doesn't backfire,” Michael groaned.

“We're the NPU,” Sam said. “We all stick together.”

“Okay,” Dan said. “Let's do it.”

* * *

Kirkham called on Michael after the barbershop closed for the night. When Michael heard the doorbell, he wanted to curse. It took him away from a favorite TV show about Superman and the space aliens. He muted the TV and fought gravity to get out of his comfortable chair. He was pleasantly surprised when he opened the door and saw Kirkham.

“Come in, come in,” he invited.

“Oh ... no, Michael,” Kirkham responded. “Let's talk out here.”

Michael thought perhaps he was being called out for the secret plan to arrest and retain policemen. *Who is the culprit that spilled the beans?* He started sweating, put his hands in his pants pockets, and followed Kirkham to the corner of the brick wall corridor.

“I heard you got fired,” Kirkham said.

“Yeah.” Michael breathed slowly. He was relieved it wasn't about the policemen.

“You know you have everything you may need right across the street.” Kirkham cocked his head towards Murphy's Market.

“Yeah,” Michael said, “Thanks.”

“Now that you don't have a job,” Kirkham put his hand on Michael's shoulder and looked him straight in the eyes, “I would like to ask a favor.”

“Sure,” Michael responded, hoping there was something exciting to do.

“We need someone to head up a state committee.” Kirkham scratched his nose.

“Yes?” Michael's heart pounded against his ribcage.

“Someone who can keep an eye on the state legislature and be a communications conduit between all of the county representatives and Maxwell's organization.”

Michael felt his face go white. He asked, “Do you think you have the right person?” He pulled his hands out of his pants pockets, moved over to the windowsill, and sat down.

“You going to be okay?” Kirkham laughed gently.

“Yes ... yes.” Michael looked up at Kirkham and took a deep breath. “Am I going to be voted into office?”

“No. This will be an appointment. Voting will come later when we're more organized.” Kirkham leaned back a little with his hands on his hips and smiled.

“I'll have to tell the wife.” Michael paused and thought for a second. “Will we have to move?”

“That's up to you. Listening to the legislature can be done right on the TV. You probably won't need to be at the state capitol but once a week, and we can provide the transportation.”

“Yeah, I guess you're right.” Michael looked at his feet and then back up to Kirkham. “We have such a nice apartment.”

Kirkham offered Michael his hand. “Well, think about it.” Michael took his hand and stood up. “I've been watching you, Mike. I can call you Mike?”

“Sure.”

“You call me Bob, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I feel we have the right man. You have the potential that we need.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow. If you say yes, I have some material you need to read ... job description and all that. See you tomorrow.” Kirkham turned and left down the stairs.

Michael said, “Have a good night,” and went into his apartment, walking on air.

Maggie looked up from her needlework. “What did he want?”

Michael settled into his lounge chair, watching her with envy. There she was, a wife dependent upon the labors of her husband. She could do whatever she wanted with her time. He had another twenty years of hard work left in him before he could retire. “He found out that I lost my job and asked me if I wanted to work for him. I mean the NPU.”

“Doing what?” she asked. She stared at the pattern on the cloth she worked on.

“Oh, heading some kind of committee in the state capitol.” He peered into his backpack to see if there was a snack in there.

“Oh?” She glanced up at him. “Will it pay much?”

“I don’t think I will be getting paid.” He found a small package of cookies. “ But we will have everything we need.”

“I guess that’s the way things are going. We will always be living out of a second hand store.”

Michael changed the subject. “James Maxwell wants me to keep him up on things

here in our little state.” He knew she was going to ask about moving, so he said, “And, we won't need to move. It will only be one day a week that I go to the capitol. Someone will take me up there, so I won't have to pay for the tram.”

“That's good.”

Chapter Seven

A car honked outside. Michael opened the blinds with one finger and peeked out. "He's here," he said to Maggie. She sat on the couch sifting through papers from her volunteer work. "I'll see you later, maybe in a couple hours."

"Going to visit your families?" she asked.

"Yeah," he lied. He and Dan were going to arrest someone. Constable's duties.

"Love you."

"Love you too."

He grabbed his coat off the hook behind the door and went out. He had pangs of guilt as he walked down the corridor. He was supposed to tell Maggie everything he did, but he couldn't tell her about this. It had to be done in secret for safety. Not the time to get a panic attack, he told himself as doubt crept in and his heart pounded. As he stepped outside and strolled through the long empty garden, his eyes riveted upon Dan's car. On ordinary days it looked like any other car. But tonight it was an object of crime, or so the world would think of it. They were going to purposely break the law for what they believed was a higher cause.

Michael walked up to the black sedan, opened the door and slid onto the plastic covered seat. "Hi Dan. It's a cold night tonight." He closed the door, and the sedan sped off into the night.

"Yep," Dan said, pursing his lips. "And tonight's the night we get our revenge." He

handed Michael a paper. "Here's a list of cops living in our neighborhood. Only three, but we have their addresses and when they get off work."

Michael took the paper and lifted it towards the window so he could read it as they passed the street lights.

"Oh, just turn on the over-head lamp." Dan stared straight ahead.

"Don't feel safe doing that. It's okay. I can read it. So what do we do? We still going to follow these guys?"

"No." Dan pulled over into a Seven-Eleven. "There. You have plenty of light now. What's the closest address? Or maybe we should go by the time. What time is it now?" Dan checked the clock on the dashboard. "It's seven ten. What's the nearest time to that?"

"Nearest time is six o'clock, but that's going backwards." Michael scanned the paper. "The next time is eight o'clock. That's Harold Stravinsky. 1846 North Maple Road."

"Want anything to eat or drink while we wait? Donuts?" Dan kidded.

Michael laughed nervously. "I don't think this can be equal to a stakeout."

"We have time," Dan said, opening his door. "I'm going in for the donut thing. I'll get you some coffee if you want."

"Naw," Michael said. "I just ate. Oh, maybe a bottle of water. I forgot my backpack. I carry my water bottle in it. Acid reflux may occur. You never know."

"Okay."

It seemed like no time elapsed before Dan was back in his seat and they were

heading out for their arrest. His or theirs, Michael couldn't determine. He opened the bag, took out the water bottle and looked at the brand. *Alpine*, it said. He placed it next to his leg.

“Where did you get this list of names?” Michael picked up the list from the dashboard.

“Got it from Jeff. He found an inside person at the police station, a desk cop who joined NPU. Jeff said he got taken off street duty when he joined up. Lives in Jeff's neighborhood as a matter of fact. That's how he found him.”

“Oh.” Michael smelled the fragrance of the donuts as he watched the passing houses. He might change his mind and have one.

Dan made a right turn and drove slowly up a hill until he read the number 1846. He pulled up to the side of the street, parked and turned off the headlights. The silence of the night amplified the sound of a train's horn moaning in distance.

“Listen to that,” Micheal said. “You'd think it was crossing the street up ahead.”

“Yeah.” Dan rummaged through the sack, took out a lidded coffee and a chocolate donut.

“So,” Michael said, looking at the white sack of donuts. “You have the toy gun?”

Dan sat the coffee in the beverage holder ring on the dashboard. “Yeah,” he said with a mouthful of donut. He reached in his black leather jacket and pulled out a forty five. “It ricochets.” He pulled the trigger, and it went, “ping, ping, ping.”

“Hem, hem,” Michael laughed softly. “That'll do the trick. Let me see it.”

Dan handed him the gun while he finished off the donut and took a sip of the hot coffee.

Michael hefted the gun. “Feels real. I don't think he'll know the difference.”

Michael gave the gun back and stuck his hand into the donut bag, expanding it with his fingers and thumb so he could see inside.

“Whatcha doin'?” Dan inquired.

“Oh.” Michael jerked his hand out of the bag and put both hands in his lap like a naughty boy.

“Go ahead,” Dan laughed. “I bought plenty just in case you changed your mind.”

Michael found a powdered sugar one and satisfied his appetite with it. Afterward, Dan handed him a napkin. He motioned around his mouth to tell Michael where the powdered sugar left its mark. As Michael lifted his water bottle to his lips, a car pulled up into the policeman's driveway.

“This is it,” Dan warned.

They scrambled out of the car and approached Harold Stravinsky as he stepped out of his car. Slender, with prominent cheekbones, round button nose and curly black hair, he seemed startled when Dan said, “Glad to see ya, buddy.” He responded by saying, “Do I know you?” Then Dan pulled the gun and stuck it into his ribs.

“Quiet and nobody gets hurt,” Dan insisted.

“What is this?” Harold demanded.

“You're under arrest for bearing arms without the people's permission. Now move,”

Dan said, shoving him with the gun.

“Arrest? By who?” Harold looked wide-eyed with astonishment. “You're the NPU, aren't you? Well, you won't get away with this.”

“Shut up or we'll tape your mouth.” Dan pulled a plastic tie wire out of his other coat pocket and gave it to Michael. “Here. Tie his hands together with this.”

Michael grabbed Harold's arms and bound his wrists together. Then he grabbed his left arm to hurry him to the waiting sedan.

“I have a roll of duct tape in the back,” Dan said. “You get to drive, kid.”

“Okay.”

Michael climbed into the front while Dan shoved the cop into the back. After scooting in and slamming the door, Michael sped off. Dan taped the cop's mouth and put a black hood over his eyes so he couldn't see where they were taking him.

When they arrived at the garage, two other men, Jeff and Mark, reached into the car and hauled the cop into the garage to be processed and put into a cell. It wasn't much to look at, four walls and a bench long enough to lay down on from the door to the back.

Michael gave up the driver's seat and let Dan drive them home.

“A good night's work,” Dan said as he dropped Michael off.

“I'll say.” Michael got out and looked back into the car, said, “Good night,” and slammed the door. Dan drove off singing at the top of his lungs, “*Home, home on the range, where the deer and the antelope play.*”

When Michael entered his apartment, Maggie asked, “That you?”

“Yeah, it's me,” Micheal said, taking off his coat.

“Have a good time?”

“We sure did.”

* * *

Michael sat listening to the state legislature on the TV when a loud knock came from the front door. Irritated at the interruption, Michael scowled as he got to his feet.

“Someone's at the door,” Maggie called from the back room.

“I'll get it,” Michael said with a deep sigh.

When he opened the door, Michael saw that rough looking blonde hippie he had met in jail.

“Hey, buddy.” It was Sam. “You gotta minute?”

“Sure,” Michael responded.

“Listen.” Sam lowered his voice and put his tattooed arm around Michael's shoulders, directing him away from the door. “Let's talk over here.”

Michael dropped his voice to match Sam's. “What's up?”

“Listen. Henry and Mark have been arrested.” Sam screwed up his face and bit his bottom lip.

“The police got'em? We going to go through this whole thing again?” Michael put his hands on his hips, trying to feel important.

“No. It's the Feds. They got'em. Holding them downtown at the courthouse.”

Michael's lips went numb. “Still,” he said, “we have to stand up for our rights.” He

paused. "How did it happen?"

Sam withdrew his arm and looked at the floor, kicking a rock that had somehow gotten out of the large rubber tree pot in the corner. "It was a set up. The police must have been watching them. Mark called me after they took them downtown. He said they came from behind the cars and the bushes and from around the house. There must have been a dozen Feds armed and wearing bullet proof vests. The policeman they were arresting just laughed at them."

Michael didn't know what to think. He hadn't thought of the FBI. He fumed. "Kirkham is gonna have to know."

Sam walked over to the window between the two apartments and sat on the ledge. He put his elbows on his knees and held his face in his hands. "So, what do you think?"

"Think we'd better desert the garage. Can you go over there and warn what's-his-name?" Michael paced as he tried to think.

"Jeff. He's there."

"Yeah, Jeff. Tell him to vacate."

"What about the police we're keeping?"

"Things are moving too fast. They'll last a couple of days. Maybe an anonymous call from a pay phone to the Feds, and we can abandon our idea for the time being."

Sam and Michael left after telling Maggie they were going to check on a family. Sam dropped Michael off at a pay phone and went to the secret garage.

* * *

The first time Mack and Kirkham heard about the arrest of two constables was on the cable news in the barbershop.

“Two members of the NPU,” came the drone of the newscaster, “calling themselves constables, were arrested today by the FBI on charges of kidnapping several policemen and holding them in a garage. They claimed to be arresting the policemen in the name of the people. After confessing to the federal agents, a SWAT team was sent to the garage which they surrounded. Forcing their way in, they released the kidnapped policemen who were found in little cubicles turned into makeshift cells.”

“Oh my demon!” Kirkham said. He rubbed his face while still holding the scissors he used to cut Mack's hair. “What have they done?”

“Looks like we in deep trouble.” The whites of Mack's eyes grew large.

Kirkham continued combing and clipping Mack's hair as he watched the news. “Have I organized a people to care for themselves or a vigilante?” he asked. “I don't know if I want to be a part of this group any longer.”

“We is part of the group,” Mack asserted. “Looks like they need some help.”

“You're right, Mack.” Kirkham looked over his hair cutting masterpiece and clipped a little here and a little there, and more at the corners. “I can't run away if I've created a monster. We have to create a rescue operation, but it will be in the courts, not like they do it in the movies.”

* * *

Michael had just sat down to lunch with a bologna sandwich. He got a couple of bites down when he heard a hard knock at the door. Someday, he thought, I would like to get a doorbell.

“I'll get it,” Maggie said. “I'm already up.”

When she opened the door, two men in dark suits smiled at her. “May we see your husband, Ma'am?” one of them asked.

“Michael?” She turned to look at her husband inching from his easy chair and putting his plate on the side table. He muted the TV.

Michael wanted to run to the bathroom, hop out the window, and climb down the fire escape, but he forced his legs to take him to the door. When he saw the men, he knew he was in trouble.

They produced badges with bright silver letters of “FBI” stamped on them. Each man grabbed one of Michael's arms while citing the Miranda rights, “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you. Do you understand these rights as they have been read to you?” all the while slipping handcuffs on him.

Michael's stomach sank deeper into his guts. He was no longer hungry. As they took him away, he could hear Maggie asking, “Michael? Where are they taking you. Michael? Michael!” Then she stomped back into the apartments and slammed the door.

* * *

Michael was taken into a room where Dan was being held. He eyed Dan who started laughing. He got up, offered his hand and said, “Well, here we are again.” But instead of shaking Michael's hand, he grabbed him and gave him a hug. They both sat down on a dark orange plastic-covered couch that was in the room facing a desk.

“It isn't exactly a jail,” Dan said, interlocking his hands.

“Not yet.” Michael stretched his legs out to get comfortable and folded his arms. He looked at Dan. “But they will get us there. Just wait.”

“Yeah.” Dan looked across the desk and out a window that showed other offices separated by more windows. “Trying to be a constable seems to be going against the grain.”

He peered into another office and saw a familiar face. “Look who.” He pointed. It was Kirkham talking to what must have been an FBI agent.

“I'll be,” Michael said. “They got him too.”

An agent entered the office and introduced himself. “I'm Michael Dorchette. I'll be your interrogator.” Tall, with a long face and dark hair cut short, military style, the man wore a dark blue suit and tie. Michael watched as he placed a small stack of papers on the desk and sat down. His fingers were extraordinarily long. Marfans, thought Michael. Disease of the connective tissues. Maggie had Marfans.

“Another Michael,” Michael volunteered.

The agent ignored his comment and concentrated on his own agenda. Looking down at the papers, he pointed to Dan, “Dan Moultry?”

“Yes,” Dan replied.

“Live at 145 West Center Street?”

“Yes.”

“Telephone, 897-1234?”

“Yes.”

“Know Bob Kirkham?”

“Yes. He's our file leader. Organized the NPU in our neighborhood.” Dan put his elbows on his knees and then sat back and folded his arms.

“Just answer my questions,” said the agent. “Is Bob Kirkham in charge of the vigilante group known as the Constables?”

“No, and we're not a vigilante group. We're a legal voted-in-by-the-people-of-our-neighborhood officers of the law.” Dan leaned forward as he spoke.

“Whose law?” the agent looked up from his papers. “Who is the man in charge ... your boss?”

“Don't tell him,” Michael whispered.

“It will go better for you if you answer the question,” the agent said in a monotone voice.

“Mack,” Dan answered.

“What's his last name?”

“Don't know his last name.” Dan faced Michael.

“Don't look at me,” he said. “I don't know it.” Michael glared at the agent and said,

“We just know him as Mack. He's a black man. Used to rob stores.”

Dan turned to Michael again. “You don't have to give all the details.”

“Details are fine,” the agent said. “Details will help us get through this a lot faster.”

He went back to his papers and asked. “Who is Edward Murphy?”

“You mean,” asked Dan, “Ed Murphy? He's the owner of Murphy's Market. Turned it into a free store for the NPU.”

“Is he part of this vigilante group?” The agent stared at Dan who wrinkled his eyebrows and pursed his lips in anger.

“I said!” Dan exclaimed.

“Sorry,” the agent said in a deadpan face. “The Constables.” He spoke in a capital “C” thinking the vigilante group was named “The Constables.”

“Let's get this thing straight,” Michael interrupted. “There is no vigilante group called 'The Constables.'”

“That's what I've been told.” The agent studied his papers. “It says here, 'the vigilante group known as The Constables.’”

“We *are* constables,” Michael said, pressing his lips together. “Law officers, voted in by our neighbors. That gives us the authority to act. The vote of the people.”

“So that gives you city-wide authority?” The agent stuck out his chin. “You think you have the right to go anywhere in the city and arrest people, just like police?”

“No,” responded Michael. “We only have authority in our own neighborhoods. Each city is divided up into neighborhoods, like a voting district. Each division appoints

its own constables who not only watch the neighborhood, but watches over them, seeing that everyone's needs are taken care of. But yes, within that area, we have the authority by the vote of the people to arrest anyone breaking the rules.”

“You have authority to arrest the police?” the agent asked.

“If they live in the neighborhood, yes.” Michael cleared his throat.

“And what rules were these policemen breaking?” The agent put his finger to his ear and said, “I know. I was just getting to that.” He paused. He wasn't looking at either Dan or Michael but they perceived that he had a hidden ear phone. “I think it is relevant. Let me do my job.” He paused again as if listening to someone. “Okay.” He turned back to Michael and asked, “What rules were they breaking?”

“Remember that uproar a few months ago where the people marched on city hall?” Michael leaned forward, interlocking his hands once again. It helped to calm his nerves.

The agent lifted the pages of the report in front of him until he found something. “Yes. It says here that you two stopped a policeman and assaulted him while doing his duties.”

“He was carrying a weapon,” Michael answered.

The agent leaned over his desk and raised his voice a little. “All policemen carry weapons.”

“That's what he was arrested for.” Michael leaned back and folded his arms. “He was arrested for carrying arms. It's against the rules.”

“And you just make up the rules as you go along?” The agent smiled for the first

time and leaned back in his chair, raising his arms up and resting the back of his head in his hands. Then he got that dead pan expression again and put his hands down, looking through his papers.

“No,” replied Dan. “We have guidelines based upon The Proclamation.”

“And that is?”

“It's our basic beliefs.”

“Do you think,” the agent continued, “that your beliefs supersede the law?”

Dan took a breath and said, “Our basic belief is that the voice of the people is the law and supersedes all else. We have gone back to the old Anglo-Saxon way of life. They didn't have so many laws as they had common sense. They were governed by the voice of their peers. We are governed by that same voice.”

“So basically,” the agent cocked his head, “you are a vigilante group working outside the law and are lawbreakers. Is that not so?”

“No,” they both exclaimed.

“Not by your belief,” said the agent. He gathered up his papers and stood. “But you are according to the Law, and you will be dealt with by the law.”

Dan and Michael sat in silence, staring at the agent.

“Do you want to be appointed a lawyer, or do you have one you want to call? At this point, it would be good to talk to one.”

“We may have one,” Dan replied. “We will have to talk to Bob Kirkham.”

The agent went to the door, turned, and said, “I'll send him in.”

Bob came in to talk to Michael and Dan. He sat down at the desk which Michael thought very odd. Why didn't he come and sit with them? He was acting like someone in authority, as if he were an FBI agent or a policeman. Did they tell him to do that?

Bob looked at the two. "I am very disappointed in you two. What made you think it was necessary to arrest the police?"

Dan spoke first. "It all started when we asked this one patrolman not to bring weapons into our neighborhood."

"And you got arrested for interfering with the duties of a policeman." Bob had that same deadpan face the FBI agent had. "The NPU was able to get you out of that first scrape, but this is more serious. It's kidnapping. It may take years to get you out of jail."

Michael said, "They wanted to know if we had a lawyer we wanted to talk to."

"Yes," continued Bob, "I can get you a lawyer. You're going to need one. I just hope you haven't gone too far with this. It's not a local matter now."

Bob paused which opened the door for Michael to say something. "Bob?" he asked.

"Yes, Michael," Bob answered. "What is it?"

"About my job at the state capital."

"I'm sorry," Bob apologized. "I've had to appoint someone else."

"Okay." Michael looked down at the floor. That was reasonable, he thought. I'm in jail anyway, or will be shortly.

* * *

Michael and Dan sat in a cell with an open toilet facing the bars, a padded bench fastened to the wall, and a bunk bed trussed up against the other wall. They sat on the bench and stared at a television through the bars. It was one of several TVs on a central post which all the cells faced. Two guards set at the bottom of the post behind circular desks, both of which were electronic control panels for the cells, TVs, outer doors, lights, and intercom. The two of them could keep an eye on each of the prisoners.

“I can see Sam,” Michael said. “Hi, Sam!”

“Keep it down,” one of the guards called out.

Breaking News interrupted the game show that was on. There seemed to be great excitement in the otherwise monotone voice. “People of this city have taken to the streets. Five months ago there was a march on city hall by the NPU. It turned out to be a fiasco ending up in the arrest of many of the marchers. Today, it looks like the whole city is out on the streets. They are not marching on the government buildings alone, but the crowds are gathering on every street of the downtown area and in the malls. They are holding placards saying, 'Don't Tread on US', 'Let Our People Go', 'Police Have No Authority', and others such as 'Government Has No Rights'.”

All the inmates clapped and yelled. A guard called out, “Hold it down fellas, or we'll turn on the water. All we have to do is push a button and you will get a forced shower.”

Michael laughed softly and rubbed his hands together. “Is that because of us do you think?”

“Could be.” Dan laughed. “Looks like we have more support than we thought.”

“Riot police,” continued the newscaster, “have been called out into all sections of the city. Troopers have been brought in to support them from the whole county. As we can see from the cameras, the beating of citizens is starting to happen and Molotov cocktails are being thrown at the police. Craig Dell is on the scene outside of the courthouse. Craig, what do you see from your location, and what are the prospects?”

A dark haired heavysset newscaster appeared with a backdrop of crowds of people pushing at the police who held clear polycarbonate shields, wore black helmets, and were defending themselves by hammering on people's heads with billy clubs. “Martha,” Craig started, “there is nowhere for the people to go except to push forward. The crowd around the courthouse is too thick for anyone to escape. There is blood everywhere as people push past the police barricade. The police are getting caught up in the crowd, and now, they are backing down. Martha, the police are backing down. Now they are shooting tear gas into the crowd, yet, the crowd persists. On the sidelines, people are pushing their way out while others from the nearby streets are taking their place. The grounds around the government buildings are a mad-house. The police are trying to push the crowd back, but they still come.”

“Thank you Craig Dell. We will now go inside the courthouse where Martha McVeigh is interviewing Councilman Townsend.”

“What are your plans, councilman?” rolled off the lips of the beautiful Martha.

“Right now, we have bolted the doors.” The camera caught the scared look in

Townsend's eyes. "We are calling in the National Guard for help. The police combined with the state troopers in the area are just not enough to hold back the crowd."

"It is obvious that the whole city is out on the streets. Do you know what caused this? What has the leadership of this city done to anger so many people?" Martha's expression showed naivety and curiosity as her eyebrows lifted.

"When we saw that some of the police were disappearing, we called in the FBI. A lot of the vigilantes who call themselves The Constables were arrested. Then all hell broke loose when you took a personal interest and had to get it on the news."

"Thank you Mr. Townsend." Martha looked away from him and faced the noise that was now coming from the front and side doors. She motioned to the cameraman. He turned and the TV screen showed people crashing through the shattered glass of broken doors. "It appears," she announced, "that this building is now under attack." She, Townsend and the cameraman moved up the marble staircase to get out of the way, but people crowded the stairs as well as the main hallway. As people bumped the cameraman, the TV picture wobbled, but it was clear that the courthouse was being taken over.

Again, the constables in their cells yelled and clapped. They were warned again by the guards, but several prisoners shouted obscenities at them.

Michael and Dan watched speechless the news broadcast of the riots taking place in the city. They didn't understand it completely, but they thought maybe they had done some good to the people of their neighborhood. Somebody out there liked them ... and

the rest of the constables.

* * *

Helicopters were heard overhead. They came in swarms. Green Army trucks full of soldiers filed into the city emptying their deadly contents onto every street corner. The city was under siege. With rifles pointed at them, the people left the streets in tears and rushed back to their homes and businesses.

Experiencing massive pain in their hearts, the city sighed. Depression and fear took hold of some, but others became more angry. Even though the NPU had sworn non-violence, they would have to make a stand or all would be lost. Miss Aiken led one group. It was decided that private property in their neighborhood would belong to the people and not to the landlords. Notices were sent to the landlords that their land and buildings had been confiscated by the people. A few days after that, Miss Aiken ordered a meeting to take place in front of her apartment building.

“What about Mister Murphy's store?” Mrs. Parks asked. “What will happen when we take over his store?”

“Oh, my dear,” Miss Aiken responded. “Didn't you know, he already donated his store to the NPU months ago?”

“No, I didn't,” Mrs. Parks said, tightening her face and squeezing her handkerchief in embarrassment.

Miss Aiken turned to the other members of her group as she glanced up at the helicopter passing overhead. About a hundred people stood around in the street between the apartments and Ed Murphy's store. "Now, has everyone signed the petition?"

There was a unanimous "Yes!"

"Okay," Miss Aiken said as she lifted the petition for everyone to see. "We agree never to pay rent, and that the land in our neighborhood belongs to us. Now, we know that under marshal law, a gathering of people, like we are doing here, is not an acceptable practice."

There was some laughter from the group.

"We know that the National Guard is watching from those helicopters up there, and they will be here soon to disperse us. We must stand our ground and prove them, even ask them to join us. We must be brave. We will do a sit-in. Everyone come into the garden between the two arms of the apartments. It will be harder for them to route us out. We will talk about the principles that sustain us."

The people of the neighborhood walked into the garden and sat around on the cement shoulders of the raised plots. Some of them sat on the sidewalks and out on the streets. Some had brought their own chairs. Miss Aiken then started reviewing the Proclamation of the People.

Soon, the tramp, tramp, tramp of marching men sounded in the distance. As a group, heads turned to see a platoon of army green running on the double down the street. Everyone stood. A command was shouted and the troops aimed their rifles at the crowd.

The officer in charge then shouted an order at the people. “You will disperse and return to your homes!”

Miss Aiken commanded, “Sit down. We will not move.”

“Ma'am,” barked the officer, “if you don't move, we will be forced to remove you.”

Miss Aiken noticed that on the heels of the military came the cameras of the press. There were two vans that turned down the street, one from each direction. Reporters poured out of them recording the actions of the soldiers and citizens. Only in America, she thought.

The officer looked back from his position in front of his troops and shouted, “Get those cameras out of here!” There was a scuffle, but other cameras showed up, getting everything that was happening. It was the national press.

“What you are doing here,” shouted Miss Aiken, “is being broadcast to the whole nation. First you took an oath to uphold the Constitution of the United States, then you blatantly violated that Constitution by trying to disperse an orderly gathering, and now you are trying to squelch the press. Two inalienable rights you have sworn to uphold.”

The officer took out a pistol and fired it into the air. “This city,” he cried, “is under marshal law. Your constitutional privileges have been suspended. You will do as ordered, or we will open fire.”

An elderly couple came forward and confronted the officer. “Jimmy?” asked the old woman. She was small and wrinkled, crowned by shiny white hair and wore a pink print dress. “Jimmy, is that you?”

The crowd laughed, and the cameras came in closer.

“Grandma?” the lieutenant asked. “What are you doing in this mob? You can't be here and interfere with my duties. Now go on home so you won't get hurt. You too Grandpa.”

The troops behind him relaxed as if they weren't sure what to do.

“We live here too. We have a right to be here,” said the old woman. “Jimmy?” She asked. “Are you going to shoot us? Are you going to shoot your own grandparents? Shame on you, Jimmy. Now you get yourself together and take these men and leave. ”

The lieutenant started swearing. He was visibly upset. His grandparents backed up into the crowd and hid behind their neighbors. He stood there for a moment. Then he ordered his men to retreat.

Two men in dark blue suits came from behind the troops. One of them, bald and slightly chubby, commanded him to do his duty. “You can't leave!” he said waving a folded paper at the officer. “What about my apartments? I have an order from the judge for them to vacate. You are supposed to order them out of that building, not send them back home. What are you going to do? You can't leave!”

Then the other man, young, skinny with black hair and a thin mustache, said with his hands on his hips, “Look here. I represent a lot of landlords that have property in this area. You have your orders. The bank will lose a lot of money if these people aren't stopped. You leave and we will have to complain to your superiors.”

“Company! Harms! Forward right, march!” The lieutenant turned to the two self-

important men and said, “Do what you have to do, gentlemen. I cannot fire upon civilians,” and off he marched with his men.

* * *

Michael lay in his bunk and watched TV through the cell bars. The trumpet sounds of the national news echoed through the building. He poked his head down to see Dan reading a book. “Hey, Dan,” he said. “The news is coming on. They said earlier they have something important to say.”

Dan put his book on his chest and propped his head with his crossed arms. They both stared at the screen. A suave newscaster came on with slicked back hair and wide smile.

“Breaking news. Several major cities today went to the streets in support of a small Illinois town under marshal law. Riots have broken out in Chicago, New York, Washington, Atlanta, Houston, Denver, Los Angeles, and many smaller cities. There is a peaceful march down Main Street in Salt Lake City. The president ordered marshal law around the country. James Clark Maxwell, when cornered, said that the American people are tired of the corrupt local governments and their freedoms being trampled upon. He said that he hopes that a peaceful solution will be found and that there will be a reconciliation between these governments and the NPU.”

“Gosh.” Michael breathed out slowly. “I didn't know the NPU was so widespread.”

“Yeah,” Dan said. “It's all over the nation. It's catching on like wildfire. People are fed up with a government that isn't for the people. There's no more representation in the

cities or the state legislatures, not to mention the federal government. The governments think they can kick us around and do whatever they well please. It isn't going easy for them. We're taking control.”

“Behind bars?” Michael chuckled.

“I think the people are fed up. I think the silent majority is finally speaking.” Dan smiled up at Michael and went back to his book.

Chapter Eight

With the city under martial law and National Guardsmen walking the streets, talks between the city and county governments and the NPU were at the table. James Clark Maxwell was there to arbitrate over the proceedings. Bob Kirkham, the barber, and Ben Brown, the banker, were the major speakers. The news media was not invited, although, the meeting was broadcast on a local station owned by the city.

“As monitor,” James Maxwell began, “I will allow each party no more than two minutes at a time. You can banter back and forth if you want, but if you can't get along, I will do the talking.” He paused and looked around the table. The mayor, skinny with an olive complexion and black hair, wearing a dark suit and tie, sat across from Bob Kirkham and Ben Brown. Townsend sat to the right of the mayor, and the chief of police, broad chested, pockmarked face and gray hair in his blue uniform, sat on the left. The sheriff, heavy set, wearing his khaki suit with its badges on each shoulder, sat across from Maxwell. At the head of the oval table, he looked at each one of them and asked, “Is that okay with both parties?”

Kirkham and Townsend both said, “Yes.”

“Then,” Maxwell said, looking down at the papers in front of him, “I will read the complaint against the NPU who will ask questions to the mayor, and then the talks can begin.”

“It says here,” Maxwell said, holding up a paper to read, “that the NPU appointed

their own constables and proceeded to enforce their own laws upon the police department by arresting policemen that lived in their neighborhoods. Now the wording on this paper is a little different than the way I interpreted it. It actually says that the NPU formed themselves into a vigilante group and kidnapped policemen, contrary to the laws of the land. The FBI was called in, the men were found, and released by a SWAT team.

“Now the desire of the NPU is that all policemen be voluntary and voted into office. That is, mercenaries should be done away with and constables be put in their place whether they be members of the NPU or not. The desire of the city and county governments is that the NPU continue to be law abiding and let the government as elected by the people continue to operate as before.”

Maxwell put the paper down. “Let's start with Bob Kirkham.”

Bob took a deep breath. “Mister Mayor, Chief Bragg, Mister Townsend, and Sheriff Coombs, have each of you read the Proclamation of the People?”

Mayor Merced turned to Townsend to allow him to answer. Townsend cleared his throat. “What has that to do with anything?”

“It's a fair question,” Maxwell responded.

“Yes,” Townsend said. “Yes we have. We were all surprised at such a document and considered it to be, excuse me Mister Maxwell, the ravings of a madman. It was nothing we had ever encountered before. It was close to communist or socialist propaganda, and so we deemed it as such.”

“Did you ever consider,” Kirkham asked, “that it might be the best we knew how

to express ourselves, we being just common people? Most of us don't have a college education, and we are not lawyers.”

“No,” said Townsend. “What has this got to do with it, anyway? Let's get down to business here and talk about how we can get back to living orderly lives.”

Kirkham scratched his head. “That's what we're trying to do. I propose you let us show you a picture of our point of view. We already know your point of view. We've lived with it most of our lives.”

“And what point of view,” Townsend asked, “have you lived with most of your life, Mister Kirkham?”

“That the town council runs the town instead of the people. It's the same with the state legislature, and the Congress, as far as that goes. There's no representation anymore. The way things are set up, the only people that get represented is special interest groups. That's why the NPU was organized, to be a special interest group that represents the people.”

Townsend shuffled in his chair. “Then why don't you act your part? Send in some representatives instead of acting on your own as though we didn't exist at all. We'll be glad to listen.”

Kirkham glanced at Brown who took up the conversation.

“That hasn't worked in the past. Why do you think it will work now? Will you actually consider our proposals, such as having all the police voted into office?”

Mayor Merced, acknowledging Ben Brown as a rich banker whose business was

greatly respected and needed in the community, deferred to answer. “Mister Brown, we are willing to hear anyone that comes to our town meetings. The fact is, in the past, those meetings were relatively empty. You didn't have to organize yourselves into a radical group to get our attention. All you had to do is to show up. As far as the police are concerned ... Chief?”

Chief Bragg's face turned red in anger. “Replacing the police is unthinkable,” he barked. “That plan of action will put the citizens of this city in danger. Why, even listening to this constable thing is just us being polite to you. We can't go back to the good old days when constables roamed the streets unarmed. We can't wage a war that way.”

Maxwell got edgy thinking the mayor and police chief were going to go overtime, so he reminded them, “Just two minutes, fellows. Remember.”

The Mayor turned to Maxwell in a huff. “We know. We know. It's Ben's turn.”

“The reason the people of this city have organized themselves,” Brown said, “isn't just because of the city government. It's because society has turned in against itself. The needs of the people are too great and society isn't answering those needs. Medical care is too expensive for most people. It's the high cost of living all around. The city government is deaf to the will of the people.”

“I said before,” the mayor emphasized, “we're willing to listen if the people will just show up. They don't have to go behind our backs and form vigilante groups.”

“You won't hear,” Kirkham interjected, “even if we do show up. Your ears are

closed because of your ideology.”

“Ideology?” Townsend exclaimed. “It has nothing to do with ideology. Don't be stupid. We're all Americans. We have the same ideology. Unless you're a communist. Are you a communist, Mister Kirkham?”

“The ideology of the people here is at a turning point, Mister Townsend,” Kirkham answered, “and you are all behind the times. If your ideology is based upon capitalism or any other kind of -ism you won't understand the needs of the people of this city. Have you visited the people personally and talked about all their troubles without campaigning?”

“I have talked to the people during my last campaign,” Townsend complained. “I got to know the people. Most of them voted for me.”

“I have followed the town council's activities.” Kirkham winked. “Your priorities seem to be to amass wealth. You take away people's homes to create expensive condos; you take away people's homes to expand streets; you take away people's homes to create parks; and you are always bowing to big business, to the ultra rich, when giving away other people's property.”

“We deny these allegations,” Townsend said unemotionally. “We create jobs. We raise the standard of living. This city used to be a hick town until people like us started caring for it. It went nearly a century without any improvements at all.”

The mayor jumped in. “By your own proclamation, you care nil for private property. What will you do eventually but take away property rights from the people of this city?”

“I think,” interjected Maxwell, “we are getting off the agenda a little bit. Can we go back to the need of getting rid of mercenaries?”

“That's out of the question,” replied Chief Bragg. “Every city needs police to keep the streets clean of vermin.”

“Don't you think, Chief,” Kirkham replied, “that if the emphasis were changed a little bit that we would have fewer criminals?”

“Emphasis on what?” the chief asked.

“On the people's needs,” Kirkham said. “For example, if a policeman's duties included visiting the sick and the afflicted, caring for the poor, standing up for the rights of the widow and fatherless, seeing that their needs were met. Don't you think we could fight crime that way? We know that more than half the crime comes from homes in which the conflict is financial. If that burden were taken away, that segment of crime would disappear.”

The Chief of Police laughed. “A policeman is a soldier, not a preacher. You're talking about the duties of a priest, by God!”

“By God is right,” Brown said. “Did you know that Moses, when he had all the complaints he could handle, wished that all Israel were prophets? If they had been, Moses would have had no trouble, but for some people, that can't be. Have you ever heard of Confucius?”

“Everyone's heard of him,” Chief Bragg said with lifted eyebrows. “What of it?”

“He said,” said Mister Brown, “that if the rulers would be virtuous, so would the

people. The ruler is as the wind, and the people are as grass. When the wind blows, the grass bends.”

“And what does that mean?” Chief Bragg exclaimed, his face turning red again.

“You implying that police are corrupt?”

“I’m simply saying that this city needs better leadership,” Kirkham said, folding his arms.

“Then run for mayor,” Townsend suggested.

“Technically, Mister Mayor,” Brown interjected, “Kirkham and I are the mayor of this city, only running parallel to your own authority.”

“Is that so?” The mayor raised his index finger. “I don’t think that’s legal, and I think you are building on clouds. Nothing you believe in, and nothing about your organization is substantial. Let’s get back to the subject. We are more organized, we have a better infrastructure, and we are more experienced. The police are more equipped to fight crime. They are trained to do that. All you can offer is a neighborhood watch group, which we will support if they are registered with the police. But they don’t have any authority to do anything, just report a crime if they see one. The police will take care of the rest as they have always done.” The mayor pressed his fingertip onto the table.

“Yeah,” the police chief agreed.

“No one,” Kirkham said, “has authority except by the vote of the people. The police may have the ability to fight crime, but they don’t have the authority. They are merely hired mercenaries. This is one of our main concerns.”

“The city charter gives us the authority,” Chief Bragg said confidently.

“That's where we disagree.” Brown furrowed his eyebrows.

“How can we come to an agreement?” Maxwell asked.

“We can't,” the mayor argued. “Especially when behind our backs, taking over private property is already occurring, which America will not stand for.”

“It is Americans,” Kirkham said calmly, “who are demanding it.”

“Let me say,” Maxwell intervened, “that private property is not on the agenda.”

“Then put it on the agenda, by damn!” the mayor demanded.

“Okay” Maxwell said, writing on the paper in front of him. “I have just had an inspiration. Maybe the idea of constables and the idea of private property, these two conflicts, can cancel each other.”

“How's that?” Townsend asked.

“Ben?” Maxwell threw the ball back into his court.

“I'll tell you, all of you,” Ben said, scanning the other eyes at the table. “I had the same thought. We may be able to bring a compromise to the table.”

“What would that be?” the mayor asked, slapping his hands onto the table.

“We will stage an election,” Ben said, “with Bob and me running for mayor, and at the same time have the people vote on giving authority to the police by voting each man to the office of constable. And ... each constable will be assigned to a specific neighborhood.”

“That doesn't answer our concern,” Townsend said, “about the NPU taking over

private property.”

Kirkham answered. “Maybe, if we can persuade the people to let the landlords have their property back, and if we can get our people to pay half their rent and give the extra money over to people who cannot pay rent, will that satisfy you?”

The city men looked at each other. “It's simple,” Ben said. “You let us vote the police into office, we withdraw our constables except as a neighborhood watch group, and you get the landlords to cut their rent in half. We will meet each other half way on the playing field.”

“And what,” asked the mayor, “about the landlords who will not comply?”

“I'm sure,” Kirkham said, “that you have enough clout to pull it off. And besides, if they don't comply, we have the vote of the people to back us up.”

“And do you think,” asked Mayor Merced, “you can out campaign and out connive us, who have been in office more than twenty years?”

“It will be a challenge, Mayor,” Ben said.

“Now,” Maxwell asked, “let's see if we can get the military out of this city.”

* * *

The commander over National Guard operations in the city was not so easily moved. The state governor was the only one who could release him, so both the mayor's office and the NPU contacted the governor. When the military was first brought in, the city charter had been nullified, so now, the National Guard could not leave without a review of the charter to reinstate it. It had to be modified to accept the democratic process

so people could again vote. Ben Brown and Bob Kirkham made sure they were on the committee to renew the charter. Provision was made to allow the people to vote on any motion that would go before the city council. That made it possible for the people to have a say on what went on within the city government. The city became a true democracy.

There was a compromise between city government and the NPU. Police were voted into office and walked their beats, thus becoming more available to serve the public. Landlords ranted and raved in vain about having to lower their rents.

Michael and Dan and the rest of the constables managed to escape prosecution after the governor granted them pardon. All charges were dropped, but the FBI were put in as observers to see that no vigilante group was again formed. After having been in jail for five months, the constables went back to helping their neighbors, working at the service stores, and on the farm.

* * *

Michael stood outside the apartments staring up at the windows where he knew Maggie would be waiting for him. She had never come to see him in jail. Maybe they hadn't allowed it. He knew she was angry at him for getting arrested. He had lied to her. He hadn't wanted her to get into the same trouble as he and the others. He would have to face her now and live with the aftermath.

He took his hands out of his pockets and strode through the little enclosure, went over to the left stairwell and opened the glass door. They haven't fixed that door, he thought. It still sticks. Maybe it kept shut that way, but it was never all the way closed. It

shut just shy of the door jamb. There was the old mail box they never used anymore. The old address was above it. Imagine, if they were still using that mailbox, he pondered, our address would be one number off. Through the other glass door to his left that led out to the parking lot, he could see the new aluminum mailbox that housed little compartments for each apartment sitting on its pedestal. He went out the door and down the steps. He thought it funny that the ground was lower in back of the apartments than in front. He opened his mail box with his own key and checked for mail. There was none. But it was nice to be back home and checking on things. He looked up at the fire escape and saw the window to his bathroom.

That was the famous fire escape where he had to climb up several times in his Sunday suit to force open the bathroom window because he had forgotten the front door key. That fire escape held one particular bad memory. He had climbed out of the bathroom window with a camera to take a picture of a beautiful sunset and had fallen into the hole where the ladder comes through, badly bruising his shins. That had been a horrible day.

As he walked back up to the stairwell, through the door, and up the stairs, he hoped this day would not be another horrible day.

When he arrived at his door, the only one at the far end of the hall, he noticed that the door was locked, so he got out his keys and opened it. "Maggie," he announced, "I'm home."

Maggie was busy in the kitchen and didn't answer. The table by the kitchen

window was set for dinner with lilacs and roses in a fluted vase as the center piece. The apartment smelled like pot roast and flowers.

He looked around at the apartment. It was all cleaned up. Standing at the end of the counter that separated the kitchen and living room with his hands in his pockets, he stared at Maggie. "Hello," he said. Maggie turned around with a dish of green beans which she placed on the table. She was smiling really big as though she was excited about something. But she still wasn't talking. When she got everything on the table, she finally said, "Well, sit down. I made your favorite."

They held hands across the table while Michael said the blessing on the food. Maggie didn't eat. She sat there smiling with tears running down her face. It was embarrassing to look at and Michael wanted to eat. He was starving. The smell of the roast and potatoes was compelling. They continued holding hands. Michael sighed and Maggie began talking. She listed all the things she did to get ready for him to come home. She had to do the shopping, clean up the apartment, and make the dinner, so she would have everything ready when he walked in the door. She was so glad that he was home. When it occurred to her that she was preventing him from eating, she let go of his hand, and they ate a nice dinner.

Book Two

Chapter One

James O'Reilly came from parents born in Northern Ireland. They emigrated to America to escape the violence between Catholics and Protestants. He married a nice Catholic girl and settled down in a small Illinois town just south of Chicago. After being drafted into the Army he was sent to Vietnam and killed in an ambush by the Vietcong. His son James was left with his grandparents while his mother went off to work in another town. She came to see him several times, and when he turned eight, she showed up with a man. After that, he never saw her again. His grandparents called him Jimmy.

After entering Illinois State, Jimmy joined the National Guard. He went to training on the weekends and studied history during the week. After entering law school, he served two years in Afghanistan fighting the Taliban then returned to pick up his studies.

A national emergency sent his unit to his home town. It brought back memories. As a boy in school there, he had learned about the pioneers who built the town up from log cabins and corduroy roads. This sparked his interest in history.

He roamed the town on patrol and acted as tour guide to his buddies, who called him O'Reilly. He showed them the schools he attended, where he had wined and dined the girls, what movies he saw at the theater, and where he went on picnics with his grandparents. There were long conversations, times when everyone was silent, and times

they goofed off and took girls to the bars or restaurants. Sometimes they talked to the residents of the town trying to understand the riots for which they were called in.

One Sunday, O'Reilly, and three friends from his unit, Cordon, Priestly, and Turley lounged in their bunks which were located in the gymnasium of an abandoned school. O'Reilly had a flat face and square jaw and stood almost six feet. His broad chest made his body appear square. Cordon, a giant black with huge lips, had a flat head as though someone had sliced the top straight off. The group shortened his name to Cord. Priestly was over six feet and slim with a long face. They often called him Rubber Man because of his ability to contort himself into a knot. He would get angry when they called him that because of its darker implications. Turley had an oval face. He wasn't fat, just stout, and was so strong that he could lay between two chairs and people could sit on him without him bending.

“How about that chick on 5th Avenue yesterday?” Priestly interjected into the conversation. He made the sound of a sick wolf.

“Your mind is like water, Priestly,” Cord said.

“What do you mean, Cord?” Priestly shot back. “You're the one with water on the brain.”

“Your mind always sinks to the lowest point.” Cord laughed as Priestly reached down from the top bunk and swatted him with a comic book.

“As I was saying,” O'Reilly continued, “what right do we have coming here to my own hometown and bothering these people? What did they do except express their

democratic rights?”

“They rioted,” Turley said. “They got out of hand.” He rolled onto his side to see O'Reilly below.

“Yeah!” O'Reilly exclaimed. “Just like a wave beating against the rocks. You know that a river runs smoothly until it hits a bunch of rocks. Then it turns into rapids. Well, we've talked to a lot of people in this town, and they all agree that if they had been left alone, if the police hadn't interfered, they would have had a peaceful demonstration. Nothing would have happened, and we wouldn't be here. I would still be in school.”

“Yeah,” Cord said. “You would be bored. You weren't bored in Afghanistan.”

“I think I will enter into politics,” Priestly said.

“What would you do?” Turley asked. “Take up with your secretary and be run out of office?”

“Don't you know,” Priestly said, “that if you spend just one term in Congress, that you would be set up for life?”

“Yeah,” O'Reilly said with an imitation drawl, “and it makes my blood boil. Those reps sit up there on their fat asses and vote themselves huge bonuses just like rich corporate magnates and get richer while people in Appalachia are starving.”

“That's for me,” Priestly said.

“You're a lazy bum,” Cord said.

“You didn't think so,” Priestly responded, “on that ridge in Afghan. None of us would be alive if I hadn't acted then.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Cord ribbed. “We hear the glory of ancient heroes. Right now, you're a lazy bum laying on your bunk building air castles.”

“Cut it out, you two.” O'Reilly clapped his hands and leaned up on his elbow to confront the two of them. “I was trying to talk about something important here. We should be out helping people. We've spent our time with hurricane victims, flood victims, and the like. We enjoyed ourselves as much as we did fighting for our lives against the Taliban. Now we're stuck here acting like policemen against our own people.”

“That's true,” Cord commented.

“Yeah,” Turley said.

“I'll even agree on that,” Priestly joined in. “But what can we do here? All we can do is search for people to arrest and look for girls now and then.”

The other three threw their pillows at Priestly, laughed and teased him about girls.

* * *

While on patrol, walking down Main Street, O'Reilly and his three buddies stopped a woman to talk to her. She wore her gray-streaked hair long, reaching almost to her elbows. Her eyes were hidden by large thick glasses, had a long face and was wide, but not chubby. It being their job to get information about the social network set up in the city, they were also interested in the people's opinions. O'Reilly asked her name.

“Maggie Beaty,” she said. Her eyebrows pushed up into the middle of her forehead, looking stressed. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” the lieutenant said. “We just want to get to know the people. You see, I grew

up here, and there are a lot of the people I don't know anymore.”

“Oh,” she said. Her heart slowed down as she took a deep breath.

“So, where you from?” Cord asked.

“We came up here from Texas,” she said, adjusting a large package in her hands.

“The Panhandle.”

“So what made you and your husband come up here?” O'Reilly asked. Then seeing that she was having trouble with the package, he said, “Oh, let me carry this for you. We can walk with you.”

“We originally moved down to Texas from Utah where Michael was going to school.” She started walking again. “But after a couple of years of living with his parents, his mother invited us to leave and visit his aunt up here. Well, after moving in with her, she died, so we had to find a place of our own. But anyway, he ran out of work down there in Texas. He had worked at a race car factory, running some robots, but,” and she laughed, “he pushed the wrong button and broke one of them. He's been doing janitorial work ever since.”

“That's quite a story,” O'Reilly said. “You have good neighbors?”

“Oh, yes,” she smiled. “I've never lived in a place where we knew all our neighbors. Usually, people keep to themselves, but here, everyone is so friendly. I guess it's because they are so organized.”

“You mean the NPU?” O'Reilly asked, hefting the box, shaking it a little to see if he could guess what was in it.”

Maggie noticed what he was doing and said, “Oh, it's just some old clothes I'm taking to the NPU Store. An elderly lady I know from a genealogy society called me up and asked me to take them.”

“Do you walk all that way?” Priestly asked, getting interested in the conversation.

“Oh, no. I couldn't do that,” she said. “I take the bus.”

“Is this your usual thing?” Turley asked.

“No, I'm just doing a favor. Usually it's the constables that go out and find donations.” Maggie approached a bench at the curb. “Well, this is my stop. You can just put the box down on the bench. Thank you.”

“You're welcome, Ma'am,” O'Reilly said, tipping his hat. “We'd love to sit and talk, but we've got to keep moving.”

Maggie turned her head as much as she could and said, “Well, have a good day, soldier.”

“Will do, Ma'am,” O'Reilly said as he and the others moved on with their machine guns swinging from their shoulders.

* * *

O'Reilly and his buddies found themselves walking down a tree covered lane with a canopy of green. Bright green light shone from overhead, an act of the leaves filtering the sun's rays. The sounds of birds, a lawnmower, a radio playing classical music, and soft conversations drifted through the air. The houses were large boxes with heavy porches with roofs held up by thick columns of differing shapes, some round, some

square, some pyramidal.

There weren't many people walking down the sidewalk, so when they saw a single woman in her fifties walking towards them, O'Reilly said, "Ma'am," tipping his green hat. The group opened up to let her pass, but then he asked, "Excuse me Ma'am. Why is it that we find very few men on the streets?"

She turned around to answer. She wore a dark dress with bright colored flowers dotting the fabric. Her nose and chin were sharp, and her black rimmed glasses framed dark blue eyes. Her gray hair drawn back and tied in a bun donned a straw hat with artificial flowers. "Perhaps they are all working, young man."

"I mean, Ma'am," O'Reilly pointed out, "that even at night, we see very little presence of the men in this town."

"Well," she responded. "Most of them have been arrested and are in jail. I thought you soldiers would know that. Isn't that why you were brought in, because of their arrest?"

"Ma'am," Cord interrupted. "We came because of the riots."

"Well," the woman said with a bit of indignation. "If you had noticed then, you would have seen that most of the rioters were women."

"I'm sorry, Ma'am," O'Reilly said, "What were the men arrested for?"

"For doing their duty as constables," she said flatly.

"And what is a constable?" Priestly asked with a laugh. His smile remained as he waited for an answer.

“A constable,” the woman said, putting her fists on her hips, “is a protector. He takes care of the needs of the people. He visits each family he is assigned to and sees to it that there is no poverty, or illness, or fighting. He walks the streets and sees to it that there is no crime. He's a guardian angel.”

“That's a lot for one man to do,” Turley said, adjusting his gun.

“They go two by two.” She moved her straw purse that matched her hat under her left arm and added, “They also ask for donations throughout the city for the NPU Store.”

“We've heard of that before,” O'Reilly said. “What is this NPU Store? Is it like Goodwill Industries?”

“Much more,” the woman said with pride, smiling. “It is a Goodwill and a food coalition all in one. Plus, there is an employment office, a free law office and all sorts of help you might need, all provided by the NPU.”

“These constables, Ma'am,” O'Reilly asked, “are they considered officers of the law, like the police?”

“That's one of their duties,” she said, “yes. Now if you will excuse me, I must be going. I have an appointment to see a dear lady that needs my help.”

“NPU help, I would assume,” Turley said.

“You bet,” said the woman as she turned to go.

“What is your name, Ma'am?” O'Reilly asked.

“Margaret,” she called back. “Margaret Hartford.”

O'Reilly stepped toward the leaving lady. “Just one more question, Ma'am.”

“Yes ... what is it soldier?” Margaret turned with the look of exasperation and impatience on her face.

“Is your husband one of these constables?”

“Yes. Yes he is. Now, I must go.”

“Okay.” O'Reilly raised his hand to wave her on. “Have a good day Mrs. Hartford.”

He turned back to his buddies. “Let's go guys.”

Priestly laughed. “What a bitch!”

“I wonder about this NPU,” O'Reilly said wistfully as they walked down the lane in their slow pace.

“Sounds like they take care of their own,” Turley commented.

“I've read up on that organization,” Cord said. “Started by an upstart Maxwell Smart.”

“Clark Maxwell,” O'Reilly corrected.

Cord laughed. “Just joking.”

“There's something happening to America,” O'Reilly said.

Priestly answered. “The liberals are taking over with their communist ideals.”

“Not quite communist, not quite socialist,” Cord said. He looked both ways as they started crossing the street. “And they are very democratic. I don't mean they are affiliated with the Democrats, either.”

“Yeah,” Priestly affirmed. “They get together and organize themselves and think they can put aside all the laws of the land and trample on capitalism.”

* * *

O'Reilly and his buddies strolled into the poorer side of town, called Rose City Park. The buildings needed painting and repair. Different layers of paint flaked off the old red bricks which were turning to dust underneath. Coca Cola or cigar signs showed through the worn layers. There was not one brick with a sharp edge on any building. Zoning laws were not adhered to in this area. Small businesses were mixed in with rows of homes that stunk like stale fried potatoes and onions. Most of the people here were black.

“Here,” O'Reilly said, “is the neatest side of town. You can get anything you would ever want. You'll find the best kinds of food.”

“I don't want no black girl,” Priestly said, turning his nose to the air.

“Don't worry,” Cord huffed in his deep, grinding voice. “They don't want you either.”

Passing by an alley as they approached the main business street, they saw a gang of hoods beating up some hapless chap. Without any orders, the four of them rushed in with their machine guns pointing, ready to fire.

“Halt!” O'Reilly commanded. “Stand with your hands in the air!”

The thugs were Tony, tall and slender, Mikie, who had braids like the Medusa, Leo, whose hair resembled the Sphinx, and Buba, who looked like a gorilla. Mack Jones stood in the middle of them and didn't know whether to put his hands up or not. He was the one they were beating on. But his hands went up slowly too.

“You!” O'Reilly pointed to Mack with his gun. “Stand over there.” He gestured to his right. “Turley, call a transport ... and an ambulance. You four sit on the ground with your hands behind your heads.”

Tony didn't comply and started running down the alley. O'Reilly fired in the air. Tony kept running. O'Reilly fired a round at his feet, making the dust fly. Tony, shaking, stopped with his hands up, shouting, “Don't shoot, man, don't shoot.”

“Get back here right now!” O'Reilly yelled. “Sit down!”

This time, Tony complied and sat with his friends, cursing under his breath.

Cord approached Mack who had a busted lip. His face was spattered with blood.

“Man, I ...” Mack pleaded.

“You okay?” Cord asked. “Sit down and rest.” He squatted on his haunches to talk to the boy. “How bad is it? Your ribs hurt?”

“Man, my whole body hurt.” Mack rolled his eyes. “Thanks.”

“We'll get you taken care of. Don't worry.” Cord glanced at the other guys. “And they won't bother you anymore.”

A green army van came rushing around the corner and into the alley. The driver got out and opened the back doors. The four brutes were rounded up and marched into the back. O'Reilly slammed the doors and locked them. The van sped off with its siren screaming.

“Turley, you and Priestly hop in the front and take these four to the compound.”

O'Reilly jerked his head at Cord and Mack. “We'll wait here for the ambulance. Meet us

at the hospital when you get through processing these thugs.”

Turley and Priestly drove off in the van and O'Reilly joined Cord and Mack. He sat down beside them.

“Okay,” O'Reilly asked with his face towards Mack. “What's your name, and what was all this about?”

“My name's Mack, Brotha. Thanks fo' savin' my ass. Whew! I thought I was a goner.” He tried laughing, but the pain in his ribs prevented it. His smile turned to a grimace. “Owed them some money. Couple years ago. They never forget. Caught me off guard.”

The ambulance showed up. The paramedics checked his vitals and transported him along with the two soldiers. They stayed with him in the emergency room exchanging small talk. He bled some inside, and had a slight concussion, so they gave him a hospital bed. O'Reilly and Cord followed him to the room.

* * *

As Mack lay between the crisp white sheets, he sighed. O'Reilly sat on the large soft lounge chair, and Cord sat backward in the hard chair facing Mack. He crossed his arms on the back of the chair and asked, “What's your relation to these four thugs?”

“Man,” Mack answered slowly, “I was in the gang. We did whateva we want. We want beer, we got beer. We want women, we got women. We want to watch a movie, we walk into the the-ata an' nobody touch us.”

“What happened?”

“Tony, he give me money to get some crack. I take it an' get me a girl an' we get drunk and have ... you know. We get on wif it an' get caught by the guys. I run and dodge and have been dodgin' eva since. They catch me today fo' sure. Heh heh!” His laughter turned to coughing.

Cord, in a low comforting voice, said, “Take it easy, man. They're gone now. So what are you going to do? Man, this life you're living? This is how you wind up. You know that.”

“No, no, man!” Mack got excited and Cord held up his hand to calm him. He put his hand on Mack's arm. Cord's expressionless face and touch seemed to calm the boy. Cord smiled slightly and Mack continued. “Somethin' happened, man. I robbed this grocery store, see? I got captured by the owner, an' he took me in, made me his friend. I got a debt now to pay. He gave me a job. I don't need nothin'. I can take care o' my motha. I got friends, good friends. But I slip up today. Heh, heh.”

“That's good you are turning your life around,” Cord said. “Who are these new friends?”

“The N-P-U. They's my new friends. We all friends. Couldn't get better'an that.”

The nurse came in, and Cord had to move out of the small room to let her have space to check on Mack and give him his medication. At the same time, Turley and Priestly showed up. O'Reilly got out of the chair in which he had taken a little nap.

Grouping out in the hall, Priestly asked O'Reilly, “We going to take him in too?”

Cord answered his question after getting eye contact with Lieutenant O'Reilly. “I

don't think we should. This guy has changed his life, Sir," he said. "You should get to know this guy. We should come back tomorrow and check on him. He's a good guy. He's playing on our team."

"Okay." O'Reilly yawned. "We'd better get back on the beat." He looked at his watch. "Lunch is coming up. We're due for a relief. Better get to the check point."

"Yeah," Priestly said. "My stomach's growling."

* * *

After lunch, O'Reilly and his team joined up with another team who were having trouble with the locals. The park in the center of town had lush green grass, the type that invited afternoon naps. In the middle sat a gazebo for Sunday concerts. On one side was a playground with kids swinging, going down the slide, and crawling through the monkey bars and plastic tubes. On the other side a group of citizens all talked at once. A sergeant and several lower class soldiers were pointing guns at them trying to get them to disperse. They wouldn't do it, and who would fire into a crowd of unarmed civilians?

O'Reilly approached the sergeant. "What's the trouble, Sarge?"

"They won't disperse, Lieutenant. What should we do?"

"Call for transport," O'Reilly said. "We'll have to pick them up and put them into the vans and haul them off."

With the soldiers pointing guns at all sides of the crowd, O'Reilly addressed them. "Okay folks, here's the deal. You either disperse and go back to your homes, or we will have to transport you to the compound where you will stay for the duration. And if you

don't know what that means, it's until we leave this city, which could take months.”

The crowd heckled the lieutenant, saying they had a right to be there. It was their constitutional right.

“You people don't understand.” O'Reilly tried yelling above the noise. “Under military law, your constitutional rights have been suspended. It is illegal to gather in groups, whether large or small.”

Three vans sped from different directions, around corners and down the streets with their sirens crying out warnings, bumped over the curbs onto the grass, each one turning sideways. The drivers jumped out and opened their back doors.

“Alright,” the sergeant yelled. “Everyone inside!”

The crowd didn't move, so the soldiers began picking up the people one by one and throwing them into the vans.

O'Reilly picked up a redhead about his age. She beat on his back with her fists, screaming, “Put me down! Put me down!” He hauled off and smacked her bottom whereupon she yelled, “Abuse! Abuse!” She tried kicking him, but her legs were up in the air. She lost one shoe. It flew over the crowd and hit Cord in the face. He had his hands full carrying an elderly woman trying to bite his ear off.

After O'Reilly dropped the girl into the van full of yelling men and women, she looked at him, and pointing to her naked foot, said, “My shoe, my shoe!” His face turned red when he saw her bare legs. He turned around and looked for her shoe. Finding it, he picked it up and threw it to her. She caught it, smiled, and yelled, “Thank you!” as he

closed the doors. The vans sped off with their prey screaming.

The people they couldn't catch had run from the park. Cord, Priestly and Turley got their gear together and started talking to the other troops. O'Reilly wiped the sweat off his face with his arm and picked up his gun from the ground where he had dropped it while carrying someone. As he stood up, he came face to face with several little children. They were dumb-struck. One little boy had tears in his eyes. "Where'd you take my mommy?" he cried. O'Reilly squatted.

"What's your name, kid?" he asked.

"Tommy."

"Do you know your way home?"

"No." The little kid shuddered and wiped his eyes.

A tall ten-year-old blonde-haired girl wearing a light blue ruffled dress approached.

"I know where he lives," she said.

O'Reilly smiled up at her. "Will you take him home?"

"Yes sir." She grabbed Tommy's hand. "Come on Tommy. You can come with me."

"Okay, Sally."

Having solved one problem, O'Reilly stood and looked at the children staring at him. "Go home children. Shoo!" He pushed at them with his open hands. "Shoo! Go!"

They stared for another moment and then turned back to the playground where they commenced sliding and swinging and climbing through the jungle gym.

O'Reilly turned back to his men who were laughing at him.

“Okay, okay,” he said with irritation. “Everything's fine. We're done here. Children and all.” Then he turned to the sergeant.

The sergeant said his thanks, and O'Reilly, pounding his fist onto his flat hand, told him, “You got to be firm with them, Sarge. Firm.”

“Yes, sir.” The sergeant saluted. “Come on men, let's get back on patrol.

“Hey, guys,” O'Reilly addressed his buddies. “We've got to get going too.”

“How about that girl?” Priestly asked O'Reilly. “Heh?”

O'Reilly walked away. The others followed.

“What girl?” O'Reilly asked, adjusting his gun.

“What girl?” Priestly exclaimed. “That red-head. The one wearing the red dress. The one with bee-u-tiful legs.”

“Oh, that one.” O'Reilly blushed as he remembered.

* * *

Evening came and O'Reilly felt pensive. Talk with his buddies waned, and he found himself outside the social circle. The others didn't seem to notice. “Hey fellas, I'm going out for a walk. I think I'll go visit the buddy we rescued this morning.”

Cord announced, “You can't go out without a chit.”

“I'll write my own pass,” he said.

“Cord's got a good hand,” Priestley remarked. “He can sign for the major.”

O'Reilly rummaged around in his duffel bag and found a blank chit. He wrote out a pass and handed it to Cord who signed it. O'Reilly said, “Thanks,” and left the

compound.

The stars were out and the night air felt cool compared to the warm barracks. O'Reilly took a deep breath and smelled the sweet flowers of the summer trees. He walked a few blocks towards downtown and was stopped by a night squad.

“Halt!” one of them exclaimed. “You got your I.D., soldier?”

O'Reilly pulled out his wallet and handed it to the man with the gun, a sergeant with a round rotunda who saw on the picture I.D. that the guy he stopped was a lieutenant. He handed the wallet back and asked, “You got a pass, Sir?”

O'Reilly handed him the forged pass, and the sergeant held it up to the street lamp to read it. “Okay, Sir.” He handed the pass back and saluted. “Out on the town, Sir?”

“Visiting a sick boy in the hospital.” O'Reilly returned the salute.

“Have a good night, Sir.”

O'Reilly continued his stroll in the night air. The squad walked in the opposite direction. Passing the center of town, he walked through the park. Approaching the swings, he sat down on one of them and swung a bit. When he saw a couple walking on the sidewalk towards him, he got up and went on his way, passed the gazebo and out onto the grassy playing field. His face turned red as he remembered the redhead he had carried to the van. His heart skipped a beat. He had a good mind to go back to the compound and ask for her name. He dropped the thought and went on his way to the hospital.

Mack was in room 305. The elevator was slow. O'Reilly stepped out and met a

nurse pushing a young boy in a wheelchair. He winked at the kid who raised his thumb and smiled as he was ushered onto the elevator. He went down the corridor to his left, read a sign on the corner giving the numbers 300 to 310, so he turned right and walked down to Mack's room.

Mack lay on his bed cranked up at a forty-five degree angle watching the television above the door. When he spotted the soldier, he grabbed the controls, muted the western, and called, "Hey, man, what's up?"

"Hello Mack." O'Reilly sat down on the hard chair facing the bed. He rose up, shook the hand Mack offered and then sat back down. "How are you tonight?"

"Oh, the morphine is nice, man, real nice." Mack grinned from ear to ear. "My granny, befo' she died, use to give me paregoric. It tasted like licorish. I don't get to taste the morphine. Heh, heh."

O'Reilly smiled. "So, what are they doing for you?"

"Oh, they's goin' to open me up early in the mornin'," raising his voice as if asking a question. "Then they's goin' to sew me up. They say I have a ruptured spleen or somethin' like that. But they say they have to allow me to calm down."

"I see." O'Reilly scratched his nose. "You have insurance?"

"I have the NPU. They takes care o' me."

"Are they paying for your stay in the hospital?"

"Oh, man!" Mack replied. "They don't use money, but they have the powa of persuasion, you see."

“How's that?” O'Reilly leaned back in his chair. This he had to hear.

“They bargain. They give the hospital things and get otha people to suppo't them. They get otha people to give to the hospital, whetha it's money or hospital things. You know what I mean?” Mack tried to put his arms under his head to relax, but he groaned and put them back down by his side. “Man, this bed is uncomfortable.”

“Ribs hurt?”

“Yeah. Morphine's fine as long as I don't move none. It's a pain lyin' here an' not movin' any.” Mack tried to sigh, but he grimaced instead. “Hard to breathe too.”

O'Reilly thought maybe talking to him would get his mind off the pain. “They barter. Is that what this NPU is about? How are they so influential?”

“They has all the answers. They get you what you needs, and they say, we get you what you want later, and they usually do.” Mack breathed three short breathes in succession. “As long as you work. And it doesn't matta what kind o' work.”

“What kind of work do you do, Mack?” O'Reilly yawned.

“Why, I work on the fa'm, howin', weedin', cuttin' down trees, milkin' the cows. I also work in the sto'e, catalogin', inventoryin', puttin' things on shelves, drivin' the grocery truck. Anything they have me do. It's all volunteered work. It makes a fella feel good. I neve' knew it.”

“Never knew what, Mack?” O'Reilly folded his hands together and stretched out his arms and yawned again.

“Why, workin', of course. I don't get paid in money, but I have ever thing I need as

though I did get paid.”

“I see. So, is this the way it is with most people in the NPU? And how is that possible?”

“Yes, Suh,” Mack said with as much expression as he could muster. “We try not to let anyone fall through the cracks. We do the best we can.”

O'Reilly noted Mack's involvement in the NPU. “Do you mean by we,” he asked, “that you are part of some kind of leadership?”

“You bet. I be a leader of a group of constables.”

“Oh!” exclaimed O'Reilly. “Then you're the man behind these kidnappings?”

“No! No! You got me wrong.” Mack sat up in bed with his eyes wide open. Then he groaned and lay back down exclaiming, “I had nothin' to do wif that. I didn't know anything about it until I hear it on the news. Was I so surprised. Heh, heh. Wow! Those guys go off and do that all by themselves. No. Why, all we do is visit the neighbors and see to their needs. Where this kidnappin' came in was a su-prise to me.”

“Well, I guess I can believe you. I don't always get permission to do all the things I do. Visiting you is an example of that.” O'Reilly adjusted himself in the chair. It started to get uncomfortable.

“Heh, heh,” Mack laughed. “Yeah, yeah. I thank you fo' that. You is a good person.”

“Tell me one thing. Do you enjoy helping other people like that? What do you do?”

“Yeah, I guess I do. Makes me feel good to see that people have enough. They

don't go hungry in our neighborhood ... even if they don't belong. We have the constables go to each house or apartment in the neighborhood and see to it that they have food, clothing, rent, and a job. We put ever body to work. But no work, no food. That's the facts o' life.”

“Facts of life, huh?” O'Reilly smiled and realized it was getting late. “Well, I'll see you again. I have to get back.”

Mack offered his hand and said, “Thanks, man. Wif all the constables in jail, I get few visits.”

O'Reilly stood and shook Mack's hand. “You get well.”

“Yeah, I will.”

O'Reilly left the hospital and strolled back to the compound. He wondered about the NPU. From what he had seen, he didn't understand what all the hullabaloo was about. Why did they bring in the Guard? Why did the people get so upset with the city government? There was a lot to think about.

Chapter Two

“In Dallas, Texas today,” the clean-cut newscaster reported crisply, “shots were fired into a crowd of protesters pelting the National Guard unit with rocks.” The reporter wore a dark blue suit with a red tie. His hair and eyebrows were dark, and his blue eyes shined. He had high cheekbones and a small square jaw. His voice resonated, “Two people were killed and others were wounded at the John F. Kennedy Memorial Plaza. Many more were dragged off into military vans to be incarcerated for protesting the presence of the Guard in their beautiful city.”

O'Reilly and his three buddies slouched on the soft sofas, watching television in the lounge on the far side of the cafeteria at the compound.

“Makes you want to cringe,” Priestly said, “don't it?”

O'Reilly sighed. “Can't get all fired up and excited when you're dealing with a crowd, that's for sure. You have to keep a cool head.”

“Cord there,” Turley said, pointing with a nod of his head, “always keeps a cool head. I wonder sometimes if he has any emotions.”

“You can't let people work you over,” Cord said, the words rippling off his tongue, “on the inside.”

“It's true,” O'Reilly commented. “You have to be in your adult ego state.”

“Your what?” Priestly screwed up his face.

“Adult ego state,” O'Reilly replied. “Your brain has these different egos. There's

the child, parent and adult. The child is your memories of childhood, including all your emotions. The parent is the interactions you had with your parents, their advice and upsets, and other parental figures like aunts and uncles.”

“And grandparents,” inserted Priestly.

“The adult ego state watches over the other two, sort of like a coach. Its the one with all the reason and common-sense. It's called transactional analysis.” O'Reilly wasn't going to explain any further, but Turley asked, “How does reason tie in with crowd control? Sometimes you just do things on impulse.”

“Your adult ego state has no emotions,” Cord said. “You can stay in that state through the practice of meditation.”

“So, that's what you're doing,” Priestley said, “when you're lying on your bunk and no one can rouse you? Or are you just trying to sleep one off?”

Cord smiled as if to say, “you'll never know.”

“Anyway,” O'Reilly countered, “we have to keep cool heads around here and not get trigger happy like those Dallas guys.”

“Back in the news,” the newscaster said, as he came back to the attention of the troopers, “is James Clark Maxwell, the one who started all the commotion. In an interview with the Morning Show, Becky Myers asked him to comment on how he got a bill into Congress that gives job seekers a free lunch. Becky.”

“Thanks Howard,” Becky said as the camera turned to a tall brunette sitting across the table from Howard. “In talking to a number of the House representatives and some of

the senators, I ascertained that one bill that had recently been passed was written by Maxwell. I cornered James in the Capitol Building where he is continually lobbying for his National People's Union. He agreed to a live interview via camera this morning. I asked him what kind of bill he had succeeded in getting passed. He said it was a compromise – not what he had actually wanted.”

The news program went to a replay of Maxwell's interview earlier that morning. “I had originally,” he started, “wanted a bill that would give a Federal credit card to each and every American citizen to replace the cash in their pockets. There is a lot of bickering that you have to slash through when talking to congressmen as a lobbyist. So you have to start with a really big pesky weed and let them cut it down to something they can use.”

“So, Maxwell,” Becky asked, “was this Federal credit card your big weed?”

“Yes, Becky, it was. With a lot of arguing, I was able to get a bill past the Appropriations Committee that allows free housing and food for those that get laid off from a job.”

“And do they get a Federal credit card?”

“Yes, Becky, they do. All their housing and food is paid by the Federal Government, relieving a lot of burden from the states.”

“Doesn't this create bigger government, James?”

“For right now, Becky, it does, but it is only one step in a solution to get rid of money altogether.”

“I understand that it is the aim of the NPU to get rid of the use of money. Is that

true? If so, what will we do without it?"

"Well, Becky, history shows that money is organized to fail. The use of money in our society, which is capitalistic, always brings a crash. Depression of the money market is a cyclic thing caused by speculation and people seeking to get rich. If we withdraw the use of money altogether, giving everyone a free lunch, we can flatten out this roller-coaster ride caused by the cycles of inflation, recession and depression."

"James, if everyone gets a free lunch, then what is the incentive to work? Won't that pull the rug out from under industry?"

"Becky, everyone gets a free lunch, and everyone is required to work. This is the policy of the NPU. Let me explain that further. It is first required that if you join the NPU, you are required to work. When it comes time for lunch, it is given freely. You don't have to buy lunch."

"I see," Becky said as if she completely understood.

"If it is taught young enough and wide enough," Maxwell continued, "if the role of work is put back on its pedestal, if it becomes a social pressure, as in East Asia, we won't have to worry about lunch, and it will only take a decade."

The camera went back to the newscaster. "Thank you, Becky," he said.

"Howard."

"That was Becky Myers from this morning's Morning Show, and that is all the time we have for today," quoted the newscaster from his script screen. "Goodnight and have a pleasant evening. This is Howard Rodell."

O'Reilly, deep in thought about the principles of the NPU, wondering if what they said was true or not, didn't hear the conversation going on around him until Turley, sitting next to him, nudged him with his elbow.

“Hey, Lieutenant,” he said with his jarring voice, “you awake in there?”

Everyone laughed.

“We're all going out to dinner,” Priestly said. “You comin' with us?”

* * *

After dinner, O'Reilly walked through the high school to the compound where they were holding the prisoners. There were six annex buildings in back between the main building and the football field. Each annex was a large trailer with eight classrooms. A tall hurricane fence surrounded the annexes with barbed wire wound helically along the top edge. Three of the annexes were dedicated to men, and three to women.

Guards walked around the compound twenty four / seven, changing guards six times a day. O'Reilly passed one of the guards who saluted. He walked along with him.

“Everything going smoothly, Sarge?” O'Reilly asked.

“Smooth as a baby's bottom, Sir,” the guard replied. “Except for an occasional curse word.” They both laughed.

“I'm curious about one redhead.” O'Reilly winked. “She's wearing a red dress. Have you seen her?”

“I can't help seeing her several times a day, Sir. She's one of the hotheads mouthing off all the time.”

Hmmm, thought O'Reilly. *Definitely Irish*. "See you next round, Sarge." O'Reilly stopped in front of the fence.

"Yes, Sir," the guard replied as he walked on.

O'Reilly placed his fingers through the fence and gripped the wires as he wondered about the girl whom he had thrown into the van the other day. His nose found its way into the fence. When it touched one of the wires, it scratched him, and he jerked back an inch. Several women strolled along the fence. One of them was the redhead. She saw him and approached.

"Come to gawk, soldier?" she asked, screwing up her face. "Come to get your jollies off watching the girls?" She took a second look. "You're the soldier that threw me into the van."

O'Reilly replied calmly. "I wanted to know if you were all right. Are they treating you okay?"

"What do you care?" she exclaimed. Not getting a reaction, she calmed down. "I'm bored. Nothing to do here but eat and sleep."

"I'll get you a book or two," he said. "What do you like to read?"

"I like books on freedom." She noticed the other women standing there staring at them. She turned to them and said, "Go ahead. I'll meet with you later." They left and she turned back to O'Reilly with a smile. "What's your name, soldier?"

"O'Reilly," he replied.

"Oh, God. Another Irishman." She put her hands on her hips, turning her head to

the side and then back again. "You Catholic?"

"My grandparents are. I don't go to any church. Not that I don't believe in a god, just haven't had the time."

"Oh." She put her fingers through the fence across his and gripped, flirting with her ear-to-ear smile. She had big white teeth. "You got a first name?"

"Lieutenant," he responded. Her fingernails cut into his skin, so he withdrew his hold on the fence, letting her have the territory. *Very aggressive*, he thought. He couldn't think of what else to say, so there was a pause in the conversation. Then he asked her name.

She laughed under her breath. "Prisoner," she said.

"What's so funny?" He smiled as he pushed his eyebrows together.

"My grandpa would say, 'Put and Tame,' but I'm not." She pursed her lips.

"So, what's your name?"

"Willow Morgan."

"So, Willow Morgan is bored." He approached the fence and put his hands above hers. She backed up and clasped her hands behind her.

"You betcha. Bored as all get out. You seen any action?"

"Afghanistan."

"How long?"

"Two years."

"What was it like?"

“Tough.”

“Killed anyone?”

O'Reilly paused, stared into space and remembered his machine gun blasting holes into the Taliban soldiers. “Go to school?” he asked.

“I bet you killed a lot.”

“That's in the past, just something that had to be done. Now I'm here.”

“Locking up your own people.”

“Not my call.”

“You're the one that put me in here!” She sounded angry.

“The people of this town were warned and given the rules of martial law.”

“We don't do anything we don't want to. We believe in democracy. It's the people's choice.”

“You a member of the NPU?”

“Yes, and so is my whole family.” Willow turned away and wiped tears from her eyes. Then she turned back to O'Reilly. “Hey. You're the only one that lets me talk. I've been raising hell here and nobody wants to listen to me.” She turned her head again and looked down at the ground. Her eyes watered as she mumbled “I'm a bad mother.”

“Hum?” O'Reilly, staring at her, wasn't paying attention to what she was saying.

“Did you see a little boy that seemed to be lost? At the playground. Did you see a little boy that was perhaps looking for someone?” Tears continued streaming down her face, and she kept wiping them off with her long slender fingers.

“I did see a little guy. He asked me why I put his mother in the van.”

Willow grabbed the fence. “Was he wearing a red shirt with white stripes and blue shorts? Sort of chubby, brown hair, dark eyes?”

“Yes.”

“What did you do to him? I mean, did you see what happened to him? Where did he go?” Willow shook the fence as she talked, trembling and crying.

“Hey,” O'Reilly said calmly, trying to comfort her. “I'm sure he's fine. A neighbor girl took him. She said she knew where he lived.”

“But I'm not home,” she sobbed. “He'll be all alone.”

“I'll look in on him. Where do you live?”

“251 Pioneer Street. I live upstairs. There's only two apartments up there. Mine is the one on the left. Please hurry. Please. Go right now. Please. And tell me if he's okay.”

O'Reilly was already on his way before she stopped talking. When he got to the house, he remembered he had been there before. He looked across the street. He saw the house he grew up in. The house where willow lived hadn't been an apartment before. There had been a little red-headed girl that lived here. *Humph!* he thought. *Couldn't be. May be.*

There were two front doors. One of them opened into a stairwell. He hurried in and ran up the stairs. He knocked on the door to his left. He didn't think the little boy would be in his apartment all alone. A ten-year-old girl with blonde hair opened the door.

“Hey,” he greeted. “I need to know what happened to the little boy you took home.

Is he here?"

The little girl turned her head and called, "Mom!" A middle-aged lady, short curly brown hair, wearing a long flower patterned apron dusted with flour came to the door.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Ma'am, pardon me." O'Reilly took off his hat and twisted it in his hands. "I'm looking for a small boy that this girl took from the playground the other day."

"What?" she asked. "Are you arresting little children now?"

"No ma'am." He tilted his head and looked at her, trying to ascertain her personality. "I ran into his mother just a moment ago. She said that she had had a son on the playground. She had completely forgotten him in the commotion. She's not a bad mother. It's just that no one would listen to her. I happened to be visiting the compound. Red and white stripes, blue pants."

"Yes, he's here all right. We've been making donuts." She wiped her hands on her apron. "Want to come in?"

The little lad popped his head in between the girl and her mom.

"No Ma'am. I need to go and tell her that he's in good hands." O'Reilly looked down at the guy and smiled at him. "Hello, little tyke."

"I'm not a tyke," the lad responded.

"Got a name?" O'Reilly asked.

"Timmy," he said.

"Well, hello, Timmy."

“Hi!” With that, he flew back behind the woman.

“Tell her the Nortons brought him home,” the woman said. “As soon as I found out where they were keeping her, I took him over there for her to know he was safe, but they weren't set up for visitors, they said.”

“Okay, Ma'am. I will tell her he's here.”

“God bless you.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you for caring, soldier.” She smiled. “The officers at the compound didn't seem to.”

O'Reilly ran down the stairs and back to the compound.

Willow was still clinging to the hurricane fence where he had left her. “Did you find him?” she called out before he approached.

He waited to answer until he came up to the fence. “I found him. He is safe with your neighbor, Mrs. Norton.”

“Thank God!” she exclaimed, giving out a big sigh. “Soldier, when I get out of here, I'm going to give you a big hug and kiss ... if I can find you.” Willow stared crying again and had to wipe her face.

“That won't be necessary, Ma'am.” O'Reilly took a clean handkerchief from his back pocket and handed it to her. She grabbed it, blew her nose and handed it back to him.

“You keep it,” he said, “I have more.”

“Oh. Oh yeah.” She stuffed it in her pocket. “You would make a good NPU member.”

“How's that?” O'Reilly said, standing with hands in his pockets.

“You care for people, and that's what the NPU is all about.” She paused, and he didn't say anything, so she continued. “I owe you a nice chicken dinner with rice and gravy.”

“I may stay around for that.”

“Where do you go from here, after all this is over?”

“Back to college. But from what I hear, I will have to wait a couple of weeks before the semester starts up.” He paused to look into her blue eyes. He didn't want to forget them. “Well, I have to get back to the barracks; long day tomorrow.”

“Okay. Thanks again.”

The picture he took in his mind was of Willow dabbing her eyes with his handkerchief. As he turned and walked away, his feet didn't quite touch the ground. He felt lighthearted and started whistling.

* * *

It was time to visit Mack. O'Reilly took Cord with him. It was a cloudless Sunday afternoon. The walk to the hospital was brisk and refreshing. Entering the front glass doors brought the smell of alcohol.

When they approached Mack's room, they saw another visitor. His face looked like the one on the Quaker Oats box, a plump elderly gentleman with long white hair down to

his shoulders. O'Reilly and Cord were about to leave to come back later, but Mack caught sight of them and said, "Hey guys, come in. There's someone I want you to meet."

O'Reilly and Cord sauntered in. The other visitor rose and Mack introduced him. "This is my friend, the Reverend Stillson." They each shook his hand, saying their names, and then the reverend sat back down in the large lounge chair. There was only one other chair in the room, a folding chair behind the door. Neither one of the soldiers would take it out of respect for the other, so they stood.

O'Reilly took advantage of the interruption to ask, "So Mack, how are you doing?"

"I'm getting' outta here directly. The reverend here is come to take me home."

"Good," Cord offered.

"That's great," O'Reilly said. He nodded to the reverend to acknowledge his good deed. "So how do you two know each other?"

"Through the ..."

Mack was interrupted by O'Reilly, saying, "Through the NPU. I knew it. You are a tight knit group."

"Yeah." Mack smiled. "We is tight like ... Oh, I won't say that. Heh heh. But we is tight. Good friends."

"We were just talking about," the reverend interjected, "the situation here in the city, about you fellas walking the streets. Mack was telling me of your rescue of him. I'm glad you showed up. I want to thank you personally."

"Well," Cord said, "we were just doing our job. When we arrived on the scene, we

could see that both sides were not equal. We had to even the odds.” He grinned with pride.

“I thank you both,” said the reverend. “You are obviously doing a good job. I don't see many soldiers like you. It has been my experience that the National Guard is merely confrontational.”

“One time,” Mack interjected, “the reverend here rescued me.”

“How's that?” O'Reilly asked.

“The gang caught me an' was goin' to beat me to a pulp. They neva got the chance. It was in the same alley you found me in. He come marchin' right in and confront them. He took 'em right by surprise. He come up to Tony and say 'Oh, there you are. I've been lookin' all ova fo you. I got a message f'om the boss. He tells me you has been compromised. You is bein' watched. You got to leave this guy alone or they is comin' afta you.' Tony then say 'Who you?' The reverend here then say, 'I'm just a messenger.' He said, 'You have a thing planted in you head. They see all you do. You touch him an' they come an' torture you. You wish you would die.' They get scared and take off. They say, 'We don't believe you, but we will be back lata.' So, I got free of them and gained a new friend.”

The reverend laughed under his breath and said, “I wouldn't put it in those words, but we did become good friends.”

“You know?” Mack explained. “ 'The Boss.' That's God. Them comin' to torture the bad guys is the devils in Hell. He explained it to me.”

A nurse came in with a wheelchair. "Pardon me, gentlemen. We have come to take Mack here downstairs." She looked at Mack and saw that he was still in his hospital gown. "Mack!" She scowled. "You haven't gotten dressed yet."

"It's my fault, Ma'am," Reverend Stillson said. "We've just been sitting here talking and forgetting everything else."

"You gentlemen wait outside," the nurse said, "and I'll help him get dressed."

"No hanky panky now, Mack," Cord threw over his shoulder.

Mack grinned.

Outside the room the three stood wondering what to say. The reverend spoke first. "You gents been busy? Get many conflicts? I know the NPU has a lot of hotheads in their midst."

"No," O'Reilly said, putting his hands in his back pockets. "It's been relatively peaceful. Mack there is the only person we've had to rescue. No robberies or domestic violence on our rounds. We've only had one riot, and that was pretty peaceful, actually."

Cord stood there with a stoic expression on his face, listening to the other two.

"The people," the reverend said, "are getting tired of their freedoms taken away, but I hear there are talks going on."

"Yeah," O'Reilly said, "I don't think we will be here for long. Talks in Washington are also getting underway. I hear the leaders of the NPU are with a Senate investigating committee."

"Yes, that too." Reverend Stillson smiled. "Talks all the way around. We'll get it

straightened out.”

The door opened, and the nurse wheeled Mack out. He was saying, “I’m sure I can walk.”

Cord offered, “We can take him down to the door.”

With all this opposition, the nurse appeared riled up when she exclaimed, “We take care of our patients all the way to the door.” She started down the hallway, wheeling Mack a little faster than normal.

“We’d better catch up to her,” the reverend said, as he motioned the soldiers to get moving with the upturned palm of his hand. He smiled as they all scooted forward.

Outside the door, under a cement canopy, they said their goodbyes to Mack and his reverend friend. They were invited to a Sunday dinner at Mack’s place. He said his mother was the best cook, but they declined. They went back to the compound and watched the talks between the NPU and the city fathers broadcast on the city TV channel.

* * *

O’Reilly saw a short, brawny, bald-headed shadow approach. It was Colonel Mather. O’Reilly raised himself up from his bunk on his elbow and pointed to the colonel. His three buddies took notice.

The Colonel called out, “O’Reilly, take D-Team. You other three come with me.” He gave O’Reilly the address on a chit. “Air Traffic found a crowd gathering. Go and break it up. Use any means necessary. And don’t bring them here. The compound is getting too crowded.”

O'Reilly yawned, put his boots on, and yelled, "D-Team! Get your asses on the floor. Grab your gear and follow me."

The squad dressed, ran to the gun rack, grabbed a carbine and formed ranks. They ran in step following O'Reilly out the double doors of the gym and then out the double doors of the high school. They ran down the street, their new boots making crunch, crunch, crunch sounds against the pavement. The thought of taking a transport never occurred to O'Reilly. The address was only five blocks away.

As the troops rounded the corner, he recognized the neighborhood. The block formed a delta with what used to be Carson's Market at the apex. Now, it was Murphey's. The place was nostalgic. He had come here with his grandparents or with his friends after school. The crowd was gathering across the street at the Garden Apartments.

O'Reilly shouted his commands, the soldiers pointed their guns, and they got a lecture from one of his old school teachers. When he told them he would open fire on them if they didn't disperse, he was only bluffing, and they knew it. Then his grandparents showed up and everything was over. He couldn't endanger his own family. He hadn't expected that, so he retreated.

Back at the compound, O'Reilly sat on the edge of his bunk with his head between his hands in the utmost despair. He had been given an assignment he either couldn't or didn't want to carry out. His insides burned with grief, disappointment, and confusion. If he were at home, he would sob his heart out. But if one tear came to his eyes here, he felt that he wouldn't qualify to be a military officer. No one would respect him. He also knew

he would be called in for shirking his duty. He sighed and stood, ready for the colonel's anger.

Cord, Turley and Priestly came back from whatever they had been assigned. They walked over to O'Reilly who was waiting to be bawled out, and each sat down on their respective bunks watching O'Reilly.

He looked back at them and sat down. "Am I on report?"

"What for?" Cord asked.

"For botching it."

"He only has great respect for you." Cord smiled with that short, upturned smile when he was trying to be polite. "He received a most impressive report. What did you say to that crowd that made them disperse so quickly?"

"Humph, ah, it dispersed?" O'Reilly was most surprised.

"Indeed," Cord said.

O'Reilly noticed all three smiling at him.

"According to the chopper report," Turley said.

"Well," O'Reilly replied, "it was my magnetic personality." All O'Reilly could think was that his grandparents had something to do with it. He sighed and said, "Now, what was it that the Colonel had you do?"

"Oh," Cord replied. "We just talked. He wanted to evaluate our performance here. We're going home. With the NPU having so much influence, the talks in Washington as well as here are going well and we won't be needed."

“You going back to finish your term at the college?” Turley asked.

“Naw,” O'Reilly drawled. “I have the summer ahead of me. I think I'll take a long needed vacation.”

“He's got a girl,” Priestly commented. Everyone laughed.

Chapter Three

The Guard left the city, and the troops were sent home. The NPU and many city governments came to a compromise, preventing a full fledged military takeover. The feds were one step behind martial law for the whole country. When the NPU backed down on their takeover of the major cities, the federal government also backed down. It was stop and go for a while. The NPU found that they had to move a lot slower than they wanted to.

O'Reilly decided to stay in "Smallville." He would need an apartment, but before that, he would go visit his grandparents. It had been several weeks since he had seen them. Even though he had communicated with them through e-mail while in school, they never told him they had moved. That's why he was so surprised when he found them in the Garden Apartments.

He walked down the familiar street carrying his duffel bag over his shoulder. There was the Rexall, the barbershop, the neighborhood grocery. There were other stores he had not remembered. It was funny that the apartments sat next to a bar. That hadn't been there before. When he turned into the enclosed garden, he looked at all the windows surrounding him. He wondered which apartment belonged to his grandparents.

His grandmother spotted him from her bedroom, to his right and one story up. She swung the window open, rotating a handle at the bottom of the casing. "James! Up here. Want me to come down, or can you find our place?"

He looked up and smiled. "I can find your place, Grandma. I'll be right up."

James took a deep breath, adjusted his duffel bag and went into a stairwell in the middle of the right wing of the building. He looked up while approaching the door. There were three stories, and the stairwells were all open to the sun, being encased in windows all the way up. He opened the glass door which didn't shut all the way, as if it didn't fit the metal doorway. The stairs were cement enclosed in red brick walls.

He jogged up to the second story and saw his grandmother waiting out in the hall at her open door. She looked like a small frail angel with a halo surrounding her head as the sun light from a far window passed through her white hair. Her eyes were wide with expectation. She had a half smile on her wrinkled face which was pale and soft with no makeup. She stood there clasping her hands to her chest, wearing a white dressing gown and pink fluffy slippers.

She held out her hands for a hug. "James."

"Hello, Grandma." James walked over to her, dropped his duffel bag, and gave her a hug.

"James. Come in. Come in. It's been a long time. You through with school? Where are you staying? I have a dozen questions."

O'Reilly let her go and picked up his duffel bag. She ushered him into the apartment and closed the door. Now her smile spread over her full face, adding a lot more wrinkles. But they were happy wrinkles.

O'Reilly looked around at the familiar furniture they had brought from their old

house. The couch was the same purple brocade. A bookshelf that covered the wall next to the door that led into the kitchen contained all the old stories he had read growing up. He saw the old treadle sewing machine under the picture window being used as a table for flowers. He remembered her sewing at that machine for hours each day. Next to the wall near the door was a bookshelf encasing a computer at a desk. It looked out of place for such an old couple. It must be there where they answered his e-mails.

“Where's Grandpa?” he asked, putting his duffel bag next to the couch.

“Oh, he's at the store next door picking up some potatoes and anything else he wants. I want the potatoes.” She paused and looked at him, her hands clasping her chest again. “My, my. You look handsome in your uniform. I'm sorry I embarrassed you in front of your soldier friends. But we have to have our meetings. And it was such a nice day outside.”

“Well,” he smiled at her. “That's all over for now. I hope, for good. It was like the Nation had a hiccup.”

“Hiccup. Yes. That's a good way to say that. I have to write that down. Now where did I set that pad of paper?” She went over to the desk and rummaged around the papers and books and pens lying about. “There it is. I have to show Miss Aiken that phrase.”

“Old Miss Aiken?” James stood there smiling, his hands in his back pockets. “That was her, wasn't it? At that rally.”

His grandmother turned around. “Oh, sit down, dear. You make me nervous.”

“Okay.” James sat down just as his grandfather entered the door. He got up to help

him with his load. "Let me help you with that."

James grabbed the bag of potatoes from his grandfather, who embraced him with tears in his eyes. "James! James! What are doing here? I thought the Army was gone."

"The Guard left. I stayed. I have a whole summer before I need to be back in school."

James followed his grandfather into the kitchen. "Where do you want these, Grandpa?"

"Put them under the sink there where it's cool." His grandfather put the perishables in the refrigerator which sat against the far corner of the opposite wall.

Irving and Fiona O'Reilly stood in the kitchen and stared at their grandson. No one knew what to say, so Fiona decided to start dinner. "You two go into the living room and get reacquainted."

Irving and his grandson went into the living room and sat down on the couch facing each other.

Grandpa Irving asked, "So what are going to do with your summer?"

"I don't know, Grandpa. I know I have to get me an apartment. Other than that, I'll have to play it by ear."

"Why don't you help us at the store? Or we could set you up on the farm. You can help out there."

"Whoa! Not so fast. First, I want to know what you and grandma are doing."

"That's what we're doing, James." Grandpa Irving smiled generously and adjusted

his seat on the couch to look at James more directly. “We've been spending a lot of time on the NPU farm hereabouts. When we can, we help out in the store across the street.”

“You mean old Carson's Market?” James remembered with nostalgia.

“Murphy's Market now. Old Carson died some time ago.” Grandpa Irving looked up at the ceiling, putting his fingers up to his chin as though trying to remember something. “In the back, it's the NPU store. Murphy still has a commercial store in front, but to all the NPU members, we get our stuff for free back there.”

“Why free, Grandpa?” James wrinkled his brow.

“We work for the NPU. We get all our basics free. Food, clothing, shelter. Those are the basics. We don't work for lunch, as Clark Maxwell would say. No one was ever meant to work in order to eat. We were meant to eat so we could work. And learn. We learn to improve ourselves and just to know things.”

“You're lecturing, Grandpa.” James smiled.

His grandpa frowned.

“That's all right, Grandpa. I've learned a few things since I was in High School.”

“It's good to hear that. You were such a wild kid, always getting into trouble.”

“War teaches. You can get burned out. You withdraw when you can. I had a lot to think about in spare moments. I learned I don't have to take the trauma. I guess some of the things you taught me sunk in, like belief in an afterlife.”

“Yeah.” Grandpa Irving's eyes turned toward the ceiling, his mouth gaping open. He looked back at James. “You know, my pa came to me one time. I had been worrying

about his death. He told me he was all right and that I would be too.”

“You told me that. It kept me going. There has to be a greater purpose than what the Church or the government tells us.”

“It's family, James. There's nothing greater. And we have a larger family in the NPU.”

“You sound like a commercial. But you know I have to feel my own way, don't cha?”

They both sighed. Grandpa Irving said, “It's always been that way with you.”

“I'm glad you understand.”

The grandpa scooted over to his grandson and gave him a hug. “I do understand, James. You know, we need an extra hand at the farm.”

“Okay, Grandpa. When I get settled down, I'll consider it.”

The two looked up as Grandma Fiona walked in the room grinning at them.

“Dinner's ready you two.”

They went into the kitchen where a little round table was set up. The roast and potatoes, gravy and green beans smelled like home used to. And there was always the smell of tea at grandma's. They sat down at the table, Grandpa Irving said grace, and all three began talking at once.

James was home again, though he couldn't stay. He had to withdraw someplace and do a lot more thinking.

* * *

James left his duffel bag at his grandparents' and took to the town. They said they would keep the door open. He walked to the now empty High School and went around back. The moon lit up the sidewalk and the sides of the buildings. He walked with his hands in his pockets to where the hurricane fence had been. He wanted to touch that fence again, so he put his hands up like a mime to feel an invisible barrier. Then walking over to one of the out buildings, he peered into it and imagined seeing a cute red-head by the name of Willow. Everyone and everything had been removed. He walked away with his head down. Then raising his sights to the full moon and the few stars he could see, he took a deep breath and walked on.

Pondering about what a true government should be like, James found himself wondering about the founding fathers and what he knew about them and their expectations. Did they ever think about capitalism or how selfish people would become, and how the great American dream would turn out to be such a dog-eat-dog search for personal security at the sacrifice of one's neighbor? He knew they had put up the scaffolding to build our freedom. But anyone or any organization could take advantage of it and had done so since its inception. There has always been political graft and corruption. Was capitalism the cause of all the corruption in government and in most of the corporate packages? Was the NPU just communism or socialism wrapped up in pretty ribbons? He hadn't seen any attack on religion or the expected dogma, or the anger in people against capitalism, just a concern for one's neighbor. Of course there was the anger against the local governments. And that was just it. It was a local thing, and that's

what democracy was. Local.

James came up for air from his reveries and looked around. He saw some familiar houses and realized he had walked himself right to Willow's house. It was like being hypnotized. Had he been thinking of her subconsciously? He looked up at the windows on the left. The shades were pulled, the lights on, and there was a female silhouette moving around. He guessed she was folding clothes. His heart beat a little faster. Should he go in? Without thinking about it, he was inside, going up the stairs and knocking on her door. The door opened. There was the little kid grinning and staring up at him.

Willow came to the door. "Go back to bed, Timmy," she said, peering down at her little boy. He left obediently, and she lifted her head, tilted it, and halfway smiled at James.

He said, "Hi."

"You missed a good dinner," she responded, leaning on the door jam.

"What did you have?" He smiled.

"A nice chicken dinner with rice and gravy."

"Sorry I missed it."

"You hungry? There are leftovers."

"It's late." James sighed, wishing he could come in. But he knew he shouldn't. Not yet. He had to play this slow. "Besides, I had dinner with my grandparents."

"Oh. Are you a local boy?"

"That was my high school you ... stayed at."

Willow stared at James. “You look familiar. Haven't I seen you somewhere else ... a long time ago?”

James took his turn staring and said “I remember a little red-head that used to live in this house before it was turned into apartments.”

Willow covered her mouth with her fingers and laughed. “Aren't you that funny little boy that lived across the street?”

James smiled.

“Oh gooness! You are.” She laughed again.

James grinned.

“You don't seem so shy anymore.”

“You sure grew up. You have filled out nicely.” He looked her up and down.

“You aren't shy,” she laughed, “are you?”

“Nope.”

“Mommy!” came from a back room. Willow turned her head and yelled back, “Just a minute, Timmy Tummy. I'll be right there.” She turned back to James and said, “I guess I'd better go. My master is calling.”

“Okay. May I see you again? Maybe take you out for a nice chicken dinner?”

“Goodness no. It'll have to be steak. I'm dying for some beef. You never know when you'll get it.”

“At the NPU store?”

“Yeah. I don't have a real job right now. So we get what we can.”

“I see.”

There was another “Mommy!”

“Have to go. Thanks for stopping over. Call me. I'm in the phone book.”

“Okay. Goodnight.”

“Wait. There's something I owe you.” She came out of the door, grabbed him and planted her red lips on his and said, “Goodnight.” She was gone in a second, not time enough for James to recover. He stood in the hallway and sighed. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his lips. He could smell the lipstick.

Someone behind James giggled. He turned around. There was that ten-year-old girl sitting on the stairs going up to the attic. She quickly covered her mouth with both hands. Her eyes shot wide open.

“Have you been there all this time?” James asked.

Without taking her hands away, she nodded.

“Well, I'll be ...” James said. He turned and walked away, blushing.

The little girl giggled as he left.

Chapter Four

James found a small duplex apartment near his old high school. The siding was a bright turquoise. The top of the building had burned down and had been replaced by a flat roof. His apartment was the left one, reached by three cement steps culminating in a small porch.

James jumped down from the porch, skipping the steps, as a van drove up. He had agreed to accompany his grandpa to the NPU farm. The side door slid open as he approached. He stepped in and landed in the first empty seat. An old van with four seats in the back that went from wall to wall, it appeared that a person had to climb over to get to the back seat. After he shut the door and put his seat belt on, he discovered he had sat down by a red-headed girl in jeans sitting there smiling at him. He started laughing for some unknown reason and had to turn his head.

She punched him in the ribs with her elbow and asked, "What's so funny?"

"I don't know," he laughed. "Just seeing you here I guess. I wasn't expecting it."

Grandpa Irving sat on the other side of the girl. He asked, "Do you know Willow?"

She hit him on his shoulder with her fist. "We've met."

"Yes," James confirmed. "We met all right." He laughed a little bit more. He was really glad to see her. He was supposed to be a hardened war veteran, but in her presence, he had a difficult time controlling his emotions.

She hit his shoulder several more times with her fist.

“Okay,” he said, sobering up. “Let's not take this too far.”

“Yes,” Grandpa Irving said. “Let's not damage my grandson.”

“He's yours, is he?”

“Yes, I'm sorry to say that he is. He has been a grief to me and his grandma. Now we have to shape him up or ship him out again.”

“Shape me up? I'm a grown man, and I think I'm being picked on by the likes of you two.”

Willow and Grandpa Irving laughed.

“It serves you right,” his grandpa said. “Now, we will see if you're a man or not when we get you to the farm.”

* * *

The van left the main road and followed a curve around a grove of pine trees. On the other side a one story white house with a red roof and shutters came into view.

“That's the main house where the boss lives,” Grandpa Irving noted.

After passing a wide fenced field of cows grazing and moaning, a large red barn came into view. The van stopped in front of it where several cars and a pickup truck had parked. After stepping out of the van, James took a deep breath of cool morning air filled with the smell of cows and manure. The sun had just risen, but gold and purple clouds were quickly spreading over the sky to hide it.

“Smells like rain,” James announced to the air.

“Good for the crops,” his grandpa replied.

Grandpa Irving grabbed James by the arm and turned him around. He had been watching Willow as she joined the crowd gathering in front of the barn. She started talking to several of the people, but his grandpa was set on introducing him to someone.

“This here's my grandson, James,” he spoke to an odd couple. One looked like Maxwell Smart from an old TV show about secret service agents. The other one had long gray hair and thick glasses. Her hips were too wide for her body. “Mike and Maggie Beaty.”

James shook hands with them both, everyone saying “Hi,” to each other.

“We were sitting behind you in the van,” Maggie said.

“We've met before,” James said. “On the street.”

“I hardly recognized you without your uniform.” Maggie smiled.

“This,” Grandpa Irving wrapped his arm around Michael, “is our newly elected state representative.”

Michael blushed as James said, “That's an important accomplishment.”

“Well,” Michael commented. “It was hard to start my office in jail. But now I'm out.”

Maggie punched him in the ribs.

“Huh, I think,” Michael said, changing the subject, “they are calling us over there.”

“Oh, yes.” Grandpa Irving grabbed James by the arm and led him over to join the others where he was introduced to the greater crowd where he was welcomed. Some faces he recognized from his youth. Everyone had gotten older. He barely knew the

younger ones his own age and guessed some of them were from his high school. He nodded to a couple of them.

James was sent to clean the barn and wash the cows down for milking. He watched Willow go off with some of the boys. She turned and shot a glance his way and was gone. What was that supposed to mean? He wondered.

While shoveling manure and straw, he saw a cow step on one of its tits. He had never before seen that and laughed. The cow gave out a loud moan and walked on, dragging the tit.

“Is there no mercy?” he laughed to Michael Beaty who was helping him.

Michael was laughing too. “No. There is no mercy. Come on. The wheelbarrow is full. I’ll show you where to dump it.”

Pushing the wheelbarrow out of the darkness of the barn into the bright daylight, they both grabbed for their sun glasses and smiled at each other.

“In a few minutes,” Michael explained, “we won’t need these shades.”

James looked up at the clouds that were having a race with the sun. The clouds were winning. Their fingers seemed to grab at the sun as if to pull it down.

“You’re right,” James answered, picking up the wheelbarrow again. “But I don’t think it will rain.”

“Oh, it will rain, all right,” Michael said assuredly. “If your grandfather says it will rain, it will. He’s never wrong.”

“I hear a note of resentment.” Michael cocked his head with a half smile.

They approached a white fenced corral with a large gate. Beyond that was a pile of manure waiting for transport. Michael opened the gate and let James in with the wheelbarrow.

“Yeah. He can be overbearing at times, but I'll let it pass. At least I don't have to live with him. He is a pretty right old fella, and I love the dickens out of him.”

James dumped the manure and they went back to the barn for another load.

“Your grandfather took to the NPU really fast,” Michael commented.

James slid his shovel beneath some manure and flopped it into the wheelbarrow.

“Never knew that he had such political views.” Michael reached down to scoop another load. “He always seemed to be a right winger.”

“How's that?” Michael put his two scoops in, letting James do most of the work.

“He had membership in both the John Birch Society and the American Rifle Association.” James moved the wheelbarrow over to a new location. The cows in the stalls complained.

“That's pretty right winged all right. He seems to have mellowed out somewhat.”

James leaned on his shovel, crossing his arms against the tip of the handle.

“Doesn't seem like the old grandpa I used to know. How could a right winger become so liberal?”

“Had a change of heart, I guess.”

“So how did you become a state rep?”

“I was appointed by committee, but I told the guys I would not accept the office

unless I was voted in. I won't be a part of party politics or party dictatorship.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the top bosses in the NPU were all appointed by James Maxwell and his friends. They thought they could just continue that process in putting an organization together at the state and federal levels. I told them I wouldn't stand for it. They let me have my way. Although it didn't change anything. They nominated me. The people elected me, but there was no opposition. In a democracy, there should be an opposition.”

“I see. Everyone seems to be like minded.” James smiled, feeling that was such a quaint thread running through these people.

“Yeah, that's what worries me.” Michael was slowing down again, but there was nothing more to do on that side of the barn. There were others working on the other side, so, except for washing down the cows ... “It's time for a break. I'm not as young as I used to be. Sitting around in jail for several months, I guess. We can come back for the cows after lunch.”

As they walked towards the main house, where tables of sandwiches and other food were set up, Michael continued his explanation. “At first, I thought I was the only rep in the state, but when I got to Springfield, I found that I was one of many from the different districts. I had to share an office with other reps from other parts of the state. In fact, we were a committee. Well, actually, that was a relief. I didn't have to lobby the state legislature all by myself.”

“I guess that's pretty good,” James said as he approached the table and picked up a

plate. He noticed there was one line on each side of the table. Michael started on the other side in front of James.

“So you're one of the soldiers that came in,” Michael said, picking up a ham sandwich and then a roast beef sandwich.

James grabbed a couple of ham sandwiches and a handful of potato chips. “Yeah, that's how I happened to arrive back here to my old home town. I guess that was a bit of luck on my part.”

“How so?” Michael asked, as he lifted a lemon soda bottled in Mexico from a tub of crushed ice.

James chose a bottle of root beer. “I didn't really have the money to come home this time. In fact, I never do. I got disconnected from my family ... the O'Reilly's. I guess you know my grandpa.”

“Yes. Known him a long time, even before we joined the NPU together. He even worked for the school district one summer. We went around to the different high schools, resurfacing gym floors. He was really good at it.”

“I never knew.”

James was jolted from the side as Willow and a bunch of laughing boys broke in line grabbing their food. He almost dropped his paper plate.

“Willow,” was all he said.

“James, this is Bob, Frank, and Larry.” She piled her plate up and darted off with them as each said “Hi.”

Michael and James saw Maggie and Grandpa Irving sitting together at an old wooden picnic table. They joined them and sat down facing them. Grandpa Irving and Michael started up a lively conversation, and James and Maggie simply said “Hello.” When James was done with one sandwich and his soda was half empty, Willow came and sat by Maggie. She smiled at James and said, “Those boys started getting fresh.” She took a bite out of her sandwich and chewed it as fast as she could and smiled.

“So what have you been doing?” James asked her.

She took a drink of James's root beer. He smiled and she said, “We've been weeding the mint behind the barn.”

“So that's what I've been smelling.” James sniffed the air. “I couldn't place it. I never think of mint being on a farm.”

Willow laughed. “Where did you think mint grows?”

“Well. I just never thought of it. What do they do with it?” James looked at his root beer and wanted to take a drink. He wondered if he should just give it to her.

“They dry, maybe ten percent of it, and you can get it at Murphy's. The rest is pressed into oil and sold.”

James shoved his root beer over to Willow. She responded with, “No, I don't want it.”

“I thought the NPU was non-profit.” James finished his sandwich and then his drink.

“Well, we have to have a little money,” she said. “It helps us get into places, you

know, like a wedge. Some things we need to buy when we can't barter. Sometimes we buy the business. But a lot of the money is spent on raw materials, or to pay someone off."

"You mean you bribe people?" James was shocked. He scooted back.

Willow grinned and said, "Well, you can't get along in this world without a little bribe."

"I've gone all my life without having to bribe people."

"It's just to soften some people up. Get them on your side. It's that wedge I spoke of. Helps you get into places, get to know people."

"Get to know the wrong people, I think."

"No, no, James. There are a lot of kind people in the world that just need to be shoved in the right direction."

"By bribing them?"

"Let's put it this way. People need to be paid for their services, and once they see there is no need for money, we can pay them with stuff. Usually, it's other services. We scratch their backs, they scratch ours. That's all it is."

"That's the long way around it."

"Yes, for some people it is." Willow sighed and changed the subject. "So what have you been doing? I hope it doesn't involve philosophy."

"Oh, Michael and I have been cleaning out the barn."

"That's what I've been smelling."

They both laughed.

James stared at Willow. She was a delight to be with, and he enjoyed the attention.

His reverie was interrupted by a tall older man whom Willow introduced as Bob Kirkham.

“May I have your attention, please.” Some the workers were still talking, so he said again, “Your attention, please.” When everyone was silent, he announced, “Chicago has given in. The battle between Chicago and the NPU about policemen having to be voted into office is over.” Everyone shouted a hurrah. James felt like an outsider, but it was interesting to watch. “Chicago is the first major city to capitulate under the pressure of the people.” Another hurrah. “When our town became independent of Chicago (we got big enough to break away),” laughter from the crew, “it started a domino effect. Other towns around Chicago have embraced our philosophy, and now, Chicago itself. Next in line is New York, Washington, Lexington, Denver, Dallas, Salt Lake City, and Los Angeles.” The crowd yelled Hallelujahs. “Keep up the good work. Our town has set a good example.”

After the clamor died down, Michael addressed James. “We've got to go wash down those cows.”

“See you later,” James told Willow.

“See you later,” she replied.

“Grandpa,” James waved at his grandfather. He waved back and continued his conversation with Maggie.

When they got back into the barn, some other people were busy hosing down the cows. The foreman, an older guy, tall with white hair under his red baseball cap came up to them. "I grabbed some other people. You two have been reassigned. They want you out in the fields pulling weeds."

Walking down the dirt road to where another group was pulling weeds, Michael complained, "We weren't fast enough for him. Now we'll sweat and get dirty as all get-out."

James hoped Willow would be out there.

The weeds had a green acid smell. James didn't mind being on his knees, but Michael kept complaining. James's wish came true, and he found himself working opposite Willow. His mind wasn't on his work, but his hands already knew what to do. They pulled weeds as fast as anyone around him.

James was having a happy time talking to Willow until Michael introduced him to a tall robust man by the name of Bob Kirkham. He rose to his feet and shook the man's hand.

"I never forget a face that has come into my barbershop," Bob said. "You're O'Reilly's boy. Glad to see you here with us serving the people."

"Grandson, actually," James said.

"Oh, of course," Bob blustered out. "That explains the age difference. Will you be coming to our meetings?"

"I don't know off hand," James answered. "I'll only be here during the summer. I

go back to school in the fall. Might even wind up in Ohio State.”

“Too bad. We could use a good worker like you.”

That wouldn't be too bad, James thought, as Bob went back to weeding next to Willow. She and Bob talked in low tones as though sharing a secret and laughed. James felt a twinge of jealousy.

It began raining, light but steady. The dirt turned to mud. There were mud fights for a while, and James made sure any potential suitors of Willow's were pounded good. After everyone was all muddy, he found it easier to work. Pulling weeds out of the mud went a lot faster. Eventually the rain washed off the mud except on their pants and feet.

By the time their stomachs started growling, everyone went back to their vehicles, dried off, and headed home. Grandpa Irving and Michael fell asleep. Maggie stared out the window. There were conversations going on in the front and back like background music.

“So, where's the little tyke?” James asked Willow.

“He's across the hall playing with Sally. She babysits him all the time.”

“Oh,” James said, remembering the last time he saw the little blonde girl who had embarrassed him. He immediately wanted to change his thought. “He's a cute kid.”

Willow and James talked about their lives. The wheels on the van whined. Someone turned on the radio to soft rock. The next thing that James noticed was that the van was still. He heard a voice saying, “This is your stop.” He opened his eyes. He had fallen asleep. Willow was sleeping on his shoulder. He felt groggy and sore all over. He

pushed her over to his grandfather's shoulder who put his arm around her and winked.

“Say goodbye for me,” James said.

As he got out of the van, he heard Willow say, “What?” She yawned and opened her eyes.

“I'll see you tomorrow,” he told her. He waved goodbye to his grandfather and Michael who was also waking up.

Chapter Five

James knocked on Willow's door. He heard her muffled voice, "Timmy! Come back here. Don't open that door!" He opened it anyway.

James stooped down. "Hi, Timmy."

"Hi," he said, grinning. He saw that James was holding a package all wrapped up with a blue ribbon. The paper had balloons printed all over it. "Is that for me?"

"Yes." James almost forgot the package he was carrying under his arm. "Yes, it is." He handed it to Timmy who grabbed it, jumped up and down and let the door slam shut as he ran to find his mom.

Willow opened the door drying her hair with a towel. "Sorry, I had to get dressed in a hurry. Come in. Timmy and I are just getting ready to go to church. How did you know it was his birthday?"

"Grandpa told me."

James walked in. It was his habit to spy out a new area to look for anything or anyone harmful. With one glance he saw an old green couch in front of him, a TV on a bookshelf to his right. There were little boy clothes scattered across the couch and on the floor along with toy cars and train parts. The pattern the clothes made told him they came from the couch. There was a door to the right. That was the bedroom. The doorway to the kitchen was on the left side of the couch, and the bathroom was, he guessed, in the bedroom. Timmy was jumping up and down in the kitchen, tearing his present open while

running back and forth from the kitchen to the living room and back again.

She wrapped her hair inside the towel. "You didn't have to." She opened the door to her bedroom, turned around and smiled.

"I wanted to," James said. "I like the little tyke."

"Thank you," Willow said.

Without looking at anyone and finally opening the box and dancing in the paper he had thrown on the floor, Timmy sang, "I'm not a tyke. I'm not a tyke. I'm not a tyke."

"It's A.D.D." She went into the bedroom. There was the sound of a blow dryer, and then she came out with her hair combed and ready to go.

Timmy ran to her, holding out a red pickup truck as big as his chest. "It's a truck, Mommy, a truck."

"A red truck. Let's get your shoes on." She looked around and found one across the room, the other one under the couch. She sat him on the couch and put his socks on that she had brought from the bedroom. As she put his shiny black shoes on him, Timmy was making rumbling sounds and trying to fly the truck through the air.

Grabbing Timmy's hand, she brought her attention back to James. "I'm sorry. You came to visit, and we're leaving." She paused, raised her eyebrows and smiled. "You could come with us."

"I don't have a suit to wear."

"You could come as you are. You look spiffy enough, and you smell good. What is that. I've never smelled it before."

“Old Spice.”

She stepped towards him and inhaled deeply, closing her eyes. She looked at him squarely and said, “Come on, Old Spice. It's non-denominational. Anyone can come.”

He thought a minute.

“I'll even sit next to you so you won't be alone.”

“Okay.”

“Thanks.”

They were out the door and down the stairs, and James saw the same van pull up that had taken them to the farm.

“I thought this was a church meeting,” James said as he approached the van.

“It is. We just happen to have a ride with our neighbors who are going to the same meeting.”

When she opened the sliding door, James saw his grandparents and the Beatys sitting behind them. Willow got in the back with the Beatys with Timmy on her lap, and James sat down next to his grandma and slid the door shut. The van sped away.

* * *

The van stopped at the old high school and parallel parked in the front instead of going out back to the parking lot. Everyone climbed out. James didn't know what to do. He thought they were going to a church, plus, he felt like an outsider. He waited for directions. It was a new thing to go to what he considered to be a different religion.

Outside of his church, everyone was considered a heretic. Willow grabbed his arm. “We are so used to meeting in this old school, we even have church here. Besides, we haven't found any other place to meet.”

James found himself in a classroom filled with many of the people he saw at the farm. Mack, whom he had rescued from a gang of bullies, sat at the head of the class. Michael went over and took a seat next to him. The Reverend Stillson, Bob Kirkham, and a business type he didn't know sat to the left of Mack. He walked over and shook everyone's hands, and was introduced to the banker Ken Brown wearing a very expensive shiny dark blue suit.

He looked around for his anchor, Willow. Seeing her and her son sitting with Grandpa Irving and Maggie, he saw an empty seat next to Willow. Grandma had gone to her own church on Friday, so hadn't come. He smiled at Willow and she motioned for him to sit beside her.

James took his seat and the meeting started as Bob Kirkham rose to the podium. As he introduced the dignitaries sitting behind him, James noticed that everyone was quiet except two old men sitting in the back. They just had to give a running commentary through the entire length of the meeting, for they were Gramps and Harold . After the introduction, the reverend gave a prayer and continued with a sermon.

“Today I'm going to give you a short rerun of our founding fathers. The Pilgrims came to this land of America to set up a New Jerusalem. What would they be doing that for? They weren't Jews, but they were steeped in the Bible prophecies and the covenants

God made with Israel. Even though they were of the Christian faith, they considered themselves of the House of Israel, if not literally, then figuratively, a fugitive nation escaping the bondage of a great king.

“The traditions of freedom and equality could not be stamped out by the oppressions of a royal house. Those traditions were handed down from their Anglo-Saxon forefathers. It is quite striking that the common law of the Anglo-Saxons was very similar to what we find in the Bible in Deuteronomy.

“I get some of my ideas from another religionist and patriot, Cleon Skousen in *The 5000 Year Leap*.

“The characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon Common Law is that they considered themselves a commonwealth of free men. They made their decisions and selected their leaders by the voice of the people, preferably with a full consensus, not just a majority. Their laws were considered natural laws given by divine dispensation, and were so well known by the people they did not have to write them down.

“That sounds like our own declaration. We know what is right and wrong. We are born with that knowledge. It is called the Light of Christ and common sense. This is the meaning of natural law.

“Power was never allowed to concentrate in any one person or group. For example, in time of war, the authority granted to the leaders was temporary. The people had the power to remove them after the war, as they were no longer needed. That's the way it was done when civilized people resided in city states. There was never a standing army. The

army was always dissolved after a war.

“Responsibility for solving problems rested first with the individual, then with the family, then the tribe, then the region, and finally, the nation. National authorities were not allowed to interfere into local politics. Their organizations were small, manageable groups where every adult had a voice and a vote. People were divided into units of ten families, a hundred families, and then a thousand families, where each group elected a leader. Besides electing a leader, each group had a set of judges from its own group. This is just like the children of Israel under the leadership of Moses. And the the rights of the individual were inalienable and could not be violated without risking the wrath of divine justice as well as civil retribution by the people's judges.

“Their system of justice concentrated on reparation to the person who had been wronged. If that couldn't be accomplished, punishment was severe.

“There were only four crimes against the nation as a whole. These were treason, cowardice and failing to fight courageously, desertion, and homosexuality. These were considered capital offenses. The penalty was death.

“For the most part, they never went to their leaders for a solution to their problems. They were organized enough at a local level to do that.

“The founding fathers were surprised at the close correlation with the Law of Moses as they studied the ancient Anglo-Saxons and their form of government. The Reverend Thomas Hooker based his *Fundamental Orders of Connecticut*, adopted in 1639, on the principles found in the first chapter of Deuteronomy. It became the first

written constitution in modern times and was so successful that it was adopted by the state of Rhode Island. When it came to forming the Constitution of the United States, these were the only two states that were ready to adapt to the new order of self-government.

“Now notice the similarity in the Law of Moses: Leviticus 25:10 states 'Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.' When the Children of Israel were tempted to have slaves or bond servants, they were reprimanded, as in Jeremiah 34:17. 'Ye have not hearkened unto me, in proclaiming liberty every man to his brother, and every man to his neighbor: behold, I proclaim a liberty for you, saith the Lord.'

“Exodus 18:13-26 says that all the people were organized into small manageable units, as were the Anglo-Saxons, when Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, saw him trying to govern the people by himself. Exodus 18:26 states 'The hard causes they brought unto Moses, but every small matter they judged for themselves.' Exodus chapters 21 and 22 show that the entire code of justice was based upon reparation to the victim rather than fines and punishment by the commonwealth. The only crime for which there was no satisfaction was that of murder, and the penalty for that was death.

“In Exodus 19:8 leaders were elected and new laws were enacted by the common consent of the people. Also, if you have your scriptures with you, look up 2nd Samuel 2:4. It deals with the same thing.

“Accused persons were presumed innocent until proven guilty. For borderline

cases, the judgment went toward the person charged. He was set free. If it turned out that he was guilty, they figured that he would be dealt with by God in the afterlife.

“Now, let's open our scriptures to Deuteronomy. Here is the Law of the Lord that both the ancient Israelites and the Anglo-Saxons adhered to.

“Deuteronomy 15:7,8:

7. If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother:

8. But thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, [in that] which he wanteth.

“That is pretty straightforward. You don't be stingy. The Lord expects you to love all people and give with your whole heart.

“Deuteronomy 15:9,10:

9. Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and thine eye be evil against thy poor brother, and thou givest him nought; and he cry unto the LORD against thee, and it be sin unto thee.

10. Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him: because that for this thing the LORD thy God shall bless thee in all thy works, and in all that thou putteth thine hand unto.

“Remember when the woman anointed Christ with an expensive ointment and Judas was appalled? He said that she should have sold the ointment and given it to the

poor. But Jesus said in Matthew 26:11, 'For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always.' What he was quoting was Deuteronomy 15:11:

11. For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.

“Why is the Lord saying this? He answers in Deuteronomy 15:15:

15. And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee: therefore I command thee this thing to day.

“We need to remember the bondage that our forefathers were under to a British monarch. It took two wars to win our freedom. The Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. There were natural steps which we took to gain that freedom. One was self-government, a tradition we brought with us that came from our Anglo-Saxon ancestors. And within that form and tradition was the idea that has come into focus in our day, that of helping our neighbor, which has been hampered by commerce, buying and selling.

“In Deuteronomy 23:15,16, we read:

15. Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee:

16. He shall dwell with thee, [even] among you, in that place which he shall choose in one of thy gates, where it liketh him best: thou shalt not oppress him.

“Human rights in God's eyes supersedes property rights. And God's original word didn't say 'oppress', but 'grumble'. 'Thou shalt not grumble' when you give to your

neighbor. You need to open your heart to your neighbor. He said to love they neighbor as thyself.

“Deuteronomy 23:24:

24. When thou comest into thy neighbour's vineyard, then thou mayest eat grapes to thy fill at thine own pleasure; but thou shalt not put [any] in thy vessel.

“If your neighbor disallows that, he is greedy. If you put some of his grapes into a box to carry away, you are greedy. It is greed, my dear brothers and sisters that causes buying and selling, commerce. It prevents one from sharing and enjoying life. The Lord said that he came to give man a more abundant life. He instructed his disciples on how to overcome economic difficulties, and what did they end up doing? They had all things in common. You can read that in the book of Acts in the New Testament. If we have sufficient for our needs, then the only reason to accumulate goods or services is to share them with others. Clothe the naked, feed the hungry, take care of the widow and orphan.

“Deuteronomy 22:1-4:

1. THOU shalt not see thy brother's ox or his sheep go astray, and hide thyself from them: thou shalt in any case bring them again unto thy brother.

2. And if thy brother [be] not nigh unto thee, or if thou know him not, then thou shalt bring it unto thine own house, and it shall be with thee until thy brother seek after it, and thou shalt restore it to him again.

3. In like manner shalt thou do with his ass; and so shalt thou do with his raiment; and with all lost things of thy brother's, which he hath lost, and thou hast found, shalt

thou do likewise: thou mayest not hide thyself.

4. Thou shalt not see thy brother's ass or his ox fall down by the way, and hide thyself from them: thou shalt surely help him to lift [them] up again.

“Again, be open hearted. Be your neighbor's friend. Serve one another. This is the law of the Lord, and this is the pattern after which we want to construct our lives and our community.

“Deuteronomy 24:6,10-11,13-15

6. No man shall take the nether or the upper millstone to pledge: for he taketh [a man's] life to pledge.

10. When thou dost lend thy brother any thing, thou shalt not go into his house to fetch his pledge.

11. Thou shalt stand abroad, and the man to whom thou dost lend shall bring out the pledge abroad unto thee.

13. In any case thou shalt deliver him the pledge again when the sun goeth down, that he may sleep in his own raiment, and bless thee: and it shall be righteousness unto thee before the LORD thy God.

14. ¶ Thou shalt not oppress an hired servant [that is] poor and needy, [whether he be] of thy brethren, or of thy strangers that [are] in thy land within thy gates:

15. At his day thou shalt give [him] his hire, neither shall the sun go down upon it; for he [is] poor, and setteth his heart upon it: lest he cry against thee unto the LORD, and it be sin unto thee.

“A man's house is sacred, you see. You can't just go into his house and search it and grab something for security when he has borrowed from you. He has to give it to you, and according to the Lord's law, it can be his choice. And if it's something he needs by sundown, it must be delivered to him before then. Can you see where this is going?

“If a man is desperate for work, you can't hold back and pay him as little as possible, treating him as a slave. It must be according to his needs. This has to be applied to the stranger, to the wetback, as well as to people in your own community. And according to these scriptures, the worker must receive daily wages, before the sun goes down, in fact. Everyone has a right to daily bread. And in the same light, if the store is going to be closed over the weekend, he can't wait for Monday to receive his loaves and fishes. We know that the employer may well go broke, but we of the NPU will help him out.”

There was a bit of laughter because everyone knew the context of not using money.

“The law of the gleaning is well-known: 'When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow,' Deuteronomy 24:19. In beating the olive trees, leave some fruit on the ground for the poor, Deuteronomy 24:20. Best known of all is 'Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn,' Deuteronomy 25:4. Anyone who is working for you, give him a break. Do the decent thing. It's not about making money. When punishing the vilest criminal, he should never be robbed of his human dignity, lest 'thy brother . . . seem vile to thee,' Deuteronomy 25:3.

“In other words, having the right spirit, you obey the whole law of God: 'And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul,' Deuteronomy 10:12. And 'everything in heaven and earth belongs to him,' Deuteronomy 10:14. '... all mortals are his children, all living things his creatures; he does right by the orphan and the widow, and he loves the stranger and wants him provided with food and clothing,' Deuteronomy 10:18. God's attributes must be ours also: 'Therefore you must do the same: love the stranger, remembering that you were strangers in the land of Egypt,' Deuteronomy 10:19. Or, in the land of England and other countries from which our ancestors come. The Lord requires empathy of us.

“Haven't you ever felt down and out? Put yourself in their place, and do something about it! If you fail in this principle, 'Heaven will be brass over thy head and the earth will be iron beneath thy feet,' Deuteronomy 28:23. 'The Lord himself will cause you to be smitten before your enemies,' Deuteronomy 23:25. Every promised blessing is matched with a curse 'till thou be destroyed,' Deuteronomy 28:45. And all this 'because thou servedst not the Lord thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, for the abundance of all things,' Deuteronomy 28:47. In short, 'as the Lord rejoiced . . . to do you good, and to multiply you; so the Lord will rejoice . . . to destroy you, and reduce you to nothing,' Deuteronomy 28:63.

“There is no security except that which we have in the Lord. Thou 'shalt have none assurance of thy life,' Deuteronomy 28:66. Therefore, 'rejoice in every good thing which

the Lord thy God hath given unto thee, and unto thine house, and the Levite, and the stranger that is among you,' Deuteronomy 26:11. We shall all share equally, 'the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that they may eat within thy gates and be filled,' Deuteronomy 26:12. The Lord insists that you observe these laws and commandments with all your heart and with all your soul. Christ said to love God with all your heart, might, mind, and soul and to love your neighbor as yourself, that is the whole law. You have promised and covenanted that you would do that. We of the United States are a special people, set apart, the wonder of the nations.

“He said in Deuteronomy 26:16-19:

16. ¶ This day the LORD thy God hath commanded thee to do these statutes and judgments: thou shalt therefore keep and do them with all thine heart, and with all thy soul.

17. Thou hast avouched the LORD this day to be thy God, and to walk in his ways, and to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and to hearken unto his voice:

18. And the LORD hath avouched thee this day to be his peculiar people, as he hath promised thee, and that [thou] shouldest keep all his commandments;

19. And to make thee high above all nations which he hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honour; and that thou mayest be an holy people unto the LORD thy God, as he hath spoken.

“Our founding fathers wanted to build the New Jerusalem here on this the

American continent because they were moved by adherence to the Holy Scriptures. They brought over with them the common-law traditions of their ancestors which turned out to be the very law they found in the Bible, in the Old Testament, the Law given to the ancient Children of Israel. Perhaps they were the descendents of the Lost Ten Tribes. The American Indians were also considered part of those lost tribes, and their traditions were similar. We have learned from them both and have agreed to live, by covenant, the principles of Maxwell's declaration, the Constitution and the principles that created that sacred document, and the Bible or the covenants given to the ancient Israelites. Let us renew this day that agreement. Amen.”

James's mind swirled with all these principles, doctrines, and scriptures as the reverend gave a closing prayer. He had never read the Old Testament before, but now he decided he would. It contained things he had never imagined. He knew the stories it contained by heart, but not the principles. Willow had to jar him with her elbow to wake him out of his reverie.

“Bob said there is dinner in the other room.”

He faintly remembered that Bob Kirkham had stood and spoke after the reverend.

“You always have dinner after a sermon?” James smiled at her way of waking him up.

“It's in the scriptures. The early Christians brought dinner with them to their meetings.”

“Oh. There's another thing I didn't know. I'd better read up on that. I've never had

to read the scriptures. I've always relied on others to tell me what's in them.”

He got up and stretched. People began folding the chairs and putting them against the wall, so he bent down and grabbed a few chairs. After that was done, he followed Willow and everyone else out. Entering the next room, he smelled potato salad, mayonnaise, probably from sandwiches, peas, fresh rolls, and fried chicken.

* * *

Willow and James climbed out of the van laughing at a joke someone had told. James grabbed Timmy from the van and swung him into the air, landing him onto the sidewalk. “There you go, little tyke, flying all the way home.”

Timmy grimaced. “My name is Timmy. Oh, well!” he said to himself. “Maybe someday he'll get it.”

Willow and James laughed, went into the house and up the stairs with Timmy following.

Sally was sat on the stairs to the attic, watching.

Timmy grinned. “Hi, Sally. I can see you're panties.”

“You don't have to look!” She scowled, putting her knees together. Then she said, “Hi, Timmy,” nonchalantly.

“All right, you two,” Willow warned. “Get in there.” She directed Timmy through the door, swatting his behind.

“Aw, Mom!” He scooted through the door frowning.

“I had a sister like that.” James smiled.

“They're usually quite friendly,” Willow said, shutting the door. “They like to tease each other.”

“My sisters constantly teased me.” James stood by the door at ease, his hands behind his back, his feet positioned two feet apart.

Willow threw her purse into the bedroom where it landed on the bed. “I would normally start dinner. But I guess we already had that. Timmy likes to watch Walt Disney. It's on in two minutes on Channel Eight. I'm going to change. You don't mind?”

“I'm sorry,” James apologized. “I just followed you in. I didn't even ask.”

Willow raised her voice behind the bedroom door. “That's okay. Feels natural, doesn't it?”

“Well,” James approached Timmy, “You like Walt Disney? What is it? Cartoons? Maybe a movie?”

Timmy sat on the couch expecting an adult to turn on the TV. James sat down beside him, he handed James the remote. He pointed it to the TV and turned it on. Tinkerbell drew a sparkling rainbow over the Sleeping Beauty Castle with introductory music, and a 'ch8' appeared momentarily in the upper right-hand corner.”

“It looks like it's already on Channel Eight,” James said.

“We only get one channel.”

“You don't get cable? I thought everyone got cable. They don't transmit over the air anymore.”

“Mommy says its a magic TV.”

“Oh.” James looked down at Timmy and tousled his hair. The little guy shook his head and frowned. “So,” James asked again, “you like Walt Disney?” and put his arm across the couch behind the boy.

“Mom likes it mostly. She likes to watch it with me.” He stared at the TV as a movie came on about a little pig.

“Oh.” James smiled at the quaint revelation, that it wasn't his favorite program, but his mother's. “So, what would you like to do?”

“I usually play with my toy train afterwards. She gave it to me last year for my birthday.”

Willow came in dressed in jeans and a light blue shirt. Since Timmy was sitting on the far edge of the couch and James next to him, there was only one place for her and that was beside James. She sat down beside him and breathed deeply. He looked at her and smiled, his blood pressure rapidly increasing.

All three stared at the TV screen in silence. Somewhere in the middle of the movie, James pretended to notice that Willow slipped her hand into his. He smiled, and she let go.

“Oh my goodness,” she said. “I forgot the popcorn.” She got up and went into the kitchen. In a few minutes, the sounds and smell of popcorn invaded the living room. She brought in a big Tupperware bowl filled with the fragrant white buttered and salted puffs. For the rest of the movie they passed the bowl to each other. When it came down to the old maids, there wasn't anything to grab but each other's hands. So for the last minute

James held Willow's hand inside the bowl. Then Timmy jumped up and asked James to play with him and the train.

Willow watched from the couch as they put the train tracks together and spent the next hour experimenting with every combination of train cars and scenarios trains could have. Her eyes sparkled as she smiled in approval.

James looked up and saw Willow's shining white teeth and his heart skipped a beat. She had been smiling all the while and he hadn't noticed.

"Hey!" he called out.

"Hey," she answered dreamily.

"What time is it?" James looked around for a clock.

"We keep the clock in the kitchen," she said. "But I imagine it's eight o'clock, and your bed time, kiddo." She directed her words to Timmy.

"Well, unless you two want to come running with me." James stood tousling Timmy's hair. "I have to go."

"No," she said, standing and walking over to him, "It's his bedtime."

"Aw, Mom," Timmy complained.

"You, little man," she replied, "get into the tub."

"Yes, Ma'am." He walked away looking dejected.

"Goodnight, Timmy," James called.

Timmy snapped his fingers and said, "Yes!" in delight that James had finally remembered his name.

Willow giggled, grabbing James's collar with both hands. "Thank you for playing with Timmy. I can see he really likes you. He needs a man in his life." She blushed. "I didn't mean ... Oh hell!" She pulled him by the collar and kissed him, let go a second, looked into his eyes, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him again. He slowly put his arms around her, hugged her and wondered when he was going to be able to come up for air because the kiss lasted an interminable amount of time.

A small voice called from the bathroom. "What are you two dooinng? I don't hear no noise."

After Willow and James said their goodbyes, James looked at the stairs to his left where Sally sat with her legs apart. She grabbed her dress and held it down and giggled. He blushed and raced downstairs. Just before he opened the glass door to go outside, his reflection showed a big smear of red lipstick. Oh, he thought, opening the door. That's what she was giggling about. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his mouth and ran away from the house as if he were on fire. He laughed for two blocks, and it took several minutes before he could run in earnest and concentrate on his training.

Chapter Six

James ran through the cool night air. A steady wind blew from the north across the lake, across Chicago and into his own home town, rustling the trees over his head. His thoughts went to a time in Houston where it was hot and muggy during the summer. He went down there looking for himself.

He walked the streets and slept on park benches, having arrived by hitch-hiking. Those were the days of his rebellion, right after graduation from high school. He wanted to prove he could take care of himself. After two weeks of living off the streets and looking for work, his pocket change ran out.

He decided he would try fasting. How long could he go without food? After two days his thoughts turned to theft. He would go into a good restaurant, order a nice meal and get arrested. Not having any money to pay for the meal, they would call the police who would take him downtown and put him into a cell with hardened criminals. It would be free meals from then on with no worries. Or would it? He rethought the plan when he considered the type of men he would have to share space with.

He decided another route. He would look in garbage cans. At first, he tried restaurants. Maybe there would be food others hadn't eaten. But all the garbage was in trash bags. He walked on. Coming to a grocery store, he decided to look in their dumpster. Perfectly good vegetables and fruits had been thrown away. There were plenty of grocery bags blowing around or left in shopping carts, so he grabbed a couple and

filled them up. Finding a nice park nearby, he filled his stomach with apples, carrots, and cabbage. Broccoli and cauliflower salad became the next meal. All he had to do was trim the bad parts off with his pocketknife and wash the food at the water fountain.

Whenever he found a dime on the pavement or in a parking lot, he could go to the bus depot, open his locker, take out fresh clothes, and go into the showers downstairs encased in marble. There was even a black attendant to shine shoes and get you towels or soap. He didn't let you in next time if you didn't tip him.

He never did find a job, but he found some friends that were in the same predicament. He would usually go to the public library, but he got tired of reading. It was too tempting to look at magazines, look at pictures of girls and worry if there would ever be one in his life. He found a ten dollar bill one day, went to the movies, and when it was over, left out the back door. He sat in the dark alley to get out of the heat and reflect upon his life. While deep in thought, three young men his own age sat down beside him. Oh God, he thought. Now I'm in trouble.

One of the three was a big black guy. He asked, "What's up dude?"

"Nothing much," James said. "Just staying out of the heat." Maybe, he thought, these were gang members seeking the thrill of blood, probably going to take it out on me when they find I have no money.

The tall skinny one asked, "Got nowhere to go? Usually, only bums come back here."

"Well, guys, you see, it's like this." He turned his head from side to side as he

addressed them. “I came here to find a job. No one wants to hire me. I have no money for a room, so I've been sleeping in the park or at the bus depot. The only reason I was in there,” referring to the theater with his thumb, “was because I found a ten. It's all I have. You can have the rest of it. I'm not good for much else. No credit cards or debit cards for that matter.”

They all three laughed. Then the young black man slapped James against the top of his head. “What do you take us for, dude?”

“I don't know.” James ducked his head too late. “What ever do you find in a dark alley?”

The third guy spoke in a resonant voice. “Hey. We saw you come out of the theater. You looked a bit dejected. We thought you could use some cheering up. We're going to a ball game next. Want to tag along?”

That's how James met Cord, Turley, and Priestly. Gosh, he thought as he ran along towards the edge of town. He was going to miss them. He could e-mail them, but they wouldn't be seeing each other again unless the Guard brought them back together. He was going back to school after the summer was over. What if he had never gone to that baseball game? What if? He had a lot to think about.

At the edge of town he turned right. He had turned left the other night and ran through a wealthy neighborhood. Tonight, he would see the poor side of town. He expected to see pimps with their girls, one bar after another, drunks and schizoids swearing up and down all over the streets, and gang members all dressed in their

particular color . Instead, he saw old houses in all states of repair, some already finished. The neighborhood didn't look as poor as he remembered. Some houses were freshly painted, gardens planted, storefronts remodeled, streets swept and no garbage out front. Friendly people greeted him. He said “Hi” in return through his huffing and puffing as he jogged along.

In one section of town he saw churches on every corner. Many of them had the lights on. There was singing coming from them. He began to wonder what had happened to the other side of the tracks. What had taken place? Was this the doings of the NPU? It seemed like a lot of caring has been taking place. He remembered the sermon he had listened to at the high school. Were people listening to those principles taught so many thousands of years ago?

The sacking of Troy was taking place at the same time that Moses was teaching compassion. Now-a-days there were bush wars all over the world. Planned wars to keep the war machine oiled, waiting for the big one. The military kept up the punch so another world war either wouldn't happen, or they would be ready for it. On the other hand, kind people in towns like this one all over the United States were taking care of their neighbor. It was a lot to think about.

* * *

James ran on into darkness. It was the industrial section of town. He hadn't noticed when the scenery had changed, he was so deep in thought. He was now running on a dirt road not knowing where he was going to wind up. He looked for a way to turn to get back

to town. He slowed down when he saw car lights in the distance. Curiosity took him closer. It was two patrol cars. He heard screaming and yelling. He stopped, bent over to get his breath, stood back up and took a few deep breaths and walked over to where he could see what was going on.

Four policemen were beating a black man who was on the ground wailing, covering his head with his arms as best he could. The policemen were hitting him with their billy clubs. James collected a few rocks and broken pieces of cement. The cars were positioned into a “V” such that the engines were at the vertex. He sneaked up behind the cars and the policemen and started throwing his rocks at them. His aim was sure, hitting them in their heads and backs. They turned around and got rocks thrown in their face. Three of them were down, but one of them had been behind the other three. He reached for his gun, but James knocked him out, though not before he got off a shot. It was Afghanistan all over again. James's shoulder felt the blazing heat of the bullet, but it wasn't enough to put him down.

He went over to the downed policemen, handcuffed them with their own cuffs and placed them into the backs of their cars. He got on the radio in one of the cars and called for an ambulance. He had to use the floodlight on the outside of the door to look at the surrounding area to get a name. He told the dispatcher Brookland's Brickworks which was painted on a cement wall near the road.

With the ambulance was two other patrol cars. The black man was taken to the hospital and James was taken down town and thrown into jail until an investigation could

take place. The four policemen found handcuffed were questioned first and then released. They pressed charges against James. Then James was taken into a room and questioned. They wanted to know what connection he had to the black man he had rescued. His name was Buba.

“I arrested him along with his other gang members,” James answered. “They were beating up one of their fellow members by the name of Mack.”

The man on the other side of the table had shaved his head, had a flat face with an expression like hard flint, wore a tan suit without a tie, wearing only a t-shirt underneath his coat. He was slightly overweight. “You a constable? One of those NPU bastards?”

“No,” James replied. “I was only a guardsman on duty during the national emergency, making my rounds, saw a fight, broke it up.”

“So, why aren't you in uniform? Have you been discharged?” The officer kept a pad of yellow legal paper before him, but he wasn't writing anything. He only held the pencil between his forefinger and thumb and beat it against the table.

“No. I'm just one of those weekend warriors. They can call me anytime. I'm off for the summer. I'll be going back to school during the fall.”

“What school?”

“University of Illinois. Studying law.”

“I'm sure you know its against the law to start pelting officers. And yet, you pick up some rocks. You do it slow and methodical, time enough to collect a small pile of them and take good aim. You downed four officers in a short time. You play ball?”

“I'm a pitcher for the Illinois University team.”

“I see. I could call you a professional. See any action overseas?” The officer put the pencil down and clasped his hands and stared at James.

“I've been in Afghanistan on two different deployments.”

“So, you just happen to be walking by, see these policemen beating this black man, and decide to become a one man vigilante?”

“I was just out for a run. Have to keep in shape.”

“Sure you weren't running out there to save your buddy? You seem awfully fond of these black men. You were seen visiting this Mack, a member of this gang, has been for more than ten years. You've been seen with him several times. What's your connection with this gang?”

“I told you. I arrested the gang. Mack, I was just making sure he was all right.”

“Sure you're not an NPU Constable? You seem to like working at their farm.”

“I haven't joined. I'm just investigating. Want to see who they are and what they're up to.”

“Professional interest?”

“No, personal.” James took a deep breath, wondering if he had just slipped up. Now he will ask about Willow, he thought.

“You've been visiting my niece, Willow Morgan.”

“Say!” James raised his voice. “Have you been following me? This has nothing to do with me pelting those policemen.”

“We look into any connection to the Viper Gang. That's what they call themselves. Willow's father was killed by one of them. Never have been able to prove it. He was one of ours, an upstanding patrolman. Not a pushover. Got the job done. Ambushed.”

“Sorry.” James bowed his head a little without taking his eyes off his interrogator.

“She ever talk about him?”

“She doesn't talk about her parents.” James paused and said, “The neighbor thinks they're both dead. Car crash or something.”

“The mother's under police protection. She's a witness. Can't contact her daughter.”

“Why tell me?” James wondered. “Wouldn't I be considered a leak?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. We have our eye on you.”

“What if I do tell?” James leaned back in his chair and rested his head in his hands.

“Doesn't matter. What matters is who. You tell a member of the gang, we may get lucky when they go looking for Mrs. Morgan. You tell Willow, she'll go for her mother and the gang will follow her. Again, we may get lucky.”

James fumed. “You're not using me like that.”

“As I said before, doesn't matter. You contact any member of the gang and we're right there.”

“I don't think I'll be contacting anyone.” James folded his hands and rested his chin on them. “Looks like I'll be in jail for some time.”

“We're still watching. A lot of things can happen in jail.”

The two stared at each other until an officer came to return James to his cell.

* * *

Detective Morgan met with two other plainclothes men. "I think he's clean. He's telling the truth. He's not NPU yet, and his connection with the Vipers is only peripheral."

"So," the older, heavier detective said, "he just happens to come up on four of our guys trying to arrest Buba and decided he doesn't like police and starts clobbering them."

"That's what it looks like," said Morgan.

"Even though he gave himself up," a younger detective noted, "looks like he's in it for a couple of years at least."

"Yes, that's true, and lucky for me." Morgan picked his teeth with a toothpick. "He won't be seeing my niece for some time."

* * *

James sat in his cell meditating and remembered that he had wanted to read the Bible, especially the Old Testament. He stood up, grabbed the bars, and searched for the jailor. He saw a man sitting at a desk at the end of the corridor.

"Hey!" he called out.

"What is it?" the man answered.

"You got a Bible?"

"Sure." The jailor opened a drawer and pulled out a thick black Bible. "A lot of people get religion in here." He walked over and handed the Bible to James through the bars.

"Thanks." James took the book and sat down again.

“You're welcome,” the jailor called back.

James opened the book and began reading in Exodus. He read about Moses and the deliverance of the Israelites, all the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea, and all those people walking across on dry ground. Then he read about the laws and rules they were supposed to follow. It was just like what Reverend Stillson said. Everyone was being taught to look out for his neighbor.

After reading a while, James set the book aside and went back to meditating. He set his feet on the bunk and scooted his back up against the wall. He wrapped his arms around his legs and set his chin between his knees. What good is my education? he thought. Am I studying the wrong thing? With this NPU taking over, all the laws are sure to change. The way business is run will change. He had never thought of studying the laws written in the Bible. It was very enlightening.

* * *

Blake Morgan spent several days questioning James, but he couldn't make him confess to any connection with the Viper Gang. The murder of Blake's brother turned him bitter, and he wouldn't stop pushing until he found who did it. He had other connections he followed, but nothing was turning up. It was he who persuaded his sister-in-law to go into hiding. He loved her and Willow and her little boy. He wanted to protect them in anyway he could. Now when he found out how dangerous her new boyfriend was, he was glad that James was going to spend a few years in jail. The courts would acquit the officers who were only subduing a criminal and find James guilty of not only

assaulting officers of the law, but preventing them from doing their duty. It was like walking through a fog, not knowing when the next turn would show up. But turns did show up, and he was getting closer to the murderer. He would go to Willow and persuade her to leave this guy alone.

* * *

Morgan knocked on Willow's door. She opened it, and with a look of surprise, exclaimed, "Uncle Morgan!" She threw her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek.

"I haven't seen you in a year or two," Morgan said as she let go, "and we live in the same town. I thought I would drop by and see how things are going."

"Great!" she said, opening the door wider. "Come on in."

Timmy came up and grabbed Morgan's legs before he could step in.

"Hello, Timmy." Morgan tousled his hair. "My, how you've grown. Let me look at you." He lifted Timmy into his arms, and the boy gave him a shy smile.

"Come on in," Willow invited, "and have a seat. How is Auntie Anne?"

Morgan came in, sat on the couch and placed Timmy on his feet. The boy ran to the bedroom to get his birthday toys to show him. Willow sat down by her uncle, smiled from ear to ear and waited for him to answer.

"She's always busy as usual with all the clubs she belongs to. She even added the NPU to her collection."

"Good for her. And how about you? I bet being a policeman keeps you busy."

“Yes,” he sighed. “And that's why I have ...”

Timmy came in with his big red truck, getting on his hands and knees, gunning his throat, racing the truck back and forth at Morgan's feet.

Morgan laughed. “You must have had a birthday.”

“I did, I did!” Timmy exclaimed.

“I guess you're doing well enough to get him a truck like that.” He glanced over at Willow and went back to watching the little fellow.

“*Groom, groom,*” Timmy said. “He gave it to me.”

“Who, Timmy?” Morgan asked.

“Mommy's boyfriend. *Groom, groom.*”

Morgan returned to Willow. “That's why I have come over, really. I ...”

“He's in the Guard. An Irishman. His grandparents came from Ireland. Isn't that something? And they live just a couple blocks from here. You should meet them. They are such a nice couple.”

Morgan grinned.

“What?” Willow asked, straightening her back, still smiling.

“I've been trying to tell you. Your boyfriend is in jail.”

“What!” Her jaw dropped. “What happened?”

“He assaulted four policemen in the performance of their duty.” He took a deep breath and then said. “He was rescuing one of his friends in the Vipers Gang. That's the gang that killed your parents.”

Willow's face turned red.

“Calm down. He's in jail and everything is under control. The gang member is in the hospital.”

“Good!” Willow exclaimed. Her hands formed fists in her lap.

Willow and Morgan were startled as they heard a crash. Out of the corner of their eyes they had seen something red fly through the air. Their attention went to the sound of the crash, and they saw a red scar on the wall with the toy truck at the bottom on the floor. Timmy ran out of the room into the bedroom. Willow stood up to go to him, but Morgan grabbed her hand.

“Let him go. He's just blowing off steam. He overheard me and got upset just like you did. Come back and sit down.”

Willow obeyed with downcast eyes.

“I've talked to this Jack. In fact, I was his interrogator. I think he was out on a walk or something, saw one of his buddies being arrested, and ... I don't know. Something inside him must have snapped. He attacked the four patrolmen with a barrage of stones. They're all right, just slightly damaged. He must have had a horrible experience in Afghanistan. A lot of soldiers come home with emotional scars they don't know how to deal with. He'll have to go to trial.”

“Can't he be put under a doctor's care?”

“That's not up to the police. The judge will have to decide that.”

They both sighed. Morgan reached out and held Willow's hands.

After talking with her uncle for a while, he left. She watched him go down the stairs and out the door. She sighed. Maybe this infatuation with a soldier wasn't panning out. Maybe she shouldn't see him anymore. She closed the door and her heart. She went back inside to attend her little boy. He seemed to be upset by what he heard about Jack. She would have to explain things. He had become attached to him just like she had, and now he found out that Jack was a criminal. Her own feelings about criminals and how they ruined people's lives (Timmy's father was in jail, but she couldn't tell him) seemed to have bled into Timmy's heart.

Chapter Seven

“Judge Black's office.” A young girlish voice answered the phone.

“This is Miss Frieda Aiken of the second district, NPU, calling. I would like to speak to Judge Black or get an appointment to see him within the next twenty four hours.”

“I'm sorry,” the secretary apologized, “but the judge isn't available at the moment. Let me quickly scan my computer screen.”

“It is an urgent matter that will save him a lot of embarrassment,” Miss Aiken said, hoping for a conflict. She smiled to herself.

“I have an opening on next Tuesday at 10 am.”

“Honey,” Miss Aiken said firmly. “If you want to save your job and to save yourself from the judge's wrath, I think you will let me know when I can see him right away. You don't want him to yell at you and say 'Why didn't you tell me!'”

“Tell him what, Ma'am?”

“That the NPU is taking over his docket.” Miss Aiken enjoyed saying that. She grinned supremely.

“I'll let him know Ma'am.”

“I would rather do this the easy way and tell him myself. It's up to you.”

“I can't be intimidated, Ma'am,” said the secretary. Miss Aiken could visualize her smiling. “But if you want to see him today, you will have to go to the party the mayor is

throwing tonight.”

“Thank you. You are a smart girl.” Miss Aiken hung up and took a deep breath.

The NPU was to make its next move.

* * *

All towns have a snob hill where the rich people like to congregate and look down on those who work in their factories and pay for their houses and fine clothes and luxurious automobiles. Miss Aiken didn't have to look far to see a large mansion with all the windows shining light into the dark night attracting people like moths. Fancy cars lined a parabolic driveway. A marble fountain lay in a central park, shooting water from the mouths of fishes, mermaids and Neptune's trident. Light classical music drifted on the night air.

Miss Aiken easily slipped by security at the mayor's mansion as she blended into a crowd of glittering women wearing their black dresses and men wearing their black suits. She had taken from her closet an old black dress covered with clear sparkling bugle beads. She looked expensive enough. She became invisible as she mingled with the guests. She didn't know what the judge looked like, but she listened to the conversations and found him when someone mentioned his name. He was dressed like all the men, in a black suit with a black tie. He was more than heavy around the middle, growing a double chin. His short black hair surrounded a balding head.

Miss Aiken walked up to Judge Black. “You must be a busy man, Judge. I couldn't get past your secretary.”

“That's what I was just saying,” he said, referring to the ladies, also in black shimmering dresses, at either side of him. “I pity those poor fellows that have to wait for months before they can get their day in court.”

“Yes,” Miss Aiken said. “There ought to be a way for us judges to get through our dockets a bit faster.”

“And you are?” the judge asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Miss, er, Judge Aiken. I would like to speak to you about lightening your load a bit.”

“I'm sorry. I don't remember you.”

“The mayor knows me. Now if you could share your docket with me, I could lift a great weight from your shoulders.”

“I wasn't told you would be doing this. I don't like surprises. I'll have to talk to the mayor about this. Where is he?”

As Judge Black looked around, Miss Aiken placed her hand on his arm and smiled. “We can do this without any pain, Judge, or we can call in the National Guard again.”

The judge looked at her as he had an epiphany. “You are the NPU, aren't you?”

“Yes. You got it right,” she said, hugging his arm and grinning, “and we can make a lot of noise which you may not want. We've been through this once before. If you will recognize our authority, we can make your life a lot easier. You well know we've been voted in by the people.”

The judge snorted and said, “See my secretary tomorrow. She will make an

appointment for you, and we can talk.”

“I’ll make an appointment with you, Judge, but not with your secretary. I’ve gone down that avenue; it’s a dead end. I will call on you tomorrow at ten o’clock a.m.”

“I won’t be threatened, and I’m not saying that just because ladies are present.”

“Judge, I’m offended. But never mind. I’m not threatening. I’m promising.”

“Well, I guess I’ll be seeing you in the morning.”

“You won’t regret it. It really will make your life easier, and also make it easier on those poor guys in jail.”

“But you don’t know the law. How can you be a judge?”

“We know. We have lawyers, but we also know a higher law. We have the vote of the people.”

The judge huffed and snorted and made fun of Miss Aiken to the ladies as she left. They all laughed at her in a genteel manner.

* * *

Miss Aiken walked into Judge Black’s office. The door was lacquered mahogany. A frosted window displayed the judge’s name in gold. Inside, everything had that varnished mahogany look, from the desks to the walls and windowsills.

The secretary said, “Go right in, he’s expecting you.”

When the judge saw Miss Aiken, he went right into a practiced speech. “I know what you want. There are six districts of the NPU in this city. Each district has elected six judges. They want work to do, so they come to me and ask for my docket. I ask my

secretary to keep them away from me, but each one of them has found me somewhere and threatened me, warning me of the danger this city will be in if I don't comply. Then they promise me a life of ease. What they don't understand is that they don't know anything about the law and what the law says about sentencing criminals.”

Miss Aiken stood in front of his desk. He hadn't asked her to sit down, so she pulled up a chair and made herself comfortable its dark brown plush leather.

“That is the trouble,” she said. “Criminals get sentenced. Only those whose offenses are minor get any punishment, such as community service, or having to pay back what they stole or broke. I know, some people have to pay fines and/or acquire jail time. But the law isn't always just if all a person has to do is sit in jail.”

The judge leaned forward. “I can tell you are well educated.”

“I am a high school teacher.” Miss Aiken smiled as she folded her hands.

“If we allow these districts to have their own judges, not having the education they need, we will get chaos.”

“You are only a judge by the vote of the people. So are these other judges.”

“I noticed. There were over twenty four judges being voted on in the last municipal election.” He leaned back and crossed his legs, leaning to one side.

Miss Aiken leaned forward. “You are still the leading judge in this county. You have a right to visit each court session and see to it that what we are doing is legal.”

The judge uncrossed his legs and propped his elbow on his desk. “Then I wouldn't get any work done.” He leaned back again, frowning.

“You worry too much.” She leaned back to relax in the comfortable chair. “Haven't you heard of Common Law?”

“Yes. But we are more civilized than that.”

“Look. Whatever we can't handle at the local level, we will send to you. That will take away some of your load. Our constables can take care of criminals. They have proven themselves.”

“Police are not criminals, Miss Aiken,” he said, leaning forward again.

“They are if the people say they are, Judge. But that's a side point. We will be using Common Law to judge our cases. It is written in every conscience.”

“I know that, but sometimes it isn't enough.”

“More so than not. Anyway, we want to acknowledge your authority, and so we want you to willingly give your approval.”

“It isn't willingly. It's blackmail.” He looked her straight in the eyes, then he pushed some papers towards her. “Here is an agreement I had drawn up for you and each of your judges to sign. It is a compromise. If you don't agree, I don't play.”

Miss Aiken took the papers and looked them over. “Can I make copies?”

“Yes. I expect that. Copy them and hand them out to each of your judges. Have them sign it and get it back to my secretary. I've had all the districts do the same thing.”

“Are we the last district to contact you?” She lifted her chin, smiled, and looked down her nose at him.

“No. Only the fourth, but I've had enough threatening. Get that to the other districts

too.” He pressed his lips together and folded his hands on the desk.

“Will do.” She got up and shook his hand, saying, “Thank you.”

“No complaints?” The judge stood as she started walking away.

She turned and said, “No. We will deal with our objections in the future. Baby steps are sometimes in order. We understand that. Good day.”

“Good day.”

* * *

Miss Aiken made copies of the papers Judge Black wanted her and all the other judges to sign, distributed them and made sure they all got back to the judge's office.

Her next job was to set up a docket. Maggie Beaty helped with that. She scheduled their first court session. A table was set up in front of the Garden Apartments with as many folding chairs as could be found, which filled the sidewalks in the front garden. Miss Aiken told Maggie that it was a nice day, and this way, they didn't have to find a large room or go to the old high school. Besides, the ancient Saxons held their courts outside. It would be nice to follow in their tradition.

One of the objections which the NPU judges had to agree with was that they couldn't go to the city or county jail and take someone out to appear in court unless Judge Black personally signed them out. So, for the first court session, they had to wait three days before they got permission to take Jack O'Reilly out of jail under guard of three constables.

That was another objection. Judge Black had stated that they needed three

constables instead of the usual two. And it was harder for three men to get off work than two. There were several objections the judge had thrown into the agreement, it seemed, just to aggravate the NPU.

The panel of judges were all long-time residents in the neighborhood. They sat at the table facing a row of chairs, consisting of the accuser (in this case, a representative of the four policemen who couldn't attend) and his counselor and the defendant, Jack O'Reilly, his counselor (an NPU lawyer), and accompanying constables, Dan Moultry and a tall, thin Mike Strickland who replaced Michael Beaty.

Maggie Beaty had a hidden talent. She had taken shorthand in high school. She sat on the right hand of Miss Aiken in a separate chair to take notes and also get the session started.

Maggie stood and called out, "Hear ye! Hear ye! Court is now in session." Then she sat down and handed some papers to Miss Aiken who announced "I am," Miss Aiken, spokesman for our panel of judges. We will call it a jury."

A young lanky lawyer in a dark blue suit, Mr. Hardy of Hardy, Hardy, and Krimp, whispered to Detective Morgan, who represented the four accused policemen, "This is so unprofessional. I don't know why we're here."

"Play along," Morgan said. "We'll snag'em somewhere. Judge Black's idea."

"Mr. Hardy," Miss Aiken said, "If you have something to say, would you please address the jury?"

"I was consulting with Detective Morgan about the case, Ma'am," Mr. Hardy

answered.

“We have ears, Sir.” Miss Aiken frowned. “Now let's get some procedures down. When addressing the jury, please refer to me as Judge Aiken, or, if you want to address one of the other judges, let me introduce them. To my left is Judge Kirkham, Judge Kruger, Judge Bergstrom, Judge Fuhrer, and then Judge Murphy on the end. As long as we sit here on this jury, we are judges of this neighborhood, that is, district six of our fair municipality. Otherwise, we are just ordinary citizens. There will be other judges elected after us, but for right now, what you see is what you get.

“The prosecution will present its case first, submitting evidence and witness to the jury. Then the defense will present its case. Any party is free to call anyone to be witness, whether eye witness or character witness. Also, the judges will be asking questions to the prosecution and to the defense, and to anyone else from whom we need information. Let the proceedings start.”

Mr. Hardy stood, holding some papers in his hand. He addressed the panel. “I want it noted, Ma'am, that I find this procedure highly irregular.”

“That's alright, Mr. Hardy,” Miss Aiken said, “you will get used to it. It's the way things will be done from now on.”

“I see.” Mr. Hardy paused. “I will present as evidence some video files retrieved from one of the patrol cars. One file shows the arrest of Buba Sams, real name, Robert Samuelson. The other, is the assault on the officers by James O'Reilly.”

Mr. Hardy placed a thin laptop on the table facing the judges. “Let me start it,” he

said as he reached from behind and pushed the mouse button.

“As you can see,” he explained, “Buba hit several officers before he was overcome. It was a very difficult arrest.”

Judge Murphy asked, “Can you run that again down here? We can't all see it at this angle.”

“I'm sorry,” Mr. Hardy apologized. “I suggest that everyone bunch up behind Judge Bergstrom.”

As Miss Aiken and Mrs. Murphy stood and leaned over each shoulder of Mrs. Bergstrom, and Mrs. Kruger, and Mrs. Fuhrer leaned over to see, Mr. Hardy started the video again. “You can see how difficult it was to apprehend him. It took four policemen to put him down.”

“Why didn't we have Buba on the docket?” asked Judge Murphy.

Judge Aiken answered. “He lives in a different district, Dear.”

“Oh,” said Judge Murphy as the video ended.

Miss Aiken and Mrs. Murphy stood and smiled at each other as Mr. Hardy prepared the next video. He said, “Okay,” and pushed the mouse key.

“You can see,” he said, “that James O'Reilly is throwing the stones.”

“But”, Judge Bergstrom said, “it doesn't show who he is throwing them at ... oh, there is one of the policemen coming into view, getting hit as he approached the defendant. I don't see the others.”

“This last part of the video,” Mr. Hardy explained, “shows James O'Reilly

dragging the unconscious patrolmen to the car with their own handcuffs on.”

“Yes,” said Judge Kruger, “but that doesn't show that he hit any of the others, nor does it show if this Buba Sams didn't help him put all those handcuffs on.”

“Just a minute. I can show that Buba was unconscious and couldn't have.” He adjusted the files and showed the paramedics carting Buba away on a stretcher.

“To me,” Judge Kirkham said, “this incriminates the police more than the defendant.”

“Ma'am,” Mr. Hardy said, “may I say, the defendant is James O'Reilly and not the police?”

“That's true, Dear,” said Judge Aiken. “That's for another trial.”

“Okay,” Judge Kirkham said.

When the viewing was over, and Miss Aiken and Mrs. Murphy took their seats, Mr. Hardy took the computer away, and Judge Kruger asked, “Mr. Hardy. Do we get a copy of these files?”

Hardy took a flash drive from his pocket and placed it on the judge's table. “It's all in here.”

Judge Kruger turned to Judge Aiken. “Does the defense get to see the videos?”

“Yes,” she answered. “When it's their turn.”

“Oh, okay.” Judge Kruger nodded.

“Your Honors, if I may be so bold to address you thus,” Mr. Hardy asked, “may I bring forth my first witness?”

“Yes, and yes.” Judge Aiken smiled.

“I call Detective Blake Morgan to the stand, please.” Mr. Hardy directed the detective to a metal folding chair to the left of the jury.

Maggie timidly approached the detective with a Bible in her hand. “Please state your name, and place your hand on the Bible.”

Detective Morgan frowned and did so.

“Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth by Almighty God, and do you swear that you live by the laws in this book?”

The detective looked dumbfounded.

Judge Aiken leaned forward. “Answer the question, Sir.”

“I ... ” Detective Morgan hesitated. “I swear that I will tell the truth, but I never expected the last question.”

“I don't see,” Maggie said, “that he is a qualified witness, Ma'am.”

“If he will swear from now on,” Judge Aiken said, “that he will abide by the law of that book, he may proceed.”

Mr. Hardy stood and exclaimed, “I object to this kind of proceeding!”

“Well noted, Mr. Hardy,” Judge Aiken said, “but that is the rule in this court. It is the closest copy of Common Law we have.” She looked at the detective. “Proceed.”

The detective cleared his throat and said, “I do.”

“This is not a marriage ceremony, Mr. Morgan.” Miss Aiken smiled and stared at him.

“I will,” he said, clearly flabbergasted.

“You may be seated then, Mr. Morgan.” Judge Aiken settled back into her seat.

Detective Morgan sat down and Mr. Hardy approached him. “Detective, ...”

“Why is he a witness?” Judge Fuhrer asked. “What does he have to do with the case?”

Mr. Hardy asked the detective, “Maybe you can answer the judge, Detective Morgan. What do you have to do with the case?”

“I interrogated each of the patrolmen after they reported back from the hospital, your Honor,” Morgan said politely.

“Oh,” Judge Fuhrer remarked. “Go ahead.”

“Will you tell the court in your own words,” Mr. Hardy questioned, “what each patrolman reported?”

“Yes, I will,” Morgan responded as he adjusted himself in the chair.

He went on to report the same thing the judges had seen on the video. Each patrolman told of how Buba had the strength of a bear, and how difficult it was to defend themselves and at the same time get him on the ground so they could handcuff him, that they had to club him into submission, but before they could handcuff him, they noticed a barrage of rocks being thrown at them. At first, they thought it was the other members of the gang, but because it was dark, they couldn't see who it was. They or he had positioned himself out of the range of the headlights of the patrol cars. Each time one of them tried to draw a weapon, he was knocked out by a rock to the head. They had to continue hitting

Buba so they could deal with their assailant. They didn't get the chance to do either. Each patrolman was reported as telling the same story.

“And why,” asked Judge Kruger, “are not the policemen here at the trial so they can tell it for themselves?”

“They are not feeling well,” Morgan replied. “They are at home recuperating from concussions caused by being hit in the head with the rocks, some of them, several times.”

“Oh. Okay.” She nodded. “Go on.”

“That is all the prosecution has at the moment, your Honors,” Mr. Hardy said and sat down.

“Does the defense have any questions?” Judge Aiken asked.

“We do, your Honor.” The council for the defense stood with pencil in hand, tapping it on the fingers of his left hand. He was of medium height, slightly overweight, and wearing a dark blue suit with a grayish green vest displaying a gold watch chain.

Mrs. Fuhrer leaned over to Mrs. Bergstrom. “I didn't catch his name.”

“Mr. Merryweather,” Mrs. Bergstrom replied.

The counselor approached Morgan, but turned to the jury. “My defense, your Honors, as I stated in my brief you have on the table, is that James O'Reilly, the defendant, saw a man being beaten to death by the police and came to his defense out of human compassion.”

He looked at Morgan. “In your investigation of the incident this trial is focused on, did you at any time look into Buba Sams' condition as the result of the beating he

received?"

"Yes, I did," Morgan answered.

"And what was that condition?" Merryweather asked. The wrinkles under his eyes showed considerable wear, but his expression was sharp.

"He's in a coma." Morgan said without expression.

"In a coma." Merryweather turned to the jury and then back to Morgan. "Would you say that if O'Reilly here would have come sooner and subdued the patrolmen earlier, that Buba Sams wouldn't have been beaten senseless, that maybe O'Reilly would have been able to save him?"

"I object, your Honors," Mr. Hardy exclaimed. "He's asking the witness to speculate."

"Noted, Mr. Hardy," Judge Aiken said. "But we want to hear what Detective Morgan has to say." She turned to Morgan. "Please answer the question."

"I suppose, if O'Reilly would have come sooner, if he had done the same thing, if he knocked out the patrolmen earlier, Buba Sams wouldn't be in a coma now." Morgan folded his hands, looked at the jury, pursed his lips and then turned back to Merryweather.

"So," Merryweather hesitated, "doesn't this confirm, through inference, that the patrolmen needed to be stopped in order to save Buba Sams?"

"Yes." Morgan looked up into the sky as if to watch the clouds.

"Your Honors," objected Mr. Hardy, raising his voice. "This is no defense! Clearly,

the defendant still attacked the police and is guilty of interfering with the performance of their duty, and not only that, but assault and battery!”

“Would you like to be the defense counselor, Mr. Hardy? That can easily be arranged,” Judge Aiken said.

There was laughter from the audience.

“Let's have some order!” Judge Aiken hammered her gavel.

“No, your Honors,” Mr. Hardy said. “I just do not see where this line of questioning is going.”

“Maybe,” Judge Aiken said, “if we are quiet and listen, we will find out.”

“Yes, Ma'am.” Mr. Hardy frowned and sat down.

Merryweather turned to the Judges and handed them a paper. “Your Honors, this is a copy of Buba Sams' medical records, confirming Detective Morgan's testimony. As you can see (you can pass it around) Buba Sams was beaten unconscious and lies in a coma in the hospital. This establishes a motive why James O'Reilly picked up some rocks and started throwing them at the police.”

Detective Morgan was dismissed and Mr. Hardy brought in other witnesses showing that O'Reilly was a member of the National Guard who patrolled the streets in the recent political upheaval, that he had been aggressive in arresting citizens of the town, that he had fought in Afghanistan, establishing his character as someone who was volatile and ready to fight with little encouragement. Merryweather, no matter what counter questions he asked, could not establish anything different.

The trial went on all day with a ten-minute break every two hours and a lunch break at noon. The trial resumed at one p.m. with the defense.

Merryweather and O'Reilly started by viewing the videos from that patrol car. It was pointed out that Buba Sams was beaten senseless and was now in a coma, and that a man, no matter if he was a criminal, had a right to life and health, and that cruel and unusual treatment of prisoners was unconstitutional. He then called Willow Morgan to the stand as a character witness. She took the oath with her hand on the Bible.

“Miss Morgan ... it is Miss, and not Mrs., is that correct?” Merryweather asked.

“Yes,” she replied. She avoided looking at James even though he stared at her.

“Do you know the defendant, James O'Reilly?”

“Yes.” Her eyes flickered as she glanced his way for a hundredth of a second.

“Have you known him to be violent in any way?” Merryweather asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“When was that?” Mr. Hardy looked at the defendant and then back to the witness.

“When we were protesting the National Guard being in our city. He came and threw me into a van. I had bruises. Then they hauled us off to a ... a concentration camp, I guess.”

“Did he ever visit you at your home?” He examined his fingernails.

“Yes.” Willow had to turn her head towards the judges as if talking to them.

“Why was that, Miss Morgan?” Merryweather asked.

“I had lost my son at the rally. He found him and told me he was safe. I invited him

into our lives after that, and he did visit several times.” She turned her face back towards Merryweather.

“When he was in your home, Miss Morgan, did he at anytime express any anger or violence?” he asked.

“No,” she said.

“Have you been with him at any other time?”

“Yes.” She looked down at her hands.

“When was that?” Merryweather paced back and forth.

“Several times. We worked together at the NPU farm. He has taken me and my boy out to dinner. We've gone to church together, been on picnics, things like that.”

“Things like that. Did he at anytime express any anger or get upset or become violent?” He stopped and looked at her.

“No,” she said.

“Did he at any time provoke you to anger or violence?” He continued pacing.

“No. Actually, we had a really good time.” Her eyes flickered again as she glanced his way.

“That is all. Your witness, Mr. Hardy.” Merryweather sat down.

Mr. Hardy approached Willow Morgan. “Miss Morgan, in talking to Detective Morgan, I found that you are his niece, is that correct?”

“Yes, I am.” She looked at her uncle and smiled.

“I also learned that you were having a romantic relationship with the defendant. Is

that true?"

"No! That is not correct," Willow objected. "Let me set you straight. We were just friends. That's all."

"I stand corrected," Mr. Hardy said with a sardonic smile, glancing over his shoulder to Jack O'Reilly. "Are you still seeing this young gentleman?"

"No," she said with downcast eyes.

"That's a shame," Fiona O'Reilly remarked from the sidelines.

"Let's be quiet, Fiona," Miss Aiken said. "We don't want to interrupt the trial."

"Okay, Dear," Fiona responded.

Mr. Hardy cleared his throat.

"It's okay, Mr. Hardy," Miss Aiken said. "You can go ahead with your questioning."

"Miss Morgan," he asked, "why are you not seeing the defendant anymore?"

"After hearing that he attacked some policemen, I thought less of him. You see, my dad and all his brothers have been or are policemen. And I didn't want him coming around if he did have a violent streak. Of course, being a soldier, you know, but he wasn't a soldier at the time. He didn't go up and try to talk to them, he just started throwing rocks. A good aim, I might add. Besides, I have a little boy to protect. If James O'Reilly weren't in custody already, I guess I would get a restraining order."

"I see." Mr. Hardy thought for a moment, peering at her. "No further questions for the moment, your Honors." He sat down.

Willow got up and went to the sidelines, passing Jack, but not looking at him. He

followed her with his eyes until she went back far enough to lose sight of her.

Merryweather rose from his seat. "I call Bob Prichard to the stand."

Maggie gave the oath to Prichard, and he sat in the chair next to Mrs. Murphy.

"Your Honors, I object to this procedure," Mr. Hardy said, raising his voice. "I was never told about this witness."

"You don't have to know everything, Mr. Hardy," Miss Aiken said. "The trial first proceeds according to your strategy, then it proceeds according to the defense's strategy. Nothing has to be planned out from the beginning. We are only here to judge, and you are here to bring your accusations. Please proceed, Mr. Merryweather."

"Now, Mr. Prichard," Merryweather said, "where were you the night in question when the defendant was accosting the police?"

"I was walking with Buba Sams." Bob Prichard, a young man in his late twenties, medium build with dark hair, wore a red shirt with green and white stripes in front.

"And why were you doing that?"

"I'm Buba's counselor from the NPU's Youth Center. He's been coming in on a regular basis for counseling. I was getting into his confidence. He was going to introduce me to the rest of the gang. We've been working with the youth in this area to help stop gang violence and crime and drug dealing. We were hoping to enlist his gang for our basketball team."

"That late at night in an unpopulated area?" Merryweather put his hands on his hips and frowned.

“Yes,” Prichard replied. “Sometimes you have to go into their environs. It's a tricky business, trying to get them to play ball.”

“So, why didn't you show up in the videos?” Merryweather paced up and down in front of the witness, putting his finger on his chin as he listened.

“When Buba saw a patrol car, he pushed me between some broken concrete and told me to hide. He's very protective.” Prichard interlaced his fingers and stretched his arms out.

“Then what happened?”

Prichard took a deep breath. “I watched. When three other patrol cars showed up and the police started wrestling with Buba, I ran to get out of hearing range and called some constables. By the time they arrived everyone was heading to the hospital except Mr. O'Reilly there. They hauled him off to jail.”

“Mr. Prichard,” Merryweather stopped and stared at him, “did you see what happened to Buba?”

“When I came back, I saw four policemen clubbing Buba. I couldn't do anything, so I watched, waiting and hoping the constables would show up.”

“Did you see the defendant at anytime before the ambulance and the other policemen came into the scene?”

“Yes.”

“And what did he do?”

“Well, sir, it's the craziest thing I ever saw. I didn't see who was doing it, just a

shadow, but what skill! He downed each policeman with just rocks to the head. When he came into the light, I saw it was the defendant there. He called an ambulance and more police after tying up the four with their own handcuffs.”

“Did he try to escape any time?”

“No. He stayed with Buba and applied first aid, tearing his own shirt to bandage the injured man's head.”

“So, could you say this man was acting as a good Samaritan, or was he acting just to help another criminal, a friend in arms?”

“Your Honors!” Mr. Hardy objected. “The defense is clearly asking for a verdict from the witness.”

“We will do the judging, Mr. Merryweather,” Miss Aiken said.

“I rest my case in saying that the defendant, your Honors,” Mr. Merryweather said, “was acting as a good Samaritan, not helping a friend, but a citizen in need.”

The prosecution and the defense were given time to summarize, then the jury departed into the apartments to deliberate. Maggie stood and said, “All rise.” Everyone followed Maggie's example and didn't sit down again until the judges were out of sight and she said, “You may be seated. We will wait for their return and read the verdict.”

The prosecution grumbled because of the difference in procedure.

* * *

Miss Aiken stared at the others. “This was our first case. What do you think, girls?”

“I think it went well.” Mrs. Murphy nodded. “I hope Ed is doing alright with the

children.”

The other judges giggled.

“We showed we can be responsible citizens.” Mrs. Kirkham placed her hand on her breast.

“We've proven that we don't need Judge Black and his group,” Mrs. Bergstrom replied.

“Look at us.” Mrs. Fuhrer glanced around. “We are supposed to be deliberating on the case, and here we are like a bunch of silly school girls laughing behind everyone's back.”

Miss Aiken paused and looked at each judge. “Yes, we had better get down to business. Well, let's have everyone's opinion ... Mrs. Kirkham, we will start with you, then go down the list according to our seating arrangement.”

Mrs. Kirkham: “All the evidence points towards James O'Reilly doing nothing but acting as a good Samaritan. He was walking along, saw the police beating a man, something that society doesn't like, and seems to wink at. I think he did the right thing in trying to stop police brutality.”

Mrs. Kruger: “Even so, isn't he still guilty of assault and battery? And what about the charge of interfering with the performance of a policeman's duty? Maybe he had the right to interfere when the police were doing the wrong thing, but still, he did hurt four men. I for one think he should be congratulated on the one hand, but be held accountable on the other.”

Mrs. Bergstrom: "I am inclined to agree with Mrs. Kruger. We can't just let people take the law into their own hands. Mr. Prichard did the right thing. He went to the constables for help. I think James O'Reilly should have done the same thing."

Mrs. Fuhrer: "At least he called the police and an ambulance and didn't try to escape. I think he is guilty, but we should be lenient. He should pay for what he has done. Do some community service. He could pay the officers' doctor bills, but we aren't supposed to support anything that has to do with money."

Mrs. Murphy: "I agree with Mrs. Fuhrer. He is guilty of assault and battery, but we don't believe in incarceration or the use of money, and I think there needs to be a slant on the community service. What about doing something for the policemen's families?"

Miss Aiken: "I doubt they would want to see his face. We might be putting him in danger if he were around the police. I thought of him cleaning up the jail and the police office and other things like that, but I wouldn't want to put temptation in front of them. We don't want to create ill feelings. We want to heal them. I think he should work for the schools and the city. All we can do now is to make recommendations to Judge Black. He will have to make the final decision."

"I don't agree with that last idea," Mrs. Kirkham said. "We need to be able to show that we have authority to punish criminals."

"As I said," Miss Aiken emphasized, "we want to heal ill feelings. The judge knows we will not stand for incarceration. I will make that plain in the report, and that our constables have just as much authority as the police. If he doesn't comply, he knows

he will have another riot on his hands. This time it will be organized by us.”

The judges looked at each other and then back to Miss Aiken for direction.

“Well, judges,” Miss Aiken passed her hat around, “put in your ballot. We will go for fifty one percent or above, whatever tips the scale. We will let Maggie count the vote and read out the court's decision.”

* * *

Upon the return of the jury, Maggie said, “All rise.” When the judges took their seats she said, “You may be seated.”

When Maggie sat down, Miss Aiken handed her the hat containing the ballots of the judges. She read each one of them. “One for guilty of assault and battery with a punishment of community service. Two for guilty of assault and battery with a punishment of community service.” She went on to three, four, five, and six votes for guilty with a punishment of community service. All six judges were in agreement.

“Will the accused stand and face the jury?” Maggie announced.

James rose along with Mr. Merryweather and the two attending constables.

Miss Aiken stood to pronounce sentence. “James O'Reilly, you shall report every day at eight a.m. to this jury at this same place to receive your assignments until such time as we deem necessary, but no shorter than for one year.”

“Ouch,” James whispered to his counselor. “There goes my college for a year.”

“If you leave town for any reason, young man,” Miss Aiken said, “you will not have the protection of the NPU.”

“Thank you,” James responded.

His grandparents rushed to his side and gave him hugs and shook the hand of Mr. Merryweather. His grandmother smothered him in kisses. At least ten neighbors came and shook their hands congratulating them, telling James he had done the right thing. He tried to catch a glimpse of Willow, but her uncle had whisked her away. They left the apartment complex with the prosecution as fast as their feet could take them.

Chapter Eight

Detective Morgan took Willow home, and they said their goodbyes. Morgan was successful in giving Willow a sense of family once again. He must have caught her at the right time in her life; before the O'Reilly incident, she was always standoffish. She never came around and he was always too busy to see her. She had drifted away from the family when she adopted the National People's Union. He was sure she was being subverted by communists, but now, he had some leverage to draw her away from them. He felt it his duty to stand up for America and save his niece.

Arriving home, he put the car in the garage in back of the house. He got out and thought about how small the garage was. It used to be a carriage house in its day. Walking out, he left the garage door open because if he pulled it down, it would fall onto the car. As he opened the gate to the back yard, he looked at the rust on the twisted iron frame. It needed paint. Someday he would get to it. He looked at the red brick house. The white trim needed painting a long time ago, even before his wife had died. Nearing the back steps, he noticed his sister-in-law peering out the window. He waved and came inside.

Martha sat in her wheelchair frowning. "You've been gone all day, Blake."

"I'm sorry for that," he said opening the refrigerator. "The trial took all day. But you can be thankful for one thing. These NPU people don't believe in long drawn out affairs." He took out a beer and popped the cap off into the trash. "The trial is actually over and the O'Reilly boy sentenced. You can thank your pretty panties for that." He took

a swig of beer.

She rolled her wheelchair out of the kitchen. “You don't have to talk gross. My panties will do you no good.”

“You didn't think so before the accident.”

“Well, those times are over.” She turned around and regarded him longingly as he stood in the kitchen doorway. “I do appreciate you taking care of me though.”

“Don't mention it. It's all part of the witness protection program.” Blake grinned, staring at her. His jaw tightened after gulping down another bitter swig. How could he make love to a cripple? Then he thought of Willow. If he could get her to live here, everything would be fine.

“Saw Willow at the trial,” he mentioned, looking at the bottle instead of her.

“Oh?” Martha sat with a blank face as if she didn't care. She gently pulled on a strand of the gray hair covering her shoulders.

“We've become friends again,” he smiled. “I could persuade her to join us here.”

Martha grabbed the arms of the wheelchair and asked anxiously, “And you've told her about me ... that her mother's alive?”

“No. I didn't think it was the right time. But now that I've put a wedge between her and her boyfriend, maybe it's time now.”

* * *

There were only a couple weeks before school started and the high school needed to be cleaned, and the gym needed a new floor. The trailers outside were a mess. There

had been so much commotion during the summer that everything else had been suspended. Everyone in the neighborhood showed up to prepare the school for the new year.

James was sent by the panel of judges. No one realized that they would be putting him and Willow together. When he saw her in one of the hallways, she was dressed in jeans with her hair up and getting mop water from a janitor closet. He walked up to her and said, "Willow, I ...". She walked off in a huff, taking her mop and bucket with her. He would have followed. He wanted to explain things, but a hand from behind gently pressed him back. It was Bob Kirkham.

"We need you in the gym," he said. "Come with me."

James reluctantly turned and followed him.

Bob asked, "Do you know how to run a scrubber? We're reflooring the gym."

"I've done plenty of that in the guard." James looked to see where Willow went, but she had disappeared. He turned back around. "Not stripping floors, but I've done enough polishing. I imagine it's the same machine. I've seen stripping done."

"Okay, then you're just the man we want."

James spent the day wearing a gas mask, something he had to do in drills in the Guard. One man sloshed the toxic solvent on with a mop and James scrubbed the wet floor with the scrubber, swinging it back and forth. He recognized most of the young men wearing the gas masks from the farm. He understood then that all this work was donated by the NPU.

After the day was over, James looked for Willow and found her going out the front door. She turned around and yelled, “Don't follow me! You hurt any policeman, you hurt my family. I don't want to have anything to do with you.” Then she walked down the street, steaming and flushed.

* * *

James noticed that Willow never showed up again at the high school. After they finished with the gym, he and his crew spent the rest of the two weeks putting down gym floors at two other schools. Maybe Willow went back after he left, but he never asked.

Keeping up with his regular routine, James ran every night, but his heart always led him to her house. Several times he had to get behind a tree or a bush, staying in the shadows, because he would see her come out with her uncle or see him go in. Sometimes he would just stand outside and pine. If he had been a cat, he would have cried out his anguish until boots were thrown at him.

One night, James saw Willow yelling at her Uncle Morgan, chasing him out of the apartments. Morgan got into his car and drove away slowly. James decided to follow him on foot. Everyone drove slowly in that town, but the farther away Morgan got from his niece's house, the faster he went. James wound up being a block behind, but he kept running and looking down each corner, seeing the car turn, running up to that corner, seeing the car turn again, and finally pulling into a drive. When he arrived, he peered into the living room window and heard arguing.

A woman in a wheelchair said, “You should never have separated me from Willow.

She could have taken care of me if you hadn't told her I was dead. You even had a funeral for me! How sick!”

“She's the one that left, living with that guy, what's-his-name, Bud?” he responded. “I needed to keep you safe. There's still someone out there that wants you dead. You saw a murder take place, plus the guy that hit your car, and you said it was the same man. He'll never let up until he kills you. Are you sure about seeing a black Cadillac Eldorado?”

“Of course, I'm sure. Why haven't you found it?” James could tell she was very shaken, almost to tears.

“We've searched everywhere. It's probably out of state.”

James left. He had seen and heard enough. Willow said that her parents were dead, killed in a car crash. Now her mother, he was sure it was her mother, showed up in the detective's house in a wheelchair. Should he tell Willow? Maybe she had found out. Maybe that's what all the arguing was about when he showed up at her house and saw her chase her uncle out. He wished he could help.

He decided that tomorrow he would pay Buba Sams a visit. He was worried about him.

* * *

James was told he couldn't see Buba unless he was a relative, so he had to use deception. He found a closet with lockers, white coats, and green scrubs. He put a set of scrubs over his clothes, stuffed his shirt and trousers inside and then put on a white coat.

The closet had a door that went into a lunch room for doctors and nurses. He walked through. Several people sat around a table talking and drinking coffee. One of the doctors had set a stethoscope on the table. James walked up to it, grabbed it, and said, “Oh, there it is,” and walked out, slipping it around his neck.

Walking down the hall, he glanced inside every open door until he came to Buba's room. Buba lay on a bed too small for him, head all bandaged, in a small room that would admit only one or two visitors. He seemed awake, but his eyes were glassy. James wondered if there was anyone in that giant body anymore. Maybe he was sleeping with his eyes wide open. James picked up a clipboard and placed it between his face and the door as though he were reading Buba's chart.

“How are you doing today?” James asked.

There was little response. James shook Buba's arm. “Buba. Wake up.”

“Huh?” Buba's eyes slowly turned towards James standing at the left side of the bed.

“Buba. How are you doing?” James smiled.

“How are you doing, Doc?” Buba responded, trying to smile.

“Buba. You recognize me? I'm James O'Reilly. I arrested you once in an alley.”

James placed the clipboard on a table behind him and put his hands on his hips.

Buba's face went blank, then he smiled again. “Hi Doc. How are you doing?” It was obvious that Buba was looking for a particular response from James.

James tilted his head and smiled. “I'm doing fine, Buba. How are you?”

“Doin' great today, Doc. Doin' great.” Buba tried to smile but grimaced.

“Let's do a little test.” James imitated the serious expression he thought a doctor might have.

“Okay, Doc.”

“I want to test your memory.” James picked up the clipboard again as if he were going to write.

“Okay.” Buba tried to match the serious expression of James but his face turned into a smile.

“Can you recall how you got here?”

“They tell me not to tell. They goin' to th'ow me in jail.” Buba laughed softly.

“The gang of police that beat you told you not to tell on them?”

“Not police, just one, a detective,” Buba answered slowly.

“I don't recall a detective being there that night.” James furrowed his eyebrows.

“You were there, Doc?”

“I was hiding in the shadows, Buba. I saw them beat you with their clubs. That's why I stopped them.”

Buba laughed. “You talkin' 'bout me? They tol' me I got to hit'm an' run. So I do it and run. I ditch the car, then I hide out.” He smiled really big. “I guess they caught me fo' sure. Oh ...” He reached up to touch his bandages. “It hurt.” His eyes went glassy again.

When James couldn't wake him, he took off his doctor disguise, rolled it around the stethoscope and left. He deposited it into a canvas bag hanging in a frame, in the hall just

before escaping down the stairwell. Out of the corner of his eye, he had seen Detective Morgan with a couple of police officers turning the corner down the hall and head his way. Maybe they were going to see Buba also.

James reflected on his visit as he ran home. Buba had been incoherent. Instead of talking about the night he was sent to the hospital, he was remembering something else. A detective had told him to hit someone. Murder? Hit as in hit man? Knocking someone off? It was confusing.

* * *

James came home from work and took a shower to get the stench of the toxic vapors out of his skin and hair. At the end of the week he would be free of the gas mask he had to wear while stripping the floor at the new high school. He had wondered why a new High School had to have new varnish in the gym. His boss told him they do it every summer whether they need it or not. It's in the budget. Maybe they could afford it by having most of the workers work for free. Where would they send him next?

After he dressed, he turned on the cable TV to listen to the news while he fixed supper. Buba was in the news.

“Buba Sams,” called out the newscaster from the living room, “the alleged victim of a brutal beating by members of the police force, died late last night in his sleep.”

“Whaa ... ?” James dropped his sauce pan back onto the stove and stepped into the living room, his mouth wide open.

“Buba Sams, age 23,” continued the newscaster, “had been found by a former

National Guardsman by the name of James O'Reilly ...”

James listened dumbfounded at the report. He had seen him the night before. Then he remembered seeing the police walking towards his room. He imagined them torturing him, beating him, giving him a shot through his I.V. to kill him. He shook his head. They wouldn't do that. That was only in the movies.

When he forced his attention back to the news, he heard, “A protest has gathered at the hospital, carrying placards denouncing police brutality. It looks like most of the black community has attended. We take you to the scene with Cathy Rodriguez.”

The scene changed to show Cathy and then the hospital and the men and women with placards pacing up and down in front of the main entrance.

“John, with the news of Buba Sam's death,” she announced, “a couple of hundred protesters came swarming in from the surrounding area ...”

James smelled something burning. It was his chili. He popped back into the kitchen to rescue it from the stove. He took a spoon, stirred it around, and went back into the living room to watch the news. He sat on the couch and ate out of the pan.

It looks like someone didn't want Buba to talk, James told himself. Who would he go to? The police? Not if they were in on it. It didn't involve him anyway. He couldn't be a one man vigilante. But it did involve Willow if what he was thinking were true, and that was enough to get him interested.

* * *

That night, during his nightly run, James was drawn Willow's apartment again. No

lights came from her windows. His attention focused on a sign posted in the window of the front door, "Apartment for Rent." He had a bad feeling about that. Something inside him dropped like a lead ball into the deepest recesses of his heart. Did she move?

James walked across the street and entered the house. He went up the stairs and saw Sally sitting cross-legged on the bottom step of the next tier bouncing a small red rubber ball. She was playing jacks.

When James knocked on Willow's door, Sally looked up from her game. "She's gone. Moved out a couple days ago."

"Thanks." James saluted her and galloped down the stairs.

His suspicions were right. She had moved. Now what? Ah, he thought. He remembered Detective Morgan talking about Willow moving in with him and her mother. He would go over there.

* * *

When Willow's uncle came and told her that her mother was still alive, she became so angry at him for keeping that information from her, that she threw him out of her apartment and didn't stop yelling until he left. Afterward she went back upstairs, sat on the bed and cried. Little Timmy tried to comfort her, but he wound up in the arms of the neighbor across the hall while Willow went to her uncle's house. It was the same night that James had followed the uncle's car on foot. She arrived just after James left.

Willow knocked on the door and peered through the cathedral windows. A woman in a wheelchair was leaving the front room. Morgan opened the door. He pressed his lips

together hard when he saw it was her.

“Let me in,” Willow exclaimed. “I want to see my mother!”

She barged in past Morgan, but he grabbed her arm and pulled her to him.

“Slowly,” he said. “This is a shock to her as well as you.”

Willow felt like a little girl again in his presence. “I want to see my mother,” she whimpered.

“Okay,” he said. “Just wait in here on the couch. I'll go and talk to her.”

Morgan left the room, but Willow didn't feel like sitting. She could hardly restrain herself from flying into the next room. In a few minutes, a woman's gray head poked around the corner as the wheelchair creaked into the room. The two women stared at each other, then Willow ran to her mother's side, fell to her knees, embraced her mother and bawled on her shoulder.

Martha patted her daughter's back and said plaintively, “There there, now. No need for all these tears.” Martha took a tissue from her pocket and wiped away the tears from her daughter's red face.

“Oh, Mama!” Willow buried her face in her mother's bosom and breathed deeply. Filling her nostrils with the smell of her mother brought all the childhood memories back and identified her as the one she loved most.

After two hours of talking, Morgan and Martha persuaded Willow to move in with them.

* * *

The jury of judges assigned James to Timmy's grade school. He arrived at the school in the same hour the children were going home. Walking up the sidewalk, he neared the front door bordered by juniper trees. He spied Willow escorting Timmy out the door. He dashed around the other side of the closest tree as they came out, hoping he wasn't seen. He had an urgent need to talk to her, but knowing her feelings about him, he decided not to, and watched them walk down the sidewalk to her little foreign car. He felt so hot inside, but his agitation turned to comedy when he looked down to see two little girls laughing at him.

“Scoot,” he said. “Get along home.” He waved his hand and they screamed little girlish screams of delight as they ran away. He took a couple of breaths to get his red face white again, looked around to see if anyone else was watching, circumvented the tree, and went inside.

Now what was he going to do? He decided to arrive early the next day and go around to the back entrance so he wouldn't have a run-in that would be embarrassing to them both. However, Willow decided to park in the back parking lot. When he approached the back door, he saw through the glass her and Timmy and there were no trees to hide behind. He flattened himself against the outside wall and hoped he wouldn't be seen. He held his breath as they passed through the door. They walked down the sidewalk and didn't turn around. They hadn't spotted him. He crept through the door and was safe. Maybe he would have to be late to work from now on.

There must have been a conspiracy in the heavens. Was it fate or destiny that these

two get together again?

James had to work the night shift cleaning each classroom and restroom in the building. Others were cleaning the cafeteria, gym, auditorium and offices. In another month, his work was interrupted by having to set up for a parent-teacher conference which would occur in the classrooms. He was only permitted light cleaning, such as taking out the trash and sweeping the halls with a long dust mop sprinkled with red oil. He knew it was only probable and not entirely inevitable that he and Willow would meet, but he could hope they wouldn't. His heart beat heavily throughout the night as he tried to keep out of the way and as hidden as possible, constantly looking over his shoulder. He wondered why they couldn't meet in the cafeteria or the auditorium so he would be out of the way and safe from Willow. He knew how temperamental she was. She would blow up at the sight of him. But then it happened.

James went into Ms. Handy's room, grabbed the trashcan and was almost to the door when it opened. There stood Willow. They stared at each other for an five long heartbeats. The next thing he remembered as he stood there holding the trashcan between them was Timmy saying, "Hi James."

"Huh?" he responded, looking down at Timmy and then back to Willow.

"I said hello," Timmy said with his neck bent back as far as it would stretch so he could see his best friend.

"Oh ... ah ... hello, Timmy," James replied without taking his eyes off Willow.

Timmy just covered his mouth and giggled. The two lovebirds stared at each other.

James was surprised at Willow's response. "I've tried to stay out of your way," he said.

"Why?" she asked.

A woman with a child tried to get through the door. "Excuse us please!" she said while trying to squeeze through.

James and Willow apologized as they scooted out of the way. James still held onto the trashcan and almost slammed it into Timmy's face. "Sorry, Timmy." He turned back to Willow. "I thought you would be angry at me."

Willow took Timmy's hand gazing at James. "Could I talk to you afterwards? I have to see Ms. Handy."

"Okay. I'll be in this hallway for another hour." James backed into the door. Someone on the other side pounded on it, wanting in. He had to move out of the way, all the while looking at Willow.

"I mean, can you come to my apartment tomorrow?" she asked, moving away towards Ms. Handy.

"I thought you moved." James held the door while a woman with a sour expression and fat little boy came through. The child stomped on James's foot. He didn't register the pain except to move back a little.

"I'll tell you about that. See you. You'd better go back to work." She smiled. "You're becoming a road block."

James looked at the doorway and then back to her. "Oh," was all he could say as he

backed out. He emptied the trashcan into his barrel on wheels and slid the can back into the room. He said “Whew” to himself and went back to work.

* * *

James entered Willow's apartment house and sauntered up the stairs. Sally sat on the stairs as if she were a permanent fixture. He tilted his head as he looked at her.

“Sally, do you live out here?” he asked.

“It's my mother. She has a boyfriend.” She stared at the door to her apartment. “We only have one bedroom. Besides, I don't want to be in there when he comes over.”

“Oh.” He didn't want to say anything because he could guess what was going on.

James approached Willow's door.

“She's back like a yo-yo,” Sally said without looking at James.

“Thank you.” He knocked on the door. Willow opened.

“Come in,” she said without emotion.

James wanted to take her in his arms so they could welcome each other as if they were close. She walked towards the couch. She turned and said, “Sit down.”

He sat on the couch. “Timmy in school?”

“Yes.” She looked at him and tears flooded her eyes. She turned away and commenced pacing. “I want to apologize for the way I've been acting.”

James opened his mouth to say something.

“Don't say anything. Let me finish.” She grinned, showing her big horse teeth and commenced pacing. “My uncle has a forceful personality. You either trust him or hate

him. I thought he was an honest person. Growing up, I could see that he and my dad were buddies, so he and I became buddies. When my dad died, he became standoffish. I thought my mother had died as well. I thought it was just his job and that he was mourning, you know, didn't want to have anything to do with anyone that reminded him of my dad and mom. And when he showed up, I was his buddy again. We were sidekicks and couldn't be separated. At least that's what I thought it was going to be. Then when he came and told me that my mother was still alive ... the bastard! He had known all along and didn't tell me! Of course, she was under police protection and all that, but that didn't matter to me. All I wanted was to see my mother again. Then I found out that she was in a wheelchair, and I was just devastated. I just bawled.”

Willow paused, thought a moment and continued. “Uncle Morgan (I don't know why I didn't call him Uncle Blake, maybe that sounded funny), he would often come into my room when I was little and lay down on my bed and hold me in his arms. It was comforting. But when I went into puberty and he wanted to continue same ol' same ol', rubbing my back and my stomach and chest, well ... darn it! I had to draw the line, you know. Well, he had an extra bedroom down in his basement, and both he and my mother invited me to join them.”

James could see where this was going and his face flushed, his heart raced and his fists tightened. If Detective Morgan had been there he would have been on his feet and plowing into him.

Willow continued. “I wanted to because my mother was there, but the heating

vents were just like an intercom in that old house of his. I could hear their conversations. When I found out that he and Mom were doing it even before my dad had been killed, I was shocked and angry. I didn't want Timmy to be in this kind of environment. I didn't either. I decided to leave the next day. I would tell them both off and see if my old landlord would have me back ... get Timmy out of there. That night, I woke up to someone rubbing my stomach, for God's sake! I went totally stiff with my hair standing on end. I was a little girl again, and all the abuse came flooding back. Of course, when I was a girl, I didn't know it was abuse. I was so naive. Well, anyway, when I came to my senses, I started biting and hitting. I drove him out of my bedroom, gathered what I could carry and dragged Timmy over to our old apartment. I had already handed in my keys, so we spent the rest of that night at the Nortons. When I made sure he was at work (I called the office), I went over and got the rest of my stuff. I had a long talk with my mother. She told me everything. But I couldn't convince her he was trying to make love to me. He has the wool pulled over *her* eyes. Boy! Anyway, here we are. Home again.”

By the time she was through, tears were flowing down her cheeks. She sat down by James, and he enfolded her in his arms. She cried on his shoulder. After a few minutes, when her tears had dried up, she said, “I have to go get Timmy, and you have to go to work.”

She started to get up, but James grabbed her arms and pulled her back down to him. He started to say something.

“Willow ...”

She pressed her finger against his lips, kissed him passionately. “Don't you dare say anything. Now, will you marry us?”

Without hesitation, James replied, “I will marry you, you know that.”

“No, I mean us. Timmy is in the deal or all bets are off.”

“Of course.” James laughed softly. “I'll be glad to include him. I love the little tyke.”

They went to the school and met Timmy as he came out the door. Willow nodded at her son. He grabbed James's legs and squeezed as tight as he could. He looked up at him and smiled broadly. James bent down and picked Timmy up and gave him a hug. He looked at Willow in surprise.

“You already told him?”

Willow's smile filled her face with gleaming teeth. “Yes.” She got serious and asked, “You don't mind, do you?”

Laughing, James grabbed Willow and gave them both a hug. “No, of course not.”

* * *

Morgan sat on the couch with a bottle of beer in his hand, Martha in her wheelchair facing him, arguing about whose fault it was that Willow left, taking Timmy with her.

“I'll tell you who takes the full blame,” Morgan contended. “It's that dad-blamed NPU. That's who. The NPU. Something's got to be done about them. I'll kill that dad-blamed Mr. Kirkham. Then we'll see who's in charge in this city.”

Martha's face turned red. “You can't go around killing people! You're a cop for

Pete's sake. You're supposed to uphold the law.”

“Sure! I'm going to uphold the law. What do you take me for? I'm just angry.”

* * *

Detective Morgan called his friends in the force. He wanted to talk to them, to have a meeting at his house. When they came, he asked Martha to go to her room. The meeting was to be private. After she went in he locked the door in case she came out and interrupted. There were two more detectives and four patrolmen. Each one of them expressed his anger at the NPU and their constables taking over their jobs and making a mockery of the law. They shared with each other their desire to put a stop to these communists as they called them.

In the middle of their heated debate, the door opened and Judge Black walked in.

“Who called him?” Morgan asked.

“I did,” Detective Jameson said.

The judge came up to Jameson and slapped him on the back. “Jameson's my boy. He lets me know what's going on in the force and in city hall.” He scanned the room and looked at all the faces and put his hands on his hips. “So you want to get rid of the NPU? It will be a hard thing to do, but we can bruise its nose and make it cower. So what do you have planned?”

“Nothing yet,” Jameson said.

Morgan's eyebrows furrowed. “Nothing short of murder. I hate this Kirkham. We

all do. If he falls, it will cause a domino effect.”

“We have to be careful about this thing,” the judge said. “If we're going to fight the NPU, we had better make sure that everyone here doesn't get second thoughts or weak knees.”

“We're all with you, Judge,” Jameson said. He put his hand on the shoulder of the policeman to his right. They all did the same until they formed a circle.

“All right then,” the judge said. He reached into his suit coat pocket and lifted out a small copy of the New Testament. He raised it in the air with his left hand. With his right hand to the square, he said, “All of you raise your hand.” They all did so. “Do you swear by Almighty God that you will uphold the law I will give you, on point of death, if any of you should break this oath and covenant?” Each man said, “I swear,” and lowered their hands. They all looked at each other, shook hands and, hugged and slapped each other on the back.

The judge continued. “Now here's what we will do.”

A discussion went on for two hours and then the judge said to Morgan, “Bring Martha out. She has probably heard every word.”

Morgan went into the bedroom and wheeled Martha before the judge. Her face was terror stricken as if she knew they would kill her on the spot.

“Now, Martha,” Judge Black said. “You have no cause of alarm. We want to protect you from what you have heard this night. All you have to do is give us your word you will not divulge anything you have heard this night, and we will trust you. You

understand that, don't you?"

"Yes, Your Honor," she said with a trembling voice.

"So, Martha," the judge asked. "Do you swear by your throat?"

Martha turned toward Detective Morgan. "Blake?"

"It's alright, Martha," Morgan said. "I'll always be right by your side. I'll protect you."

Martha turned back to the judge and said "Yes."

"Then we have no further worry, do we?" Judge Black asked with a wry smile.

"No, Sir," she replied.

"Good. You may go to bed now." Judge Black winked at her and Martha wheeled back into the bedroom and closed the door.

* * *

James sat with Willow in the park in the center of town under the shade of an elm tree while Timmy swung on the swings and played with the other children in the park. It was there they had first met. They talked about that and laughed. James held Willow's hand and thought how nice it was for them to be together again.

"What church do you want to be married in?" James asked. "My parents were married in a cathedral. We would have to go to Chicago if we want that. That's the closest one."

"Oh, no no, James," Willow responded. "I'm just a simple girl. I don't like a lot of ceremony."

“What would you like then?” James frowned. He was a little disappointed.

“Don't do that,” Willow demanded. “Look. You want to join the NPU, don't you?”

“Yes.” He wondered what that had to do with getting married.

“Well, then, it's a simple affair. We go before one of the judges and sign the register.” Willow smiled and squeezed his hand.

“That's it?” James eyebrows arched.

“That's it. Things are different now.” She looked at him in a comforting manner, putting on as much charm as she could. “That's how it's done.”

James felt like he was being pushed by a hurricane wind. She wanted to be married that afternoon. He had little time to prepare. They weren't even going to have words said between the bride and bridegroom. They did have to find witnesses though, so James grabbed his grandparents and Willow grabbed some of her friends. She tried to find Bob Kirkham, but he couldn't be found. They both dressed in their best and showed up at Miss Aiken's apartment.

Miss Aiken brought a leather bound ledger and placed it on the table in her living room. There were two columns drawn by ballpoint pen and ruler on the left page, one for the groom and one for the bride. Half the page had already been filled with other people's signatures. The other page was for witnesses.

James bent down and signed his name, Willow signed hers, and then the book was handed to the witnesses. James's grandmother, Fiona O'Reilly, sobbed as she signed. The book was handed back to Miss Aiken and she said, “Well, I guess it's legal now, you can

kiss the bride.” After their first embrace and kiss, everyone was kissing the bride and shaking James's hand. The O'Reilly's hosted refreshments at their apartment.

* * *

That night, Timmy was sat with Sally on the stairs going up to the attic.

“This is the pits.” Timmy slumped with his head between his hands; his elbows dug into his knees. His cheeks squished out and made his lips purse. “Why can't I go in? I live there too.”

Sally sighed. “Why do you think I'm out here? Adults have to be alone together in the bedroom. They don't want any children around.”

“What are they doing, anyway?” Timmy asked with disgust.

“When two adults get married, they have to make babies.” Sally stared straight ahead.

“Oh,” Timmy said. He skewed up his face. “Does that mean the 'f' word?”

“Yes, Timmy,” Sally said matter-of-factly. “It does.”

* * *

James and Willow raced to undress each other and jumped into bed, kissing all the while. The bed springs squeaked and it made them laugh.

The television had been left on and it was blaring the news.

“Stop! Stop!” Willow exclaimed.

“Am I hurting you?” James asked very concerned.

“No, no. Listen.”

James perked up his ears.

“The body of Bob Kirkham has been found on the outskirts of the town's industrial area,” came the monotone voice of the newscaster. “Bob Kirkham, the leader of the NPU in this city, had been missing since late last night. His wife called the police this morning ...”

Willow got up, covered her face with her hands and paced back and forth in front of the TV. Tears filled her eyes. “Oh my God! Oh my God!” she blubbered, occasionally looking at the screen.

“It has been reported that other leaders of the NPU have turned up missing in other states. Reports have come in from New York, New Jersey, Georgia, Texas and Colorado ...”

James got up and took Willow in his arms. She cried, wetting his shoulder with her tears. He caressed her back and tried to comfort her, but his thoughts returned to the news. Tears ran down his own cheeks and onto Willow. He could feel the pangs of war coming. As he thought of the United States having a second Civil War, chills ran down his spine and up into his face. James and Willow comforted each other with a passionate kiss, blending their tears.

Book Three

Chapter One

James Maxwell sat at the head of an oval table of what he called his cabinet. Everyone represented a different authority, in medicine, education, labor, trade, politics, war, agriculture, transportation, energy, housing and land management, public relations, and Indian affairs. He had tabs on all aspects of what the NPU was doing throughout the country. They were arguing on whether he should run for president.

Maxwell responded with a wide smile and eyes half closed. “When I started organizing the NPU, it was to be a union against the government, a source of lobbyists. I wanted the people to bend the government to their will, not become the government.”

His old time friend and secretary of trade, Tom McIntyre, asked, “How can we not set up a federal government? You organized city and county governments already. State governments are the next step. It is inevitable we should go in this direction. So we will need a president to pave the way.”

“The people need a focal point,” said the Secretary of Education. “And as president, you can be the biggest push on Congress to get our agendas across.”

“But Gentlemen,” Maxwell, said, turning his head and looking at the ceiling, “that is what lobbyists do. They get the ear of the Congress.” A serious expression crossed his face. “And besides, it is not the president's job to make and pass laws. That is the job of Congress. That is why we should focus on the lobby. Corner the congressmen. Make our

arguments. We have leverage in the form of a union. We can strike and bring this nation to its knees if we have to.”

The Secretary of War answered. “James, it might be our knees that will be bending. There are reports coming from all over the country of local leaders being assassinated.”

“Disappearing is the word,” said the Secretary of Politics.

The Secretary of War put his nose in the air. “When you have our leaders disappearing in several states, that is enough to say assassination.”

Then several of the secretaries spoke at once saying, “And that is why we need you in as president.”

Secretary of War: “You would have the power to control the armed forces and hold this nation together.”

“Gentlemen,” objected Maxwell, “the people are choosing democracy in all the states. They will have the power to hold this nation together. I have faith in them.”

Secretary of War: “Don't forget there are enclaves of right wing armies popping up all over the west and the south. Another vote for your presidency. We will need protection against them.”

Secretary of Labor: “James, there is another thing on the agenda. The labor unions want to join us.”

Maxwell: “You mean they want us to pay some dues. We can't do that. If they want to join us, they can just join as individuals and disband their unions. Send them that message. We can't accept any leadership which might come with the package. We have to

have our own leaders. And if it so happens that when they join us as individuals and one of their former leaders is voted in as a leader of a district, that's the natural order of things.”

“Okay,” the Secretary of Labor said with raised eyebrows. “I'll let them know.”

“Another thing on the agenda,” the Secretary of Public Relations started. “There are a lot of churches and people's rights groups asking us why we are supporting this nameless church most of our members seem to be attending. They are losing members to this non-denominational group.”

Maxwell smiled and laughed softly. “I don't understand it. Why do people who all of a sudden choose democracy also choose to be non-denominational in their faith? It's beyond me. All I did was introduce this one preacher I got to know because he wanted to support the NPU, and the whole thing grew. I mean, people everywhere started copying this one group. It was a domino effect.”

“So what should I tell them?” the Secretary of Public Relations asked.

James pondered, resting his head on his folded hands. He sat back up and said, “Tell them to go home and read their Bible. We don't dictate how people worship.”

“I have one more thing,” the Secretary of Public Relations added. “The people of this union you started look up to you. You are their natural president, their natural choice. When we get just over fifty percent of the population into the union, and it's approaching that fast, you will easily succeed to the presidency.”

Maxwell laughed. In fact, he was embarrassed. He didn't want to be in the

spotlight. He became solemn, closed his eyes a moment in meditation and then said, “Gentlemen, we are missing the point here. We don't need to get ourselves involved with the present government. I have had fun in the past participating in campaigns and party elections, but last night, as I lay on my bed, I thought of something. We need to sidestep the government. We have our own organization with state representation already in place. Why, we can even have state governors elected, but within the union, not getting involved with the present day parties and governments. In fact, we should be electing and setting up our own congress. Just forget about the government. We will govern our own selves by our own laws, and as we grow, we will simply displace the government that is in place now. That is the only way I will be your president.”

James Maxwell breathed in an air of excitement about setting up his own government and running for president and passed it to his constituents. They all joined the band wagon and voted one hundred percent support for his new ideas. It may be fun running for president, he thought afterwards, but not being president. He wouldn't wish that on anyone. He had bit off something and now he must chew it. The excitement of the whole thought of running wouldn't let him spit it out. He was a political animal after all.

* * *

The day of the funeral for Robert Kirkham was rainy. It had to be held in the high school auditorium, for the whole town attended. Most of the people also came to the grave site wearing black and carrying black umbrellas. Ed Murphy and Mack Jones were the last ones to throw some soil on the coffin. The funeral directors kept some soil in a

box to keep it dry on occasions like this.

As the crowd thinned, Mack asked Ed, "Who will take his place? What about that banker Ben Brown?"

They walked back towards the limousine. "I think not," Ed said. "He is on the ballot for governor."

"Ho! Heh heh." Mack's whole body shook as he laughed. "Big fish go to the big fish fry. Umm umm." He looked at Ed as they approached the long black gasoline hog. "So who do you think?"

"It will have to be someone local, Mack." Ed opened the door and let Mack get in first. Ed climbed in and closed the door.

"Maybe you, Ed."

"Maybe you, Mack." Ed slapped Mack on the knee.

"You got more experi-ence!"

The limousine sped off. Ed looked at Mack and smiled. "I suppose the people will decide on that."

* * *

Tony, Mikie, and Leo stared at Mack, their faces hardened by crime. Mack approached the pool table and into the light of the overhanging lamp. Tony had been stooped over, ready to make a shot. He raised back up and said, "What you want?" He placed the small end of the cue-stick onto Mack's chest. "I could put this right through you."

“Do it, Tony,” Mickie exclaimed with glee.

“Do it!” Leo repeated.

“Ya'll not happy to see me? A good friend?” Mack asked with a wide smile. “Why. I know you all. You my buddies. Let's make peace.”

“Yo' betta leave this place,” Leo said bitterly, “befo'e that stick find yo' reah.”

“Don't ya'll want to get even fo' a greatah cause?” Mack leaned his head over to one side and smiled again.

“What cause?” Tony asked, taking a puff from his cigarette and blowing it into Mack's face. Mack coughed.

“What a pussy!” Mickie spat on the floor at Mack's feet.

“I come 'bout Buba,” Mack said in a serious tone.

“What 'bout Buba?” Tony asked, jabbing Mack in the chest with his cue-stick.
“Buba's dead.”

“Take that stick away!” Mack insisted, pulling it down, drawing Tony into his face.
“That's what I come about.” He whispered it again. “That's what I come about. I know who kilt 'em.”

Now, all three thugs were in his face.

Tony grabbed Mack by the collar. “You tell us who, and I'll jam this stick us **his** ass! And then I rip 'is guts out with my own bare hands.”

“We gotta set a trap fo' him,” Mack said, unhampered by the fist pulling his shirt up into his throat.

“Who?” all three asked at once.

“A detective,” Mack said, jerking his head, pointing to someone in the shadows with his nose. “James knows 'em.”

“Who's ... ?” The gang turned as one and looked at James O'Reilly stepping into the light. They let go of Mack and Tony raised the cue-stick as if to strike. “You!”

“Gents.” James saluted military fashion, but with one finger.

“Who let this whitey in heah?” complained Mickie.

“This here's James O'Reilly. He's here to help set the trap.”

* * *

Ted Bradley, a broad-shouldered, square-faced secretary of the AFL-CIO, sat on his couch drinking a beer after a stressful day at work. The news was on cable TV. He wanted to see the coverage of the talks with the labor unions and James Maxwell and his National People's Union. He had heard a lot of gossip and arguments for and against Maxwell's union. His own wife was a member of the NPU. He wondered if there was room for a merger. There would be a lot of power given to the people, if at least there could be a coalition formed. What he heard instead was just as interesting.

Pictures of trains and salvage yards came on the screen with the monotone voice of a newscaster. “Today is a bookmark in history for the National People's Union. Trains are picking up truckloads of cars crushed into small cubes and sending them to a place out in Utah. On the shores of a small lake a sprawling steel mill sat in ruins until the NPU reopened it and rehired workers that had been laid off for years. Some of them had to

come back from different states across the West to attend the grand reopening. There was opposition to the opening. In fact, people are picketing the steel mill. One man said, “We have just cleaned up the air, and now it will bring a sickly haze over the valley again.”

“We go to the site with our roving reporter, Samantha Beardsley who has with her the famous James Clark Maxwell. Samantha.”

The camera showed a smiling blonde holding a microphone with a backdrop of massive buildings and smoke stacks bellowing their pollutants into the air.

“Hi Bill. Today is a special day for the NPU and we have James Maxwell here to explain it.” She turned and the camera focused on Maxwell and her hand holding the microphone up to his face. “James, what is going on here?”

“Samantha, the mill was put up for sale,” Maxwell smiled, “and we needed one desperately, so we bought it. Of course, we are not using money. We use barter instead. The previous owners will be paid in steel. We are getting that from NPU members who own wrecking yards where old cars have been piling up for almost a century. We are not even paying for the use of the railroads. We are promising a shipment of train wheels to the railroad companies. All the workers here are volunteers who belong to the NPU.”

“What other kinds of things will you manufacture here?”

“At this site, all we will be doing is melting down the raw materials and cutting them up into forms that can be shipped back east where we have another factory which will be producing farm equipment. Our NPU-owned farms will then be independent of other manufacturers and dealers except the ones that join the NPU.”

The camera went back to Samantha. “Thank you, James. This is certainly a grand day for your union. And now, back to Bill.”

Ted pondered what he saw as he gulped down more beer. The NPU has successfully spanned a complete cycle that includes farming and manufacturing. The farmers feed the workers at the mill, and the mill supplies the farm. What power! And what is next? If only there could be a merger of all the unions with the NPU. There could be no barriers. The wealthy owners of factories and lands would have to capitulate. The unions would become the government. If only, he thought, we could persuade this Maxwell ... or supplant him.

Ted picked up the phone. He needed to get things rolling. He understood that Maxwell had a cloud of friends that kept him informed. He needed to pick out a weak spot he could go through to get to Maxwell. “Hey, Tor, I need you to do something for me. I need you to join the NPU and associate yourself with the friends of James Maxwell. Get to know them. We need some influence in that crowd of his.”

“Okay, boss,” came Tor's voice over the phone. “Want me to bump someone off?”

“Tor! You know we don't do things like that. I just want you to keep your eyes and ears open. Become a friend.” Ted gulped down the last of the bottle. “I'll call you in a month and see how things are going.”

“Is there some place you want me to start?” Tor asked.

“There is a little town just below Chicago ...”

* * *

Mack received a telephone call from Maggie Beaty. A new tenant was moving into the apartments. His name was Tor Johnson.

“I’ll get some men together and be right over,” Mack answered.

When Mack showed up with some neighbors, Tor wasn’t surprised, but he acted like it. He had been told of the friendliness of the NPU.

Mack went up to the U-Haul truck and offered his hand. “Hey, neighbor, you need a hand?”

Tor, a heavy Swede with blonde hair and short beard, was glad for the help. “Back’s been out of shape since my accident at the plant. I was wondering how I was going to get that furniture out. Appreciate the help.”

After the truck was empty and everyone introduced themselves, shaking hands with Tor before leaving, Mack approached Tor with an offer to join the NPU.

“You will find,” Mack said, “that everyone around here is a member, and it will do you some good. Even if you don’t join, you have some good neighbors who will be willing to give you a hand in any difficulty.”

“I’ve been seeing what’s happening with that ironworks out in Utah,” Tor said. He handed Mack a cold beer.

“Thanks,” Mack said. “Yeah, we’ve been busy. Our neighborhood has a farm we work. Truck farm. Have some milk cows too.”

“My family has a dairy in Wisconsin,” Tor said.

“Yeah?” Mack got excited. “We could sure use a man that knows how to handle

them cows.”

“I know all about cows. Maybe after I get settled in I can give you a hand.”

“Right on man. Give me five.” Mack and Tor went through a ritual of shaking hands and hitting their fists together.

Before Mack left, Tor slipped him a question. “Any of you know the main man, that Maxwell fellow?”

Mack stopped in the doorway as he was leaving. “That would be Mr. Beaty. Lives right down there, at the end of the hall. Usually home on the weekends now-a-days.”

“Okay. I'll look 'em up.”

“Okay. See you 'round.”

Mack closed the door behind him and went down to the Beaty's. He knocked on the door and Maggie opened.

“Hi, Maggie,” he said.

“Hi, Mack.”

“Say, Maggie. Mr. Johnson down the hall, the one just moved in? He wants to talk to Mike. Wants to find out about Maxwell. I don't trust this new guy. My nose twitches when I'm around 'em. You know what that means. So watch 'em.”

“Okay, Mack,” Maggie replied. She leaned out the doorway as Mack left. “I'll tell Michael.”

“See ya,” he called back.

“See ya,” Maggie echoed.

* * *

It was voting time again. There hadn't been much electioneering. A grass roots meeting elected the candidates to replace Bob Kirkham. On the ballot was Michael Beaty, Macintosh Jones, Edward Murphy, and a write-in, Thomas Paine. Most people thought it was a joke, but actually, he was one of the farm managers. The voting judges were Pattie Kruger as poll judge, Marge Bergstrom on the register, and ballot judge was Ruth Fuhrer.

When one came in to vote, he or she would go to the middle of the table where Marge would look up their name in the register, ask to see their driver's license or other picture I.D., record that information near their name and then have the voter sign the book upside down. Then the voter would complain about it, and Marge would ask Ruth for the ballot number and Pattie for the line number where the voter had been written down in the Poll Book. Ruth would hand the ballot to the voter and ask him or her to bring it back folded to place in the ballot box. Ruth would always point out where the voting booth was, for the voter could not see something that was in plain sight.

Miss Aiken was the Poll Manager. She oversaw everything and gave people a provisional ballot if they did not have proper I.D., weren't in the register, or had moved. She would have them fill out the back of an envelope with all the information they needed to register, give them a ballot, and after they had voted, instruct them to place the ballot in the envelope they had filled out and seal it with their own tongue. Then she would tell them to make sure and go to the registrar's office within five days with proof of who they are for their vote to count.

Ed Murphy and Mack Jones came in talking up a storm. Miss Aiken informed them, “Now you two cannot do any electioneering. That means you can't even mention your own names. So be quiet and go and vote.”

They looked at each other and laughed. They both said, “Okay, teacher, we will behave.” Whereupon they stood in line to vote, raising their eyebrows at each other.

Ed was right behind Linda Rumpskin, a middle-aged woman with short spiked hair and a long black dress with an American flag printed on it that wound around the whole affair. When she stood before Marge, she said, “Oh, you know me, Marge.”

“Yes, I do, Linda,” Marge said with a smile, “but you have to state your name and address just the same. It's the law.”

With some irritation, Linda stated her name and address, showing her I.D., got her ballot and went on to the voting booth.

Then it was Ed's turn.

“Hello, Ed!” Marge smiled, happy to see him. “How are you doing?”

“Edward G. Murphy, 234 Main and Second Street, and I'm doing fine.” He smiled as he showed her his drivers license, and they both laughed at his business-like attitude.

“How are things going? It looks like everyone has shown up.”

“It's not like the old days, Ed,” she said.

“Ballot number 23987,” Ruth stated loudly.

“Line number 306,” Pattie called out.

“It used to be,” Marge continued, “we would have only a hundred or less all day.

Now it seems everyone wants to vote.”

“We all knew Bob, Marge,” Ed said. “He was a great guy.”

Ed was handed a ballot, Ruth pointed to an empty booth, and he sauntered over.

“Mack. How are you today?” Marge pointed to the sign in front of her telling all voters to state their full name and address. He did so as he handed her his Illinois I.D.

“What is this thing on the ballot?” Mack asked with a little jump. “I saw on the wall over there we're voting on making the proclamation into a law. Why wasn't I told?”

“Came from upstairs is all I know.” Marge handed his I.D. back. “Can't talk about it here. You can ask Miss Aiken about it.

“Okay. I will.” Mack took his ballot and went over to Miss Aiken who was busy helping a woman fill out a provisional.

“Miss Aiken,” Mack asked as he bent down and leaned on Miss Aiken's table. “What is this here on the ballot? I thought we already agreed to uphold the proclamation, and here it is trying to get itself made a law.”

“Well, Mack,” she said. “I can't say much. Either you agree to do it or not. The state legislature wouldn't touch it with a ten foot pole, so we're giving it to the people to vote on. If it passes, we judges will make sure that all the people in the state abide by it. All we need is fifty one percent of the vote.”

“But if it passes ...” Mack took a deep breath with his eyes bulging.

“If it passes,” Miss Aiken said, “we'll be in for a fight for sure, but the legislature will have to concede to the will of the people.”

“Who!” was all Mack could say. He took his ballot and voted for Ed to replace Bob. He wondered who Ed voted for. When he and Ed walked out of the high school, Mack asked him. “Who'd ya vote for, Ed?”

“Not tellin', Mack. My vote is private.” Ed slapped him on the back and they both laughed at each other.

“What about this referendum?” Mack asked.

“Well ...” Ed looked both ways as they started across the street.

“I know, it's a deep subject. But I'm tellin' you, that one thing that's goin' to bother me is that the people might be forced to take over land properties, and someone's goin' to make a big fuss over that.” Mack stuffed his hands into his coat pockets and blew his breath out into the cold air just to look at the vapor.

“They sure will, Mack, but it must be done. We can't have equality with someone owning land and someone else not. It's that we all own the land or nobody owns it. And it's going to be the law.” Ed put his hands into his pockets and wished he had brought a coat.

“If it passes,” Mack said. He looked straight ahead as if into the future.

“If it doesn't, it will eventually. The NPU is growing, and its influence is the future of this nation.”

Ed and Mack continued walking down the street discussing politics.

* * *

Michael came through the door all excited. “Maggie, grab your bags! We're going

to Philadelphia.”

Maggie called from the back room where she was looking for some gray yarn in one of the storage boxes. “What?” She came out into the living room and sat on the couch to finish up a scarf for her sister's birthday next week.

“Maggie,” Michael interrupted. “Pack your suitcase. I'll go in and pack mine. We're moving to Philly.”

Maggie turned around as best she could with a fused back. “We're not moving anywhere! What do you mean?”

Michael came back into the living room and explained. “The NPU is sending us to Philadelphia. I'm to be the Illinois rep. I can't be coming home from there every weekend like I'm doing now. But think. I'll be able to come home every day. We'll be together.”

“That will be good,” Maggie said as she continued to crochet. “But we can't just go off with two suitcases. How are we going to move all our stuff?”

“The NPU. They'll ship it all to us.” Micheal grinned. “We have to go today and find an apartment. The plane is going to leave in two hours.”

Maggie continued to crochet.

Michael went into the bedroom and started packing his suitcase. He noticed his wife hadn't followed. He went back into the the living room.

“Maggie,” he complained, “we have to pack right now.”

“How loyal do we have to be to this NPU anyhow!” Maggie huffed. “We can't just pick up and leave. We have friends here. We've been here for twenty years almost.”

“Remember, you've done this to me twice in our marriage. We've moved from Oregon and from Texas on the spur of the moment, and it was your idea. Remember how quickly we had to leave? When we left Oregon we left with two suitcases. We had family and friends there too.” Michael left, went into the bedroom and came back. “This is payback, man. I'm going to pack. Don't worry. We'll have the rest of our things with us in a week.”

Maggie raised herself off the couch, groaned and went into the bedroom. “I hate this!” She huffed and puffed and tried to walk without pain.

“You'll love it there.” Michael got down her suitcase from the top of the shelves, a homemade closet at the foot of the bed made of three bookshelves nailed together with a curtain door. “It's where our constitutional government was first formed. We can visit all the historic places.”

“I guess it will be like a vacation or like visiting some lost relation ... ” Maggie let out a deep breath, “ ... who has died.”

“You bet ... just like a vacation.”

Michael and Maggie finished packing in silence, but when Maggie started on a second and third suitcase, he couldn't keep from asking, “What are you doing?”

“You don't think I'm going there without anything to do!” She paused, looked him square in the face and said, “And besides, we need something to eat. I know you. You'll be complaining all the way about your stomach.”

Michael loaded the four suitcases onto a fold-up hand truck, got his coat on and

helped Maggie with hers and went out the door with the truck.

“Don't worry about that,” he said. “I have a credit card.”

Maggie followed him out and locked the door behind her with a sigh.

“We don't have a bank account anymore,” she said, catching up to him. “You told me to get rid of it a long time ago, remember? And no money to speak of.”

Maggie followed Michael down the stairs as he carefully let the hand truck bump down one stair at a time.

“We do now, and the government is paying for it.” Michael put his shoulder to the swinging glass door and went out backwards pulling his load.

Maggie came through the door with a question. “How are we going to be able to use a credit card? Is the NPU going to pay for our trip?”

“Naw. You remember that bill that went into law last year that issued the unemployed credit cards, making the government pay their expenses?”

“Yes.” Maggie followed down the sidewalk through the garden out to the street where a white van waited.

“Well, Maxwell pulled some strings,” Michael said, putting the suitcases into the back of the van, “and issued each state rep such a card for themselves and their families to use.”

Maggie got in the front seat and asked, “One credit card per family?”

“Yes, why?” Michael got in the first row of back seats.

Maggie fastened her seat-belt and shut the door. “A lot of good that will do. I'm

sure there will be fights about who gets to use the card.”

Michael slid his door shut and fastened his seat-belt. “That may be true, but that's what we have right now. It may be expanded in the future.”

Maggie looked at the driver. It was red-headed Henry who used to work at the NPU Store. He was wearing a suit and cap that made him look like a chauffeur.

“Oh, hi, Henry,” Maggie said nonchalantly.

“Hi, Maggie.” Henry pulled out into the street and headed towards the airport.

“How are you doing today?”

“Well, it looks like I'm going to be up in the air all day.” Maggie frowned.

Michael responded with, “It won't take us that long to get there.”

“You know what I mean!” Maggie folding her arms and pouted.

Henry just chuckled.

Maggie looked at him. “Have you been here all this time?”

“You mean waiting for you out in this cold van, shivering my tail off?” asked Henry.

“Of course,” Maggie said.

“Yes, Ma'am.” Henry pulled onto the freeway. “I brought your husband home from Springfield. He said it wouldn't take long, so I just waited.”

“Wouldn't take long!” Maggie sat in the front seat and fumed. She addressed Michael. “How did you know I'd leave with you?”

“I love you too,” Michael replied.

When the van stopped at the airport, Maggie stepped onto the sidewalk and asked Michael, “How did you ever become a state representative?”

He got out, picked up a luggage carrier, pushed it to the back of the van and answered, “It was a sudden move by Maxwell to set up a congress for all the members of the NPU. We've gone so national that we need a national organization, a parallel to the federal government. And ... I guess there are some people that actually like me. Maybe I did a good job being a county rep. There were over ten county reps in Springfield they could have chosen. But they chose me.”

Henry opened up the back and put the suitcases onto the carrier.

“I can see you were appointed. That's not my question.” Maggie shivered as a cold wind blew against her. “What I mean is why didn't the people vote you in. I never saw a vote come up. What's going on?”

“Thank you, Henry,” Michael smiled and waved as his chauffeur got back in the van. “Hope to see you again sometime.” Henry waved back as he drove away.

Maggie had already gone into the building and waited for Michael. She opened the door for him as he approached. As Michael came through the doors pushing the luggage carrier, he said, “We don't have all the counties yet. We can't actually represent the whole state until we get all the counties. Then there will be several reps representing the different populations.” As they pushed through the crowd to the ticket counter, he said, “We will get around to voting. That's what the top people in the union think.”

Chapter Two

Detectives Morgan and Jameson sat in a sleek, black, unmarked Lincoln that smelled like leather inside. They waited in the dark next to the barn and watched for Tom Paine to drive home. When he drove up in his old beat-up dodge truck, they were surprised to see two thugs get out the other side.

“Hey,” Morgan whispered, “isn't that Tony Ramirez and one of his cohorts?”

“Yeah,” Jameson answered. “I recognize the one called Leo, alias the Sphinx.”

“What the hell are they doing with this Paine guy?”

Jameson put his hand on the car door as the three entered the house. “We'd better go see. We can listen in at the window.”

The two got out and moved toward the house, keeping their legs bent and their heads down. The closer to the house they got, the lower to the ground, so they wouldn't be seen. Morgan squatted underneath the living room picture window while Jameson stood to the side. They listened.

“Thanks, boys,” Tom said. “Never knew I'd need body guards.”

“We gonna keep you safe, see?”

Morgan and Jameson couldn't determine whether Tony or Leo was speaking.

“One thing we can do fo' Bubba.”

“You boys make yourselves at home.” Tom hung up his coat on a hook and walked toward the kitchen. “I'll put some dinner on. Hope you like roast beef and potatoes. It's

already made. Just have to warm it up some.”

“I hate roast beef!” One said to the other in a raspy low tone. “We ought to call in fo' some fried chicken at my mama's place.”

Morgan knew that was Leo, because his mother owned a fried chicken restaurant. He told Jameson in a whisper.

“You shut yo' mouth,” Tony said. “If we do this, we go all the way and be po-lite.”

Morgan and Jameson stood around while the three inside ate their dinner. They didn't find out any pertinent information except that Tom Paine had body guards provided by the NPU. They could go in and kill all three, but they didn't want a mess they would have to clean up. They wanted Tom by himself so they could choke him. They waited most of the night to see if the body guards would go to sleep. They never did. They were night owls. They would be sleeping tomorrow while Tom worked. They would come back then and get him.

Morgan and Jameson drove to the farm in hopes of killing Tom at 2 pm the next day. They had to drive straight through. The farm was filled with laborers. The two had noticed as they drove through that Tom was walking with James O'Reilly, his wife, and Mack Jones. They would have to wait until he was alone.

* * *

Mack and Tony waited in Tony's hopped up yellow Malibu in front of the police station. They looked for Blake Morgan to show up. If they could take him down, maybe his friends in crime would forget their vendetta against the NPU. Bullies always turned

out to be cowards.

“By joining the NPU ... ” Mack continued their conversation. “Look, you are a natural born leader. You could be top man in your neighborhood.”

“Man,” Tony replied, “I'm already top man in my territory. I rule. Nobody gets in my way.” He put his aquiline nose in the air and basked in his own light with a wide smile.

“Fear tactics,” Mack said with a wave of his hand. “I'm talkin' 'bout real power where people respect you.”

“Man! I got respect. Nobody messes with me,” Tony snarled.

“I'm not talkin' 'bout messin around. I'm talkin' 'bout all the people of the neighborhood givin' you their support out of God-given duty. Not run by gangs, but by the vote of the people.”

“Naw, man. That's not me. I'm a dude.” Tony turned his head toward the street. “Gotta walk like a dude and talk like a dude.”

“You're more'an that, man.” Mack juttet his head forward for emphasis shaking his Afro. “You got smarts. You know how to get things done. Know how to organize and authorize. Delegate. You can contribute.”

Before an argument ensued, they saw Morgan walk down the steps of the police station. He went next door to the car pool surrounded by hurricane fence. As he stood by the gate, he was picked up by Jameson in the same black Lincoln. It turned right out of the drive. The two dudes in the Malibu were pointed in the opposite direction and had to

drive around the block to pick up their lead. When they returned to the same street and looked in both directions, they spotted the detectives two blocks down. The Lincoln headed south out of town. Mack and Tony turned and followed until they realized Morgan and Jameson were heading for the farm.

“Better slow down,” Tony commanded. “Pull into that dirt road there. We can hide behind those trees.”

Mack pulled in and drove around the trees and came in from behind so the front of the car pointed to the highway. They would wait for the detectives to come back towards town. Then they would pull up behind them and follow. First, they waited for a call on a two-way radio.

“Hello, Mack?” came the crackling voice of James O'Reilly. “He's got 'em.”

“Okay, Brotha,” Tony answered. He had taken charge of the radio. He was the boss.

Mack had dozed off, listening to the twittering of the birds and the moaning of the cows. When the black Lincoln whizzed by, it was abrupt, as though the car had appeared out of thin air. Mack jerked at the realization and Tony yelled at him to go.

Mack and Tony kept a distance between them and the detectives so that the black Lincoln stayed near the horizon. When the Lincoln turned off into an industrial area, they knew exactly where they were headed. The police had a favorite spot they used to beat up on hoodlums. Tony called for backup as the Malibu slid to a stop behind some broken concrete slabs. The two climbed to the top of them. Mack brought a camcorder which he

turned on. He recorded Morgan and Jameson getting out of the car, opening the trunk and pulling out a subdued Tom Paine. They started shoving him around and bouncing him between the two of them and yelling at him. When they started punching him, two carloads of black thugs drove up, hopped out, getting the drop on the two detectives, pointing pistols and sawed off shotguns.

Morgan yelled, "Who the hell are you?"

One of them yelled back, "We are the Constables of Black Town, Illinois, and you guys are under arrest."

Another yelled, "Hands on yo' heads and knees on the ground!"

Mack and Tony climbed down from the concrete slabs. They said, "Goin' good guys," as they frisked Morgan and Jameson, taking their guns and handcuffs. They handcuffed the two while they knelt and then took them and put them in the back seat of their own car.

Mack walked over to Tom then and asked, "You okay, Tom?"

"Yeah," he said, rubbing his chin and neck. "You guys are organized. You did good."

"Man," Mack laughed. "You is one tough buddy."

"Thanks fo' yo' help, brotha." Tony shook hands with Tom, bumping fists and doing hand acrobatics.

"Glad to," Tom said as he took out a red handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

Mack told Tony, "I'm goin' to take Tom back to the farm. You can take the

Lincoln.”

“Okay,” Tony said, as he slid behind the wheel.

Mack walked over to Tony, leaned down and asked, “What's this about constables?”

“Man,” responded Tony with a wide smile. “We organized. We know which way the wind blows.”

They both laughed short “heh heh” laughs.

As Mack went to take the yellow Malibu to the farm, Tony shouted, “You take good care o' her!”

“Will do,” Mack yelled back as he followed the other cars to the highway.

All three black cars took the detectives to a different precinct in the poorer neighborhood where they were not so popular. Before they arrived, Morgan warned Tony, “We're organized too, Tony. Watch yer back.”

* * *

Tor Johnson, the heavy Swede that had moved in a month ago, was talking to Mack who had grown an Afro which shook when he laughed. They sat on a bench outside the apartments in the garden to enjoy the spring weather.

“They looked stupified!” Mack finished his description of Morgan and Jameson's arrest.

“You have a lot of run-ins with the police?” Tor asked, taking another swig of his root beer.

“Only some of them,” Mack explained. “Most of them are decent citizens, and some are members of the NPU ... all voted in policemen. They all have authority now.”

“Yes.” Tor took his last swig and put the bottle down on the sidewalk. “What is this thing about policemen having to get voted in? I've heard about that.”

“It was in the news last year.” Mack pulled one long leg over the other and held onto his shin. “That was one of the original objections of Clark Maxwell. The police don't have any authority unless they are voted into some kind of office like the sheriff.”

Tor stared out into space and then turned his head towards Mack. “So the community took action.”

“Yeah, and we whupped 'em. Those po-lice didn't know what hit 'em.” Mack reared back and laughed. “They didn't like having to have the people's permission to be a policeman.”

“There seems to be some corruption among the ranks? Hm?” Tor emphasized with his nose in the air and pursing his lips like he could smell a stinker.

“Yes, but we know who they are.” Mack grinned. “Jameson squealed like a greased pig when the Rose City Constables got ahold of 'em.”

“You guys tortured him?”

“Naw. And it wasn't we guys. It was just them that arrested 'em. They went back to the 1970's way of po-lice tack-tics of the big city cops.” Macks big teeth glistened in the sunlight. “They just scared 'em.”

“Isn't that against the law?” Tor pulled at his little blond beard.

“You have to remember. We is a democracy now, and what the people wants, that is the law.”

“Oh, I see. The majority rule. Um-Hum.” Tor sat back to think about that. “Didn't Maxwell know that could lead to chaos? To total anarchy? One community having different laws than another? Cities fighting each other?”

“Hopefully that won't happen. You see, each city belongs to a county gov'ment which they have to face up to. You get judges from each city on a council. The fo'm a county gov'ment and judge the city judges and vice versa.”

“I see,” Tor said, scratching his chin. “Smart move.”

Tor looked deeply into Mack's eyes. “So, you found the killer of your last leader, Bob Kirkham?”

“We have an idea it's one of the ones we arrested.” Mack had to look away to prevent a tear forming. He swallowed and said, “Probably Morgan, but we have no proof yet. Even if we get a confession from Jameson, we got no evi-dence.” He paused and looked back at Tor. “We still workin' on it. We'll git 'em.”

There was a lull in the conversation. After a couple of minutes Tor brought up another subject. “Heard that the Beatys moved. It seems like the whole neighborhood came in and helped themselves to all their stuff.”

Mack laughed so hard he almost fell over backwards.

“What's so funny?” Tor asked with his brows furrowed, almost covering his eyes.

“They weren't stealin' the stuff, they was shippin' it off. Their stuff followed them

to P. A. Yeah! We brothas 'round heah. We help each otha out.”

“I see,” Tor said. “It's a tight little community around here.”

“It's as tight as a ... well, you know what I mean.”

It was Tor's turn for a hardy laugh as he slapped his knee.

* * *

Tom Paine sat down to his computer and clicked on the browser. He slid the mouse up to the bookmarks and went to a new website called Facebook that was becoming quite popular. At the same time, he listened to the news on cable-TV.

The local newscaster was turning gray around the ears while his associate, a blonde woman who recently cut her hair short had remained the same age for ten years, unless the camera came too close. Then you could notice wrinkles just below her eyes. The two were called Sam and Sally.

Sam was saying, “Looks like the city fathers are taking on some heat from the NPU in this city. Since the arrest of two detectives by the Rose City Constables, City Hall has been swamped with complaints about the police department. It seems that several policemen have been charged with conspiracy to commit murder. It has been brought to our attention that allegedly, people they wanted to kill were the leadership of the local NPU. The police and the NPU are again head to head in a serious battle for supremacy.”

Tom read a comment from Facebook. “Those policemen need to be taken down.” The next one said, “It is time to put in a new city government.”

Sam turned to Sally. “Do you think we will need to bring back the National

Guard?”

“No, Sam,” Sally said in a monotone voice. “I think the mayor and city council will capitulate before that happens. They may get so angry that they will just walk out and throw up their hands. At least, that is what the spokesman for the NPU is hoping.”

The camera went back to Sam. “Yes, Sally, I'm afraid that is the case. Tom Paine was interviewed earlier today. He said that the city seems to have another battle ahead.”

The camera went to a video where a young Asian girl was interviewing Tom. Tom sat at his computer reading Facebook comments, half paying attention to his own voice. He already knew what he had said. There were still a lot of people e-mailing him and complaining on his Facebook page about the abuse people were taking from the police. If there was the slightest error in the law, people were arrested or stopped by traffic cops. Then there was this business of wanting to get rid of the NPU leadership. He wondered if that were happening elsewhere. He decided to call a town meeting. The people could air out everything there.

Chapter Three

The auditorium at the high school was packed. The noise was six decibels in a range of one to ten. Tom Paine opened the meeting with the national anthem. Everyone stood and remained standing while a prayer was said by the resident minister, Reverend Stillson. When they sat down they were quiet in urgent expectation. Tom Paine stood behind the mahogany podium and explained the sudden meeting. Grasping the sides of the pulpit, he announced, "It seems that everyone in this city has either emailed me or put up messages on my Facebook page."

The audience broke into laughter.

"There is a popular agenda," the tall, slender Tom continued, "that I should do something about the police situation." The audience clapped. "I'm only one man. The power to do something is within you, the people." They clapped again. "I'm only an administrator, a chairman of the board in a political co-op. All the neighborhoods are already organized to take action." Again applause. "Each group has local leaders and judges. I want each one of these to stand so you can recognize them." People popped up throughout the audience. "I want you to look to these fine citizens first before coming to me. We must preserve the chain of command." Tom paused, took a breath and continued. "There is a tier of choir benches behind me on the stage. I'm sorry we couldn't find enough chairs. I would like all the leadership and judges to come up here and sit on these benches. Then if anyone has any questions to pose to them, they will be in the spotlight,

so to speak. You can see them and address your concerns directly to them.”

The leaders and the judges took their seats on the stage, some greeted each other as they came up.

“Now,” Tom continued, “we will open this session to discussion so you can speak your concerns. There are constables in the aisles with microphones. Please use them so everyone can hear you.”

The first man to take the microphone was a short thin man with barely a chin. He said, “The police look so unkindly upon the citizens of this city they don't even ask whether they be members of the NPU or not. I'm not, but they treat me like one. I just stopped to light my pipe and I was hauled into court for loitering.” He sat down and gave the microphone to a slightly obese woman in front of him with white slick hair.

“It isn't just the police but the whole city government. Only yesterday I was evicted from my apartment for a city violation I hadn't even heard of. It was a basement apartment, and the windows were too small. The landlord couldn't do a thing. She's an old woman with a very sparse income. With no one to rent her apartment, she may starve.”

Tom stood up and bent over the microphone on the podium. “Please come up here after the meeting. We will tend to her problem as well as yours if you have no place to live.”

“I'm living with my sister-in-law just now,” answered the woman, “but that won't last long. Her charity lasts as long as a short fuse.”

Half the audience laughed as though it were a joke. But there were others that tried to hush them.

Ben Brown sat next to Tom and slapped his knee as he could see that he was shaking a bit. “You are doing fine. In fact, you would make a good mayor. You know city elections are coming up pretty soon.”

Talking in a whisper as not to interrupt the next complainer, he said, “That may be fine, Sir, but please, one thing at a time.”

“ ... and there I was, helping the children across the street at the school corner when a couple of police arrested me for not having a yellow caution sign in the middle of the street.”

After another half hour of complaints, the subject matter had turned more sinister with complaints of police brutality and the possible murder of NPU authorities. Tony Ramirez stood up. “I heard with my own ears Detective Morgan threaten me and the other Rose City Constables if we didn't stand down. I ask him if he's in any position to make such a threat. He say he is. An' he's in jail. The more we investigate this Detective Morgan, the more we think he is responsible for the death of Bob Kirkham.”

Tony sat down and James O'Reilly was recognized. “I agree with Tony here. Everything we have seen so far about the murder of Buba Sams and Bob Kirkham points to Detective Brent Morgan.”

John's wife Willow, sitting next to him, rubbed the middle of her forehead and closed her eyes at the mention of her Uncle Morgan.

The audience rumbled like the tremor felt before the roar of a mob.

Scruffy Harold sat alone in the crowd. He was moaning the fact that he would never see Gramps, his old drinking buddy, again. He would never again come to these public meetings with his life-long companion and hear his complaints. He had buried him the Friday before. Now, he sat there grumbling, and the more he listened the more he grumbled and the more energy rose into his legs. He slowly rose, and by the time James finished speaking, he was on his feet. The gathering energy found vent in the gradual opening of his mouth not knowing what he was going to say, but what came out was, “We need to rid our town of these cops! We don't need the mayor or the judges or the town council either. We have our own organization, the NPU. We are the government! Let's close 'em down, by God!”

There was a general applause, whistling and hooting. It took Tom several minutes to quiet the growing mob. He was afraid they would storm out and batter City Hall like waves of a tsunami. “Quiet! Quiet! Let's be civil!” He shouted while pounding his gavel.

One of the judges stood. It was Miss Aiken. “May I say something, Tom?”

“Yes, go ahead, Ma'am.” Tom turned around to invite her to the podium.

“Folks,” she began. “I have been here from the beginning of our organization. I have seen it grow from a handful of people to include the whole city. I've been part of all its growing pains. Yes, I think it's time to have our own city government, but we need to go through channels. There is the proper political machine to put our people into power. We don't just storm down there and take over. We use the vote. We call for a proper

election. We put our candidates and our judges on the ballot. The time for the next city election is this year. We can have our campaign speeches and our rallies. We can have a good time knowing that the city fathers will lose this election.”

There was great applause and a standing ovation.

After the meeting, the judges started the ball rolling, getting the election machine in place. It would be more like a roller-coaster ride as the NPU went head to head with the incumbent city government.

* * *

Tor caught up with Mack as everyone left the auditorium.

“This is like the opposite of a strike,” Tor said wheezing for breath. “Instead of the employees striking, (cough) they are taking over the company.”

“You bet, man,” Mack responded with his big smile. “We is doing the take-over and the make-over. Hee hee.”

“This can get exciting.” Tor put his hand on Mack's shoulder as they walked down the sidewalk. “Maybe it will take a shorter time to undermine the city than you may think. Want a root beer?”

“No, man. I got to go with Miss Aiken to the courthouse. There's papers to fill out and forms to sign. We is legit. We gotta go by the rules, you see.”

“The other union wouldn't be so slow.” Tor tried to look Mack in the eyes, but Mack looked straight ahead. “We'd be on top of the problem the next day.”

“See ya, Tor.” Mack patted Tor on the back and joined up with Miss Aiken. “Gotta

go.”

* * *

Tor went back to his apartment and called his boss, Ted Bradley.

“Hey, Ted,” Tor answered after he got past the options on the phone. “Got some news for you.”

“You been in contact with that Maxwell fellow?” Ted asked.

“Drop him,” Tor said, mashing a toothpick between his molars. “I’m at the center of things in ‘Smalltown’, Illinois just below Chicago. Things are heating up. Everyone’s out to oust the mayor, the police commissioner, and the police. The NPU is taking over the whole city government.”

“You in with the leadership there?” Ted’s voice sounded mechanical.

“I’m ‘Good Neighbor Sam,’ ” Tor explained. “Friends with one of the leaders of the neighborhood I live in. They divide the city into neighborhoods, and each has its own leaders. Everyone’s a constable or a member of a lady’s aid society. It beats me.” Tor switched the chewed toothpick from the left jaw to the right with his tongue.

“How are they taking over the city?” Ted asked anxiously. “Do they need our help? We could take it over in one day.”

“They don’t want that,” Tor grinned. “They want to vote themselves in.”

“Then get on the bandwagon, Tor. Get on the bandwagon.” Ted paused. “I have an idea. What goes on in this town may be what’s happening to the rest of the nation. I’ve been listening to the local news of several towns across the USA. The same kinds of

things are happening everywhere. So do whatever you can to help the process. I'll get Ted Junior to go after Maxwell. By the way, you know Maxwell has set up his own congress and is running for president?"

"That's what I heard." Tor took the toothpick out of his mouth and looked up at the ceiling. "The main character, that Michael Beaty, has split town and joined Maxwell in Philadelphia. Yet, everyone here seems to be in touch with Maxwell. Everyone knows what's going on. They're that organized."

"Okay," came Ted's mechanical voice. "Keep me informed. We have to find a way in. We merge and take over, or we defame and destroy."

"Right, Boss." Tor hung up. He stared out the window and thought how he could become a volunteer in the voting process and help things get rolling.

* * *

Tor saw Mack going into what used to be Murphy's Groceries. It was now "The NPU Co-Op". He had learned that from talking to Mack. Seeing Mack was a bit of luck. He wanted to talk to him. Tor ran downstairs and crossed the street. He waited a few minutes outside, hoping he would be coming out, but he never did. Tor went inside the corner double-door that was surrounded by glass brickwork. As he pushed on the bars, he noticed that they still read "Murphy's" on them, even though the sign above said "The NPU Co-Op."

Tor looked down one aisle after the other. The smell in the little store consisted of vegetables, fruit and freshly cut meat. It reminded him of the time as a teenager when he

had a job as a bag boy. That was the first time he had joined a union.

Not finding Mack, he went up to one of the cashiers and asked, “You know Mack?”

“Everyone around here knows Mack,” she said. “He tried robbing this store a few years ago. Ed got ahold of him, and now he's the head constable.”

“You know where he is?” Tor asked, wrinkling his face at the unwanted conversation.

She pointed towards the back and said, “He went to talk to Ed.”

“Thank you.” Tor went to the far corner and found black swinging double doors. He went through and found an office surrounded by large glass windows. Mack was inside, sitting down, talking with Ed. Tor knocked.

“Come in,” Ed called out.

Mack stood up and introduced Tor to Ed. “This is Tor Johnson. He moved into the apartments across the street.”

Ed reached across his desk and shook his hand.

“I'll see ya later, Ed.” Mack turned to leave.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Johnson?” Ed asked, sitting down to his computer.

“Oh, it's Mack I wanted. Excuse me.” Tor followed Mack out.

Ed scratched his head and went back to work.

“Whatcha up to?” Tor asked Mack as he caught up to him at the black swinging doors.

Mack turned around as soon as they went into the store proper. “Ed is our unofficial leader around here. I was just talking to him about you.”

“Me?” Tor asked as they walked down the dog food and detergent aisle.

“Didn't you tell me the other day you were a union advocate at one time?” Mack walked fast out the front door.

“Hey, slow down.” Tor had to take a few quick steps to catch up to Mack. “You are full of energy.”

“I'm excited.” Mack turned around and put his arm around Tor so he could walk with him instead of run from him. “Got electioneerin' boilin' my blood.”

“What were you two talking about in there?” Tor noticed they were walking down the street as if they were in a hurry to go somewhere. “And where we going?”

“I want to intro-duce you to another big man, Brother Dan Moultry. You two can oversee the election. You are ex-perienced in human relations, and he just likes people. The two of you will get along fine.” Mack gave Tor a little hug as they walked.

“That's what I wanted to talk to you about.” Tor looked at Mack in amazement. “I was just coming to you to see if you needed any help in the upcoming election, and here you go stealing my thunder.”

Mack laughed his little “hee hee” laugh. “We is on the same wave length.”

The two of them walked down a couple of blocks and turned into a house with pillars shaped as long pyramids that held up a wide roof over a green porch. The 1930's style house was also green with yellow shutters and trim. Mack knocked on the door and

a gruff voice said, "Come on in."

Dan overwhelmed Tor with his size and with his friendliness. He grabbed his hand and gave it a hard shake, and at the same time slapped his back, greeting him with a warm smile. "You must be Tor. Welcome to my little home." It did seem cramped compared to Dan. "I hear you and I are going on the campaign trail."

"That's what Mack was saying," Tor said, putting his aching hand in his pocket. He didn't want to tell anyone he had arthritis.

"Have a seat, have a seat." Dan waved the palm of his hand towards the sofa. "You too, Mack. Glad to see ya." He shook Mack's hand too.

Mack jiggled hand his and said, "Man, you got a powerful handshake."

Dan just smiled.

"Tor here has volunteered to help in the election," Mack said as he sat down next to Tor and slapped his back.

Tor wondered what all this slapping was about.

"We'll put 'im to work for sure," Dan said. "We're opening an office downtown where we can distribute posters and placards, and just run the election. We'll find something for 'im."

The three of them worked out some details of who would do what before Mack and Tor left. Tor thought he was on the inside now. He could help or do some damage, whatever was necessary.

* * *

Tor found himself walking away from his apartment instead of going back to it after Mack left him in the street. He seemed to have an automatic guidance system taking him to Rose Park, the black side of town, heading toward their precinct building. He stopped in front of it. It looked like the original police station from the 1920's. He thought this must be the first settlement, then everyone migrated north as the blacks moved in.

He knew whom he had come to see. Brent Morgan. He walked up the steps, went through the new glass door and up to the desk. "You got a Brent Morgan in here?" he asked the old man who looked down at him over his spectacles.

"Yeah, we got him alright." The policeman smiled.

"Is he allowed visitors?" Tor asked impatiently.

"Let me check." The attendant looked on his computer, typed a few keys and turned back to Tor. "Yes. Sign here." He gave Tor a clipboard and pen. Tor signed.

"Render your driver's license. Here's your pass. Return that and I'll give your driver's license back. Take that to the door over there," he pointed to his right. "Someone will come and get you."

Tor was taken to Morgan's cell and the policeman shoved a stool over by the bars for Tor to sit on. "Yell when you want out. I'll be over at my desk."

Tor looked into the cell and saw a man lying on his bunk. There was no one else in the cell that he could see. "Brent Morgan?"

"Who the hell are you?" Morgan asked, peering down his nose as he lifted his head from his pillow. He must have been dozing.

“My name is Tor Johnson. I'm a troubleshooter for the AFL-CIO. I'm investigating this NPU. Mind answering some questions?”

“Go away,” Morgan groaned. “There's plenty of them to talk to.”

“I have been talking to a great number of them.” Tor juttled his head forward.

“They all indirectly point to you. I understand they caught you allegedly roughing up one of their leaders.”

“Yeah. Well, what's it to you?” Morgan looked up and put his head back down.

“I understand,” Tor said, almost as a question, “that he was recently elected because of the death of their first leader.”

“You mean the city leader.” Morgan spoke to the ceiling. “They have one for the county, that's Robert Brown. Then this Patrick Henry, he's the city leader.”

“You mean Thomas Pain,” Tor corrected.

“Patrick Henry, Thomas Pain, it's all the same. They think they're forming a new revolution. Well, they have another thing coming.” Morgan rose from his bed and sat on the edge. He turned his head and stared at his visitor for a moment. “You know what this town has done to the police, the fine men in blue? They first start arresting them and putting them in a makeshift jail, then they riot until they make everyone have to vote each and every policeman into office, and now, I heard they want to get rid of the police altogether. I'll tell you. That's never going to happen. But if it did, then those constables will become the police and nothing will be any different, except for one thing. You know what that one thing is?”

“What's that?” Tor asked.

“The one big difference between them and us, is that we rule by the law. With them in power it will be mob rule. Not the rule of law! That's the big difference.” Morgan spat on the floor for effect.

“You're pretty angry about that.” Tor put his hands on his knees and peered through the bars.

Morgan frowned and said, “You're darned right I'm angry.”

Tor leaned forward. “Angry enough to do something about it?”

Morgan leaned forward with his fist in the air. “Hey! What're you talking about?”

“I'm simply mentioning the fact that the union,” Tor said, leaning back and smiling with pride, “the real union, is investigating to see whether we support the NPU, try to merge with them or destroy them altogether. We have the power to pull the plug, you know.”

“No, I don't know, but good luck trying.” Morgan picked his nose and looked at his finger.

“If it turns out that we can do something about it, do you have any suggestions?” Tor asked condescendingly.

“Yeah.” Morgan lay back down and put his hands under his head. “Get ahold of Judge Black. He'll steer you in the right direction.”

“Judge Black, huh?” Tor put his finger up to his chin. “What's he got to do with it?”

“You see, we men in blue ... I'm not wearing blue now-a-days, but you know what I mean. We men in blue stick together. We cover each other's back. I'll be out of this cell tonight because of Judge Black. He's all for supporting the police and the present city government. He'll bend over backwards for us.”

“I see. So you think I should go and talk to him?” Tor stood and grabbed hold of the bars so he could see Morgan's face.

“I think you should. He'll answer all your questions. He's a good guy. Now leave me alone and let me get some rest.”

“Thanks for seeing me. I'll be glad to talk to you again someday.” Tor smiled as he stepped away, backing into the stool.

“Go to Hell.” Morgan covered his head with his pillow.

It had been dark in that cell, but as Tor stepped out into the day light and walked down the steps, he could have sworn Morgan had been beaten. His left eye was badly bruised.

That afternoon, Tor called Judge Black's office and set up an appointment.

* * *

Tor looked down at the receptionist. “I think Judge Black is expecting me.”

The young girl looked up at the large black-rimmed clock hanging above the door. It was 3:30. “Mr. Tor Johnson?”

He nodded.

“He's in,” she said. “Won't you take a seat? He'll call for you.”

“Thank you.” Tor took a seat on a dark wood settee facing the secretary's desk. Behind him was a nine foot wall that didn't reach the sixteen foot ceiling. It was topped by two foot etched windows surrounded by elegant carvings.

Presently, an intercom on the secretary's desk buzzed. A muffled voice sounded, and she said, “You can go in now, Mr. Johnson.”

“Thank you,” he said.

There was a buzz and a click near the doorknob. Tor was surprised at the security, turned the knob and went in.

Judge Black stood and offered his hand from behind his desk. “Mr. Johnson?”

“Yes,” Tor said, shaking the judge's hand. “Thank you for seeing me.” Tor sat down on a soft leather chair in front of an almost black desk supported by carved lion paws.

“What can I do for you?” Judge Black smiled, showing creased cheeks and crowfeet at the edge of each eye. He looked over the top of his gold-rimmed spectacles at Tor.

“I represent the largest union in the nation, and it isn't the NPU,” Tor returned the smile.

“Oh, that one. And what is the AFL-CIO doing in this hick town?” The judge overlapped his fingers and rested his hands on the papers on his desk as if to hide them.

“We are investigating this NPU, its activities on a local level. Are they harmful to the nation? Should we support it or get rid of it altogether?”

Judge Black's face became serious, almost pursing his lips, but his wrinkles

remained. "Get rid of it, of course."

"Why do you say that, may I ask?" Tor leaned forward an inch.

"Why, they are a lawless bunch who think they can run the government as they see fit. They think they are above the Law. They write their own laws or just make them up as they go along. Their courts make a mockery of the Law. We ought to do everything we can to get rid of them, don't you think, Mr. Johnson?"

"Why is it that everyone in this town steals my thunder?" Tor laughed a little and remained smiling.

Judge Black grinned. "I see you have been talking with the opposition, Mr. Johnson. Or is it Mr. Holstein?"

Tor looked surprised.

"Yes, Mr. Holstein, or Johnson. I know all of your aliases. There isn't anything I don't know about the goings on in this town. I was expecting you would show up sooner or later. I called your boss Mr. Bradley. We had a long talk. We would like you to remain where you are. Be friends with that NPU bunch. He gave me permission to give you some orders now and then. You can call him today and ask him yourself. Of course, if you call him tomorrow, he won't know who you are."

"Why?" Tor asked.

"I bought you, Mr. Johnson." Judge Black tilted his head and smiled.

"You mean ..."

"I'm your boss now." There was a long pause to let Tor assimilate this. "I will be in

contact with you from time to time. You will do all my dirty laundry, you see.”

Tor gulped. “I see.”

“Now if you will excuse me ...”

Judge Black lifted a paper as if to look at it and paid no more attention to Tor. When Tor realized he was dismissed, his face flushed, he rose and went out the door. Something had happened. He didn't know what it was, yet he knew he had just met someone way out of his league.

Chapter Four

An abandoned Main Street store with two large picture windows had been acquired for the Tom Paine headquarters. Coming out of the center door one could see the city hall to the right, one block away. Inside, high school and college kids were busy at one table unwrapping packages of newly printed posters. The big ones were being stapled to stakes to be distributed to the locals to display in their front yards. At another table, phones were set up with operators already calling the neighborhoods asking for support and taking polls.

Centered on one wall sat a large television with the news channel blaring the activities of James Clark Maxwell.

“Here in Philadelphia,” spoke the monotoned newscaster, “stands a renovated auditorium with the oversized letters of NPU over the entrance. Where old folding chairs used to be is now a maze of desks and chairs resembling the House of Congress in Washington, D.C. Frank Matheson will now take you on a tour of the building.”

The large glass doors swung open, and the TV viewers could see a hallway curving both to the right and to the left. As the cameras turned right, a large black entrance appeared leading into the auditorium. Gentle, sloping semicircles of desks were only half filled with people talking to each other or into a telephone. Where the stage should have been were a line of chairs behind a tall mahogany podium and desks off to each side where men and women typed at computers.

A man standing at the podium spoke with someone in the middle of the auditorium who said, “What you're proposing goes against the whole idea of the NPU. We never were meant to be a governing body, only lobbyists, to persuade Congress to get things right.”

“I think you are absolutely mistaken, Mr. Myres,” the Speaker of the House said. “On the contrary, the NPU was set up to have representation of all states just like Congress. It is Maxwell's intention that we set up our own government and make our own laws and bypass Congress altogether while following the original Constitution. ”

“Mr. Speaker. You know what that will cause. The Federal Government will not allow that to happen. What do you think they will do? Just sit on their asses and go on as if nothing is happening? No, they will do all within their power to shut us down.”

And so the conversation went, discussing pros and cons, changing speakers as one after another representative stood to take the floor.

The camera man and newscaster turned to the architecture of the old building. It was the classic Georgian style with flattened pillars holding up a curved ceiling of boxed frames, each one showing elaborated ribbons and flowers with an occasional pastoral scene.

* * *

“Boy, they is goin' after it. Ain't they?” Mack asked Tom.

“Mack, you and Tor grab this list here. Take Susie with you. She can drive, and you can distribute a bundle of these signs.” Tom grabbed a hammer off his desk near the TV

and gave it to Tor. "Here. You'll need it. The ground in this town is pretty hard."

"Gotcha man," Mack said as he picked up an armful of signs.

Tor followed suit, put the hammer through his belt, and took a load out to the pickup in back.

Susie, a blonde senior back from college, jumped behind the wheel. As soon as Mack and Tor slid in beside her, they were off.

Rock and Roll reverberated from the radio.

"Say," asked Tor, "isn't there a news station like C-Span or a talk show on there?"

Susie punched a few buttons and the shocking music changed to a debate.

"The liberals of this nation are bankrupting America. With this new reform that was passed last year, they said they were going to put Americans back to work, but what they did instead, was to take us one step further into socialism and triple the deficit. With one step, they've managed to increase the number of unemployed and pay for it at the same time with moneys that don't exist."

"Mr. Speaker! Mr. Speaker!" called out a voice.

"Mr. Langley from New Hampshire has the floor."

"Mr. Speaker and fellow congressmen," Mr. Langley yelled, "Mr. Wriggly is using, I am going to assume, the McIntyre Tables on unemployment. The poll taken depends upon who took it. There are other tabulations, such as the Efferson, that show people are going back to work. There is at least a two percent increase."

"Mr. Speaker!" Mr. Wriggly exclaimed. "I want to say ..." and so it went.

Mack read off the addresses of people who agreed to have the “Tom Paine for Mayor” sign in their yards while Tor jumped out, hammered in a sign, and came back into the cab wheezing.

“We'd betta take turns, man,” Mack said as Tor entered the truck.

Susie leaned over to take a look at Tor. “Yeah, you better rest some, Mr. Johnson.”

Mack and Tor traded places for the next run.

* * *

Tor sat down on the edge of his bed to take his socks off. It was after ten at night, and the phone rang. He could see on the yellow-green display that it was Judge Black.

“Yes, Judge,” Tor answered as he lay down and leaned on his elbow. “What is it?”

“Tor,” the judge said, “I want the voters scared senseless. It'll be up to you. That's where your talent lies.”

“Okay, Judge.”

The judge hung up. There was a dial tone for a moment as Tor stared into the darkness. He reached over and placed the receiver down, lay back and began wheezing. Opening a drawer in the nightstand, he took out a bottle of whiskey, downed a couple of swigs, put the cap back on, and put it away. He relaxed and the wheezing stopped. Thinking what he would do, he decided it wouldn't be nice to deliberately kill someone; it had to be an accident.

* * *

The next day Tor and Mack were out planting more signs in people's yards. Tor

insisted on helping. He held the sign and Mack did the hammering. Now if it had been the other way around, Tor thought, he could hit Mack over the head with the hammer and say it was an accident, but he had an alternative plan. As they reached another address, Tor went to the back of the pickup, took out a sign, and strolled up a yard with a slight slope. The grass was wet. It was nearing the end of the day.

“Man, I'm gonna have me a big burger tonight,” Mack was saying.

“Give this one your best shot, Mack,” Tor said. “Hit it really hard. You're almost finished.”

Tor made sure Mack was between himself and the truck. Mack reared back with the hammer. As the hammer came down, Mack slipped on the grass and lost his footing. Tor took advantage of Mack's clumsiness and turned the sign so that the pointed end rammed into Mack's liver as he fell forward. Mack's face had a surprised look as Tor pushed him over backwards onto the ground. Tor ran back to the truck.

“Susie! Susie! Call 911! Mack slipped,” Tor cried.

Susie looked through the window. There was Mack laying on the ground with a sign saying “Vote for Tom Paine” sticking up-right out of his belly. She hurriedly grabbed her cell phone and dialed the emergency number. After telling the operator the situation, she was too upset to remember the address, so she read it from the paper. She got out of the cab and they both ran to help Mack.

Mack's eyes were glazed over. He was already in shock.

Susie shook her hands up and down frantically. “What can we do?”

“Don't do anything until the ambulance arrives,” Tor said, putting his hands on her shoulders.

“Here, let's get you back to the truck,” Tor said, leading her away from the scene. “You're shaking. You need to sit down.”

The ambulance came and took Mack away, sign and all. Tor took Susie back to headquarters. Leaving her there, he went to the hospital, figuring she would do all the telling of the tragedy. He would have to watch over Mack. On the way, he called the news reporters.

After talking to the reporters, Tor lingered in the corridor of the hospital wing where they had taken Mack. A woman, maybe a sister, came out of his room. Tor stopped her.

“How is he doing?” he asked, touching her wrist.

She jerked her hand away from his, answering briskly, “How would you do without your liver?” She straightened herself and apologized. “I'm sorry. They had to remove his liver. It was mangled. They are searching for a replacement. He'll die if he doesn't get one soon.”

“You think I can go in and see him?” Tor genuinely liked Mack and was concerned for him. He had only been doing his job.

“Our mother is with him now. Only family, you know.”

“Yes, I thought so.” He watched the nurse scurry down the hall. He called to her. “I'll wait and talk to your mother.” When the mother didn't come out, and he realized she

was going to stay, he went home.

Tor paced up and down his living room looking at a flask of whiskey on a round table where he ate. Each time he passed the table, he would take a swig and set it down. When he found the flask empty, he made up his mind. He would go back to the scene of the crime and cover his tracks.

* * *

Linda Rumpskin prepared her small meal of chicken soup and crackers and ate in silence. The ordeal of seeing someone die on her front lawn and having the ambulance come had been very upsetting. It must have upset Pooh Pooh as well. He was nowhere to be found. He usually showed up at dinner time. She had looked all around the house. Maybe he had gone outside when she carried the trash out, but she hadn't noticed him. She had even called for him. He hadn't come. Toy poodles were just a mouthful for bigger dogs. Oh, she hated the thought.

Linda went to watch television but soon fell asleep. When she woke up, it was nearly nine o'clock, her bedtime. She went in, brushed her teeth, changed into her nightgown, and sat on the edge of the bed. It had been a horrible day. Pulling down the covers, she sank into the comfortable warmth and soon fell off to sleep.

Linda awoke with a jerk. She had heard something. Was it a dream or was it Pooh Pooh? She leaned her head over the bed to look under it. "Pooh Pooh?"

A hand came out from under the bed and grabbed her throat. With her last breath she managed to reach her hand up to the telephone and push one button. It dialed 911 and

put the phone on speaker.

Tor crawled from under the bed, wheezing, pushing the dangling body back. When he stood up, he grabbed his arthritic hand and rubbed it. Choking someone might be cleaner, but it sure hurt. He carefully put Linda's body back under the covers and tucked her in, smiling sympathetically. He then reached under the bed and pulled out the corpse of a little black poodle and placed it under the covers with Linda's arm wrapped around it so that only its head stuck out. He smiled at the scene and left the house.

Outside, Tor pushed a "Vote for Tom Paine" sign into the soft loam of the lawn.

* * *

Susie had stayed up late with her dad, Tom Paine, at the campaign headquarters. They and the two bodyguards were the only ones left. Everyone else had gone home. Tom was turning out the lights when he saw Tor standing outside on the sidewalk. He opened the door.

"Come in Tor," Tom said, offering his hand, which Tor shook cordially. "There's still coffee if you want some. We're all heading out to the farm."

"Thank you, Tom," Tor said. "I just got back from the hospital to see Mack and came by to say goodnight."

"He's not doing very well, is he?" Tom frowned.

Tor looked down at the floor. "No. He's not. They don't expect him to live." He looked up at Susie who stood by her dad's side. "I feel it was my fault. I'm so clumsy sometimes."

Susie reached out and grabbed Tor's arm. "It wasn't your fault, Tor. I saw the whole thing."

Tor's eyes jerked open with full attention. "You saw it?"

"Of course," she said. "He slipped. It couldn't be helped. The grass must have been wet. And that slope."

"Yeah." Tor looked down at the floor again. But without pulling his head back up, he focused his eyes on Tom. "I'd better be getting home."

"Yes, Tor. It's been a tough day for us all." Tom put his arm around Susie and pulled her away from Tor. She looked up at him with a worried look on her face. His eyes pointed toward the door. "We'll leave these front lights on."

Leo, one of the guards, said, "Time to go home, boss."

Everyone moved out onto the sidewalk and said their goodbyes as Tom locked the door. The truck was parked in front this time. The two bodyguards climbed in back while Tom and Susie got into the cab. Tor waved as the truck left.

"Daughter and daddy, eh?" Tor said to himself. "One witness down, another to go."

* * *

Dan and another constable showed up with the police at Linda's house. A call from the 911 Emergency Department made them suspicious. They found the front door unlocked.

"I know Linda," Dan commented. "I visit her on a regular basis. See to her needs. She has a little poodle that always greets me, even in the middle of the night."

“Not here now,” Detective Arnold said, looking around with his flashlight.

The two police officers that came with the detective began using *their* flashlights.

Dan screwed up his face with disgust and turned on the lights.

“What did you do that for?” one of the policemen asked.

Dan just frowned at him. “Let's look upstairs,” Dan said. “She would be in bed. Or maybe she slipped and fell.”

“She could have fallen in the kitchen,” a policeman said.

“Doubt it,” Dan said as he headed for the stairs situated in front of the door.

“Detective?”

Detective Arnold followed Dan upstairs while the other two reconnoitered downstairs.

They found Linda in her bed with an arm around her puppy.

“Linda?” Dan whispered.

Something wasn't right. The dog would have started barking. Detective Arnold reached out and touched the dog. He pulled his hand back as though it burnt him. “It's dead.”

Dan touched Linda's throat. He felt no pulse. “So is she.”

Arnold pulled down the covers. There was no evidence of foul play until he looked at her throat.

Dan turned the lights on when he realized he was seeing by way of the detective's flashlight.

“Look at her throat,” Arnold said. “Bruised.”

“Yeah.” Dan started feeling a wave of sorrow come over him. He put his hands on his hips and turned away.

The other two policemen entered the room. The first one said, “No one down ...” He saw the body on the bed. “ ... stairs.”

Arnold punched 911 Emergency on his cellphone and spoke with Betty on the other end. “Let me hear the recording ... I see.” He looked at Dan. “Dan, I want you to hear something. Betty, play that back again. Here.” He handed his cellphone to Dan.

Dan listened carefully. What he heard on the other end was wheezing. “I know who that is. It's not Linda.”

The house was cordoned off, an investigative team sent in, and Dan and Arnold set out for the police station. It wasn't uncommon for Dan to work with Detective Arnold. Arnold was one of the few members of the police force who was a member of the NPU.

* * *

Tor didn't show up at the campaign headquarters until afternoon. When he came in, Tom asked, “Where've you been, Tor? We needed some more signs out. Last load.”

“Sorry, Tom. Why so sore? I had a bad night.” Tor wiped the back of his neck and stared at Tom before he let his hand down. The two bodyguards, who were sitting down loafing, now stood. Tor saw them and smiled at Tom, taking his hand down. “No problem. Where's Susie? I'll go right now.”

“Change of plans.” Tom turned around. “Dan? Tor's here.” Tom turned back to Tor.

“You and Dan can go around and hand out these flyers. Put some in the shops along the way.”

“Okie-dokie.” Tor reached out his hand. “Hi Dan. Good to see you again.”

Dan, instead of shaking his hand, gave him a pile of 8 1/2" by 11" handbills. He almost dropped them, pretending they were too heavy for one hand.

Dan and Tor walked around town giving out the bills and placing several in little shops along the way.

“You work for the union still, Tor?” Dan asked as they walked along.

“Na. I'm retired. Hurt my back some time ago. Got compensation.” Tor handed a bill to a passerby. The load was now lighter. He wondered why Dan wasn't carrying any.

“How'd you hurt your back?” Dan took one of the bills and handed it to another passerby.

“Really, it just grew weaker over the of years. Old age. Disc deterioration.” Tor smiled at another passerby. She and her girlfriend were too young to vote.

“So, where is Susie today?” Tor asked, rubbing his nose.

“Doing the job you were supposed to do this morning,” Dan said, smiling down at Tor.

“Oh. Well, maybe I'll see her when we get back.” Tor looked up at Dan, but the sun got in his eyes and had to quickly look away.

“Yeah.” Dan paused. “There's someone I want you to meet while we're out. James O'Reilly.”

“Oh? Bringing in the military, are we?” Tor smiled. He already knew the guy.

* * *

James could usually sniff out an enemy or predator in a crowd. He had plenty of street sense and war experience. He watched Tor from behind the one-way mirror at the police station, sensing a two-headed dog, or a two-faced Janus. It wasn't like the guy had a split personality, but more like a sociopath, someone who could greet you with a smile and stab you in the back at the same time. It sent chills up and down his spine.

“Strange character,” he said to Dan.

They both stared at him for a moment and then James said, “I'll interrogate him, but I know he won't tell the truth about anything unless it's to his advantage.”

“You've had more experience at this. That's why we brought him to you.” Dan slapped James on the back and smiled as if telling a joke.

“Okay,” James said, taking his hands out of his pockets. He grabbed the doorknob and looked back at Dan. “But I can't promise anything.”

“All right, just do what you can.” Dan frowned and glanced back through the mirror at Tor.

James went in. Tor was sitting behind a table. James pulled out the opposite seat facing the fugitive. Tor stood, smiled, and offered his hand. “The famous James O'Reilly, I presume. I didn't know you were a detective.”

James shook his hand and sat down. “I guess I've been promoted.”

“I didn't know the NPU used detectives in their organization,” Tor said, still

smiling.

“How's your condition?” James asked as he folded his hands and rested his arms on the table.

“Condition?” Tor asked.

“Your wheezing.” James looked down his nose at the guy.

“Oh, that. It's just a little allergy. I assume you read the brief they have on me?” Tor jerked his head towards the mirror to his left.

“Yeah. There isn't much they don't know about you.” James paused. “Do you want an attorney?”

“Have I been arrested for something? I thought Dan wanted me to meet one of his buddies.” Tor screwed up his face. “Say! What is this?” He put his fists on the table and raised halfway out of his chair.

“Calm down, Tor. You haven't been arrested for anything. You can leave anytime you want. We just brought you here to answer some questions concerning the death of ... ,” he looked down at the papers he brought with him, holding them up to see better, “Linda Rumpskin. She was found dead in her apartment two days ago. You and Mack were there. We can't talk to Mack, but we can talk to you. ”

“Susie was there too. Have you talked to her?” Tor looked down his nose at James, imitating him.

“Yes. We already brought Miss Paine in.” James tilted his head to the right. “She was quite helpful.”

“She's nice lookin', don't you think?” Tor smiled and tilted his head to his right, imitating James.

James straightened up and leaned forward.

“We've identified a piece of evidence that belongs to the killer, Mr. Johnson.” He paused for effect. Tor stared back at him with a blank face.

“Do you work for the Union, Mr. Johnson?”

“Hey, why the formality, here? Everyone around here knows me.” Tor turned the palms of his hands to the air and stuck out his bottom lip.

“Do you?” James turned his head to the left.

Tor followed suit. “I'm retired now,” Tor said. “That's why I came to this little town, just to settle down and meet some new friends. Say, could you introduce me to this Susie?”

“Don't you think she's a little young for you?” James raised his eyebrows.

“She's a grown woman. She's free for the taking. Hey! You remember that line from Finian's Rainbow? What the leprechaun says? 'If she's got a boosm, I woose'm.’”

James frowned. “Do you work for the Union, Mr. Johnson?”

Tor pounded on the table, exclaiming, “I told you I don't!” but James didn't flinch. Tor smiled. “Smart guy. I thought I would try, anyway.”

“Who do you work for?” James presented a stone face.

“I told you. I don't work for anyone. I'm retired.” Tor paused and stared at James. When he saw that he wasn't going to back down, he said, “Listen. I moved here because I

heard it was a nice town with nice people. But that's just on the surface, isn't it? Deep down, behind the curtains, you're all just a bunch of communist bastards.”

James rose, scooted his chair back into place, and said, “Thank you, Mr. Johnson, you can go now.” He picked up his papers, walked over to the door, opened it, and with a wave of his hand, invited Tor to leave.

Tor stood without saying anything until he was out in the hallway. He turned and said, “I'm going to go home, pack my bags and get out of this hell hole,” turned back around and left.

James rejoined Dan and Detective Arnold. “He's leaving town, but my gut feeling is that he's going after Susie Paine first.”

Dan volunteered to call Susie and warn her. Arnold then tried to convince both Dan and James the reasons the NPU should keep the police force intact. “You need our support, our buildings, our mobility, and our computers.”

“We'll see what the people have to say at the polls,” Dan said. “It depends on what the people want. We're living in a democracy now.”

* * *

Tor walked down the steps of the police station talking to himself. “I thought it odd that Dan took me into the police station to see the military man. I'm so gullible sometimes. It comes from being a people person.” He shook his head.

He spent the time it took to walk home figuring out what to do about Susie. He decided he would take the truck they were using, pick her up and take her out into the

boonies somewhere and dispose of her. Beyond that, he would play it by ear.

When Tor got back to his apartment, he packed his bags, put a cloth and a bottle of ether in his coat pocket and went to Tom Paine's political headquarters. He came to the alley where the truck was parked, walked between it and the building and looked inside the door. Someone was coming out. He pressed his back to the wall so no one would see him.

Susie came out carrying a large box. She put it in the back of the pickup. "I'll be back in a jiff, James." Not noticing Tor, she took the keys to the pickup out of her jeans pocket and headed around the truck to get into the driver's side.

Meantime, Tor poured a few drops of ether onto the rag he brought, sneaked up behind Susie as she came to the tailgate of the pickup, threw one arm around her to catch her arms and at the same time, covered her mouth with the ether dowsed cloth. She didn't have time to scream.

Tor looked around to see that the two of them were alone and then carried Susie's limp body around to the driver's side, pushed her in and went back for the keys she had dropped. Getting into the cab, he pushed Susie the rest of the way across the seat, started the truck and drove off.

Dan and James were watching from just beyond the screen door inside the building. Susie had agreed before hand to act as bait to trap Tor. They promised her they would be right there to rescue her. Dan wanted to capture Tor before he put Susie in the truck, but James held him back. He said that a kidnapping charge wouldn't stick until Tor

actually left with her. They rushed through the building, shouting, “He has Susie!” Tom wanted to go, but they were out the front door and into Tony's hopped-up Lincoln and gone before he could reach them.

James called Tom on his cell phone. “We're in pursuit, Tom. We'll call as soon as we catch up to them.”

“Okay. Please hurry,” answered Tom. “I love my Susie. You know that. I wish now she hadn't agreed to your plan. This is just plain stupid.”

“Calm down, Tom. We'll get him before he has a chance to do anything.” James hung up and sat thinking that maybe he had been wrong to let Susie do this.

James came back to the present moment and noticed the car they were in. “I thought you had a Malibu.”

“Man, I did, but it's got engine troubles, see?” Tony swerved around the corner to pick up Tor's trail “So, I borried this one. Detective Morgan ain't gonna miss it.”

James looked at something protruding from the hood as they swerved around another corner. “I don't recall a manifold sticking out of his hood.”

“I jus' fix it for'im, my man.” Tony winked at James.

Dan sat in the backseat wringing his hands. “Can you hurry it up?”

James touched a two-way radio under the dashboard with his fingers. “That another addition?”

“No, man, but I fix that too. It is now connected. We can call the station.” Tony grinned for a second before his face tightened into a serious concentration. He passed two

cars and missed hitting an oncoming truck. The tires squealed as he swerved this way and then that way.

“You mean it was broken?” James asked.

“No, man,” Tony responded as he followed the pickup onto the freeway. “It connected to the wrong station, but now it work for **me**.”

After a long pause as Tony dodged cars and trucks trying to located Tor, James spoke again. “I suppose, if you had been driving your Malibu, Tor would have recognized it.”

“Now you git it, Man!” Tony exclaimed, shaking his head. “There he be!” Tony stepped on the gas and everyone experienced two G's.

Tony lifted the microphone from the radio, pushed a side button and said, “One two three, this is me. Make yo' start and follow this cart.” He hung up and said with some excitement, “We is on our way. We got back-up.”

“Rose City Constables?” James asked.

“Yeah, Man, you smart.” Tony popped some bubble gum into his mouth and started chewing. There wasn't much to say after that except to increase the G's in response to Dan's complaints.

* * *

Tor hadn't planned on getting Susie so soon. He was only going to steal the truck, put his bags in the back and then go pick her up, but since the opportunity arose he was prepared. He could always buy new clothes and stuff. He liked doing that. He had plenty

of money in the bank and not a care in the world. He headed south. Glancing at the rearview mirror, he saw a black Lincoln following.

After driving about an hour, he came to some woods, a state park. As he turned onto the dirt road, Susie started waking up. Tor grabbed her wrist.

“Let me go!” she screamed.

“Go ahead,” Tor said. “No one can hear.”

Tor pulled the car over and turned the engine off. He leaned toward her and grabbed the top of her t-shirt with his other hand. He pulled it down to see her throat.

“You're nice and soft.”

She scratched at his face with her free hand, but he quickly grabbed it and pushed it into her chest.

“Naughty naughty,” he said, grabbing both her wrists with one hand and caressing her face with the other. She tried to distract him with her screams and kicked with both legs, but his body had her pinned down.

Tony slowed as he entered the park. When he spotted the truck, he pulled over. The three of them jumped out and ran into the woods. They knew they couldn't run up the dirt road; they were sure to be spotted. They hoped to gain an advantage by coming in from the side.

Tony got there first. He took his Smith and Wesson from behind his back, opened the driver's side, and pointed his gun at Tor's head, whose hand was around Susie's throat choking her.

“Stop it!” Tony yelled. “Stop it or I fire!”

Tor kept on choking Susie with one hand, and with the other, grabbed Tony's wrist, making him fire into the windshield.

James opened the other door, pulled out his pocketknife, and starting jabbing at Tor's jugger vein, cutting him several times. Blood spewed onto the windows, Susie and James's arm and hand, but Tor didn't let Susie go. James started bashing his fist into Tor's face. After a couple of minutes with both Tony and James beating on him, Tor fainted and lost his grip. Dan had been standing outside watching. There had been no room for him to get in there and do something, so when James dragged Susie from the cab and lay her on the dirt road, he shoved James out of the way.

“She's not breathing,” James cried.

Dan knelled down and made sure Susie's airway was clear and gave her mouth to mouth and pounded on her heart, repeating the sequence several times. Tony ran back to call an ambulance, wiping blood off his hand with his handkerchief. A van load of Rose City Constables drove up just as Susie started coughing.

“She's breathing. She's breathing,” James reported to Tony, who came running back.

Everyone got out of the van and stood around gasping at the macabre scene. One of them took a blanket and covered Susie as she lay wheezing and rubbing her bruised throat. It was as though Tor had transferred his wheezing to her.

“You did okay, girl,” Dan said, trying to comfort her, wiping the blood off her face.

“You did just fine.”

The ambulance came, the medics looked her over and carried her away. One of the medics returned and checked Tor's pulse.

“He's bled out,” he said. “Better have you take him. Got to get her to the hospital.”

“Okay.” Dan threw Tor's limp body in the back of the truck and followed the ambulance.

James and Tony followed Dan in the Lincoln, and the Rose City Constables followed them in their black van.

Tor bled out his life and died in route, but no one cared.

James notified Tom Paine on his cellphone. He was waiting at the hospital when the ambulance arrived and stayed with his daughter the rest of the night while everyone went home.

The voting would be tomorrow and everything would be changed. The people in town already knew the outcome. The NPU would have more votes They would be in charge.

Chapter Five

Marguerite Higgins, a brunette, middle-aged woman wearing a blue cotton dress from the NPU Store, took a pair of reading glasses from her blue, plastic-covered purse. Putting her glasses on, she signed her name to the registry, took her glasses off and received a coded card. She looked at it, not knowing what to do next. The voting judge that gave it to her said, “Just slide it into the top right hand slot of any one of the machines located over there.” She pointed to her right toward a long line of voting machines. “Instructions will automatically show up on the screen.”

“Okay,” said Marguerite. “Thank you.”

She walked over to the next unoccupied machine three rows down, placed the card into the machine and read the instructions. She pressed the “Next” button on the kiosk and read the list of people running for election. When she saw Thomas Paine under “Mayor”, she pressed the square in front of his name. Skipping the other candidates, she looked to see if she could recognize anyone else on the list. There was James O'Reilly for police commissioner and a long list of judges whom she recognized as her neighbors. She saw Judge Black and frowned. She spotted Mackintosh Jones running for city councilmen and gave him a vote of confidence, knowing he was still in the hospital. She voted for everyone she knew was in the NPU, then she pushed the “Next” button at the bottom of the page.

A list of propositions showed up. The first one was to get rid of the police

department altogether, having the police commissioner be in charge of the constables of the NPU. The next one was to keep only the traffic division, giving all the other responsibilities to the constables. She thought for a moment and decided to keep the traffic department. She thought they still needed to have parking and speeding tickets.

The fire department and other departments weren't mentioned. She assumed they would remain intact. But knowing the NPU would be in power, she knew no one in the city government would be paid, although their housing, groceries, and clothes would simply be given to them.

The next agenda concerned the right for the NPU to make laws for the city in line with the People's Proclamation. The first law would be that all land in the city precincts would be deeded over to the NPU. She voted yes on that proposition. She knew then that she wouldn't have to pay rent ever again. She had heard that something similar would be happening to the county after their government was set up. That voting day was two months away.

A sub-proposition was that everyone would be given a deed to the place they lived in as long as they were members of the NPU. She smiled and voted yes on that one.

After reviewing everything she voted on Marguerite pushed the button called "Cast Ballot." She pushed the "Print" button and a ratchet sounded along with a printout scrolling across a window near her arm. The card she was given popped out of the machine up in the right-hand top corner. She took that back to the voting judge at the table and went home, proud that she had voiced her opinion.

* * *

Marguerite pulled off her light coat and gloves, put her shades in her purse and set that aside and turned on the cable news. As she left for the kitchen to fix herself some dinner, the newscaster proclaimed, “It's happening folks, all around the country. Thousands of little communities are voting out the incumbent governments to replace them with the NPU organization. What is surprising is that some large cities like Chicago, Illinois; Dallas, Texas; Inner L.A.; Portland, Oregon; Denver, Colorado; Atlanta, Georgia; Charleston, South Carolina, and Philadelphia are doing the same. Even though the NPU is alive and well in New York City, they are holding out. They love their mayor, the police and fire departments.

“Several federal judges in the different states have declared that any attempt for the NPU to take over private land and property will be dealt with harshly. A line has been drawn. If the NPU crosses that line, I am afraid that the nation will have a fight on its hands. When private land and property goes, so does our freedom. And that, ladies and gentlemen is the opinion of this station.”

Marguerite thought to herself, Huh! That will be the day. The people will rise up. There will be riots all over the place. Oh, I don't know if I'm ready for this. Well, I signed up. I can't back out now.

The cable news changed to an argument going on at the NPU Congress in Philadelphia.

“My report from Illinois,” Michael Beaty called out as he stood, “says that because

of the NPU takeover of most counties, a lot more cities in the other counties are organizing. Therefore, I think it imperative that we continue freeing the land for NPU use. I believe we are getting enough support that we can defy the federal judges. We can ignore them, and if they want to take us on beyond an injunction, then we are prepared.”

“Speaker, Speaker,” yelled Representative Heller from Arizona.

“The representative from Arizona has the floor,” the speaker announced.

“I believe that the representative from Illinois is a war monger.”

“You may state your opinion, Mr. Heller,” said the speaker, “but leave off the name calling, please.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Speaker,” Mr. Heller apologized. “I believe that if we follow the current path, taking away private property, we will anger the American people and have a civil war on our hands.”

Marguerite shook her head. What next, she thought. Here we are trying to free ourselves of a strong federal government and they are talking about civil war. She sat down with her fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and coleslaw.

“Heavenly Father,” she prayed, “I thank you for this food, and please bless this nation that it won't come to war. Please bring us peace. Amen.”

* * *

A week passed. Tom Paine became mayor. Mayor Merced, Chief Bragg, and Councilman Townsend walked down the steps of City Hall proclaiming they will be back. Twelve new councilmen, all NPU members, replaced the six that lost their seats.

James O'Reilly started reorganizing the police force, using constables to pound the streets in organized blocks of city streets. The men and women of the fire department, water and garbage, and other departments, if they weren't members of the NPU, either joined or left and were replaced. The whole city became an NPU organization.

Judge Black retained his office and put up his attorney's shingle.

Land owners wanting their rents picketed City Hall while renters and home owners lined up to get their deeds to their homes or apartments. The constables had to form a wall with their bodies to keep the lines apart.

Meetings were held to decide whether to arm the constables or not. It was decided that guns were to be kept in closets and not to be worn on the streets. The idea was that crime was to be fought in the home with the constables visiting and teaching each family in the city. The Rose City Constables voted against this idea and decided to keep their weapons. No one in the big city liked the idea, but they supported each other's democratic views. The sheriff and his deputies were always present to give armed support to the constables.

Chapter Six

The mayor, judge, and police of one little town tried to crush the NPU by murdering its leaders and scaring voters away from the polls, but it rose up like David to slay Goliath by the power of the vote and people's dissension. They proved that by organizing, they could have their own will and put in their own government. However, Federal judges immediately declared land takeovers unconstitutional. Federal marshals began arresting NPU leaders, including James Maxwell. People like Tom Paine and James O'Reilly had to go into hiding. Federal buildings in several cities were taken over by NPU mobs to get their leaders back. It was democracy verses incumbent governments.

James O'Reilly sat with Dan Moultry in the basement of the farmhouse listening to an old broadcast on the radio of James Maxwell addressing the NPU Congress.

“It is the right of every citizen to organize and force his will in conjunction with his neighbor on the government, whether that government be local, state, or national. It is his constitutional right. He uses his right of free speech and the power of his vote. He can reorganize that government as he sees fit.

“We started with a small number of men and women and went about the country sharing our ideas in grassroots meetings. Our ideas spread like wildfire because they spoke to the heart of the common man. We didn't invite the rich and the ultra-rich because they were the ones suppressing everyone else. Yet, our ideas attracted them too. We found backing from corners we hadn't imagined. We founded the National People's Union

originally to lobby the different governments from town meetings to state legislatures to Congress, but the people of these United States took hold of it and formed it into their own organization according to their own needs.

“Now we are on the verge of a great decision. Will democracy win out? Or will the establishment and the republic squash the desire of the people to govern themselves?”

“Pretty heavy words,” Dan said. He passed James a soda.

“The establishment doesn't really want us to govern ourselves.” James, sitting on a wooden box, took the soda and pulled the opener. It fizzed and spilled out. James had to take the first drink leaning over so it wouldn't get on his clothes.

“It's the liberals.” Dan sat on an old metal folding chair, the only one in the basement. He opened his own soda. It popped open and spewed until he stopped it with his finger. They both laughed. “Pretty warm, but there's a whole case here.” He took a drink. “They thought they had a foothold in the schools and the governments. Most of the doctors, especially the psychiatrists, are liberals.”

“Yeah.” James took another swig of the warm soda. “I read this Soviet textbook once about how they planned to infiltrate all the mental health organizations in the States and literally drive the citizens insane by getting them all hooked on drugs of one kind or another.”

“Yeah. Those liberals are in all the colleges preaching socialism and communism. You know that China is pouring millions of dollars into the country to support liberal candidates? Read it on a back page of the Wall Street Journal.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

James and Dan turned their faces towards the radio that sat on a little table against the dirty concrete brick wall. James wanted to lean back, but didn't like the dirt and cobwebs, so he rested his arms on his knees. They listened to more of Maxwell's speech.

“No one can be free when he is attached to the land. Owning land feeds covetousness and selfishness. It gives you a sense of being one's own boss, cutting off any connection to your neighbor. You don't feel any obligation towards him. But when a community comes together, like they have all across these United States, and you share the land in common ownership, when you work the land together and build your homes together and build up your industries on that land, there is a connection to your neighbor, a brotherhood which binds neighbors in common causes.

“When a person joins the NPU, he joins something more than a fraternity, he joins an ideology that has one mind and one heart focused on one cause, and that is the freedom, happiness, and prosperity for all.”

“He got that right,” Dan said as he finished off his soda. “Tom said that Susan is coming to bring us some ham sandwiches.”

“That sounds pretty good. My stomach is starting to growl.” James rolled his soda between his hands. A lot of clapping came from the radio. “It's about time for the news.” He leaned over and turned the dial to another station. “Maybe they'll tell us some more about Maxwell.”

“I hear he's running for president, even in jail.” Dan wiped his hands on his pants while looking around for a rag.

“Yeah. It seems like nothing gets him down.”

“Here it is,” Dan said, adjusting the antenna to get rid of some of the crackle.

“James Maxwell,” said the important sounding newscaster, “is being moved to a secure location, presumably a federal prison. On location is Miles Stedroff.”

“Mr. Maxwell!” Stedroff called out. “Do you have any comments?”

“Yes, I have!” shouted Maxwell with an FBI agent holding each arm. “The government impounds the leaders and representatives of the NPU, but like weeds, they will grow back. You take one down, another pops up to take its place. You can't destroy the democracy that is taking shape across this beautiful country.”

“You'd never have guessed,” James said to Dan, “that little Harold would take my place as police chief.”

“That scruffy little guy that used to go around with what's-his-name?” Dan squinted.

“Gramps.”

“Harold and Gramps.” Dan chuckled. “People used to think they were the clowns of the town. Now look at Harold. Cold sober and a serious contender. Turned out to be quite the leader.”

“Everyone looks up to old Harold.” James grinned and took his last drink.

“Hear your wife Willow is one of the new judges.” Dan scratched his beard.

“And my folks too.” James looked pensive. “Gosh. Sure wish I could see Willow right now.”

“Yeah.” Dan looked pensively into the hole at the top of his can before he crushed it and threw it across the basement. “I know what you mean.”

Three boring hours passed. The two woke up from dozing by a coded knock at the door. James and Dan became alert. If the code had been any different they would have grabbed their guns. Dan wasn't in hiding, he was there only to protect James. They looked up the stairs. It was Susan with a tray of sandwiches and water bottles.

“How are you two doing today?” she asked. She handed Dan the tray and stood there smiling.

“Our stomachs have been taking turns growling at each other,” Dan said, salivating at the pile in front of him.

“Thanks Susan,” James said, looking up. “Any word from Willow?”

“Oh, yes.” She took a letter from under her belt holding up her Levis and handed it to James. “There's instructions for tonight's raid also.”

As the two fugitives started gobbling up the sandwiches, Susan sauntered up the stairs throwing back, “See ya.”

James opened the letter with one hand. He didn't read out loud until Dan insisted with his mouth full. James stopped and swallowed.

“Dear James,

“I was sure glad to get your last letter. I love you. I think you're a great man. I wish

things were more peaceful around here. The marshals have closed down city hall. They won't let us vote or assemble. It looks like all our constitutional rights have been suspended again! Timmy kicked a marshal in the shin yesterday. It was all I could do to protect him and keep him from being dragged away. I had to be rescued by another marshal. They come in pairs, evidently.

“I wish you were here. I'm not a letter writer, so I'll be short. We are to meet at the water tower tonight at 11pm. I know you don't want me involved, but you know me. I can't stay out of a fight. I have my orders from Tom. I'll tell you tonight.

“Love and Kisses,

“Willow.”

Dan washed down a sandwich with some water from one of the water bottles.

“Let's go a little early. I'd like to see the wife for a few minutes.”

“Got to be careful. You know your house is being watched.” James stared at him through his eyebrows.

“I can sneak in through the basement.” Dan scarfed down the last sandwich.

James waited until his mouth was empty again. “The house is most likely bugged. They'll know it the moment you arrive.”

“I have to chance it.”

James thought as he finished off his lunch. “Tell you what. If we clear the area of marshals before hand, you'll be able to see your wife ... at least for a few minutes.”

“That's all it'll take,” Dan chuckled.

James smiled. He took a drink and turned on the radio again. News would be on soon.

* * *

Sam, Jeff, and Henry were contacted through Susan and Willow. They had been the ones who helped Michael and Dan arrest the police a couple of years ago. They were ordered to clear the area around Dan's house of all federal marshals before 10:30pm. Dan and James approached the house from the back. After a look around, Dan entered the back door. When Ruby saw him poking his head out of the kitchen door, she froze. He put his finger up to his lips to tell her to be quiet. She raced over to him and they embraced in the dark. She went back into the living room and turned out the lights, then she took him upstairs where he peeked in on the kids. They went into the master bedroom.

James waited outside with his hands in his pockets. The air was a bit chilly, and he only had a thin coat. He heard some rustling of the bushes, grabbed his gun, and ducked down behind the cement stairs.

“Pssst!” he heard.

“James,” someone whispered loudly. “It's Sam. We got rid of the marshals.”

“Git over here,” James commanded, irritated that his cover might be compromised.

Sam came out of the bushes and squatted down beside James.

“What did you do with them?” James whispered.

“They're all in jail.” Sam grinned.

“That's going to stir up a hornet's nest.” James frowned, trying not to laugh. He had heard of the arrest of the policemen of the town.

“They're not in the public jail.” Sam chuckled.

“Where are they?” James's face turned red.

“They're in the basement of the Rose City precinct.”

James took a breath and let it out slowly. “Well, at least you didn't slit their throats.”

“We thought about it.”

Dan came out. “Let's go. Hi, Sam.”

* * *

A group of constables met in several locations throughout the city. Dan and James met with Susie, Willow, Sam, Jeff and Henry under the water tower above Snob Hill.

“Where's Tom?” James asked Willow.

“He'll be here,” she said, giving him a peck on the cheek. “He' meeting with other constables. He said for us to wait and keep out of sight.”

“How's Timmy?” James tried to grab her and give Willow a hug.

“No time and not the place.” Willow stepped back. “Timmy's fine and full of spunk still. He keeps asking where you are.”

James grabbed Willow and pulled her up close. He felt a bulge pressing against his abdomen. His jaw dropped.

“I didn't want to tell you yet,” she said. “Didn't want you to get nervous.”

“You shouldn't be out here!”

“See what I mean?” Willow grinned.

“It's too dangerous.” James put his hands on his hips in a gesture of authority.

“I feel the same way about you.” She poked her finger hard into his chest.

Tom Paine came over the hill and joined the group. James and Willow let go of each other and turned to listen.

“All right,” Tom panted, out of breath from running from one group to another.

“Here's your orders. We're all sick of these marshals. We are going to send a message to the federal government they can understand. We will not be pushed around and be denied our constitutional rights. We are going to exercise our authority and protect our citizens. Tonight we arrest the federal marshals and put them all in jail ... just like we did the police.”

“They'll send in the troops again,” James assured him.

“Be what it may.” Tom put his hands on his hips and took a deep breath. “We will protect our citizens at any cost.”

“What about Rose City?” Willow asked. “They're a bit trigger happy.”

“They promised me they would only protect themselves. They won't come out with guns blazing. Their words. They said they will be peaceful if the marshals will be. I told them to do it quietly. We'll see.”

* * *

The soft new beat and voice of Paul McCartney singing *Always* drifted down the

stairs and settled into the lowest parts of the basement where James stood peering out a narrow window at a row of houses. If he would have had someone with him, it would have been a large seven foot rabbit by the name of Harvey, and he would have commented on the mood, “Oh, so pleasant.”

The plum and apricot trees were in bloom. Green was coming back to the trees ever so slowly. People hadn't started mowing their lawns yet. The air was cool, and the hyacinths and violets were popping up in all the yards. He thought he would go out in the night and pick a handful of violets to put in some sugar to give to Willow for a present.

He sat down on a couch that opened up into a futon and let his thoughts wander. The National Guard had taken over the town again. They had looked for him and the other leaders who had to keep shifting locations so as not to be found. He knew the Guard sent two of his buddies, Cord and Priestly, to arrest him for desertion. He couldn't go back to the Guard now. They called for him; he hadn't replied, and now he was reported as AWOL. He sighed. He trusted his friends. He believed they wouldn't turn him in. Willow got a message to him. Cord and Priestly wanted to see him. He had thought about it. Yes. They could see him. So he waited. Would they turn him in? He would chance it. If they did, it didn't matter. He would either escape or face the consequences depending upon opportunity.

He had sworn to uphold the Constitution and the People's Proclamation. It didn't occur to him that the two would someday be in conflict. Of course, if it came to a choice, he would always side with the Constitution. But he believed in the democracy that had

been set up on a local level. That was basic. It was his constitutional right to be governed by the vote of the people and to contribute to that vote, to determine his own political and religious course. Let the Federal government be what it will, the local government had to be independent and have an influence on the Federal through representation.

What he had against the Feds was that they wanted to be in control of the people at a local level, and that just rubbed him the wrong way. That's why he had stood up for these people in this town. They were fighting to rule themselves in their own way, and the NPU was fighting to have it remain so. Sure, it was a socialism of sorts, but they wanted to protect people's rights in a way as to wipe away poverty and the rule of the super rich. I suppose, he thought, that taking away property rights, that is, land ownership, whether by individuals, corporations, or governments, was just the scalpel that would cut away at that cancer, poverty and the privileges of the super rich.

The next step in the process was to do away with money and give everyone a Federal credit card which required only one thing, that a person have a job. It might come to pass that the basic necessities of life, food, clothing, and shelter, would become a constitutional right. Banks would be turned into counting houses, keeping track of everything that was bought and sold, as it were. The Federal government would pretend to pay everyone's bills by this record keeping. The question was, was there a clear cut line between this socialism and communism? If you meant the dialectic materialism type of communism, where there was only the state controlling the people with none of those personal freedoms assured by the Constitution, then he could see a definite line. The

NPU did not believe in a government that controlled the people, only in the people controlling the government. They believed in a weak centralized government so that the locals could determine their own course. As things were shaping up, there didn't seem to be a clear separation in his mind between socialism, communism, and capitalism. All the “isms” were merging.

* * *

James heard someone talking outside. He rose and put his face up to the window. He saw Cord and Priestly wearing their green camouflage khakis, walking up to the door with Susan, his contact with the outside world. She knocked on the door and introduced them to Mrs. Quigley, the owner, who let them in.

James took a deep breath and climbed the stairs. He didn't have Susan give a coded knock this time. He opened the basement door into the hallway. The dark wood floor reflected the outside light and the images of the people coming towards him.

“This way,” Susan was heard to say. Her voice and the footsteps of the three echoed through the hall.

Cord and Priestly stopped before the figure of their old friend. They smiled, reached out their hands for a handshake, but James grabbed both of them and they all hugged each other, while drilling James with questions.

“What's you doin'?” “You takin' care of yourself?” “You've gained weight!” “I hear you're married!” “What's she like?” “You keepin' fit?” “Where you hidin' yourself?”

Susan took them into the sitting room.

They sat in a circle in chairs facing each other.

“You comin' back to the Guard?” “My, it's hard to find you.” “We thought you were missing in action, Man!” “What hold do these people have on you, anyway?”

James asked, “Hey, where's Turley?”

“Man,” Cord answered, “he got transferred. We're not the old group we used to be.”

“Too bad.” James paused and looked at the two. “We were one bad platoon, huh?”

They didn't answer.

“Huh?” James insisted.

“Yeah, Man,” Cord answered, folding his hands together and rubbing them. “We were one bad platoon.”

Priestly spoke up. “What are we going to be like now? You're the platoon leader.”

“We need ya back, Man,” Cord almost pleaded.

“These are my people in this town.” James looked down at the floor and then over to Susan.

“Yeah,” she said. “He's the police chief now. How can he be your platoon leader and head of the police?”

They didn't acknowledge her presence. Cord answered her question by directing his words to James.

“Colonel,” Cord said, “that's why you need to be walking the streets right now with us. You see, there is no police chief now. No police. We are the police, and we need our

leader.”

“Why, I thought you came to arrest me.” James grimaced.

“Oh, Man,” Cord pleaded. “We didn't come to arrest you. The man said he would drop all charges.”

Priestly smiled. “We only get to arrest you if you **don't** come with us.”

“Oh,” remarked James, sticking out his chest. “Is that the way it is?”

“Yeah,” Cord said. “That's the way it is.”

James rose to his feet, taking off his shirt.

Cord and Priestly looked at each other and smiled. They took off their shirts. The three of them bent over and put their hands on their knees and stared at each other for a moment, then raced into a huddle where each one tried to wrestle the other two to the ground. There was a lot of grunting and sweating. Susan backed into a corner with a twisted expression on her face.

Mrs. Quigley, hearing the ruckus, grabbed her broom and rushed into the sitting room. She started hitting the backs of the wrestlers, who were moving the furniture around, knocking down tables and chairs. When they realized what she was doing, they started laughing and patting each other on their backs. Mrs. Quigley, confused, asked, “What are you doing, rough housing in a decent person's sitting room and tearing up the furniture?”

As Cord, Priestley, and James straightened up the room, they apologized between spurts of laughter. When Susan confronted James and asked, “You aren't serious about

going back with these guys are you?"

James put his hand on her shoulder and pushed a piece of paper into her blouse and down her back. "Susan, tell Willow I'll be home for dinner tonight. I'll be bringing some friends over. I know where my place is. It will be better for the town if I'm out there among them instead of hiding around here and there. I think I can do a lot more good in the Guard."

"Well, I hope you know what you're doing." Susan turned away from James wondering about the paper now making her back itch and went over to Mrs. Quigley. "I'm sorry for the mess, Ma'am. Thank you for taking care of James on such short notice."

"That's quite all right," Mrs. Quigley said. "James was no trouble at all. It's these confounded soldiers that's makin' the mess." She shook her broom at Cord and Priestly who raised their hands as if surrendering.

"We're sorry, Ma'am." Priestley said. "James is an old friend. It was just an automatic reaction among buddies."

"Well, you just take your automatic reactions outside, if you please." Mrs. Quigley pressed her lips together into a small ring like a Cheerio, her eyebrows frowning as hard as she could.

"I'll get my gear and meet you outside," James called to the soldiers as he left the room.

"Sorry," Cord called back. "We have to help you." He looked at the little lady.

“And then we will be out of the house.”

“Okay,” she said angrily.

“I’m sorry,” Susan said as she left.

* * *

Susan watched the three drive away in an armored Hummer. Feeling something scratching her back, she reached down her blouse and pulled out a wad of paper. It was that note from James. It read, “Still acting Police Chief. Talk to Willow. Get notes to me. I’ll be undercover.”

“Hmmm,” Susan said to herself. “He’s still with us, and in a strategic place.”

That night Susan found Tom in a warehouse.

“... and he won’t be throwing suspicion on himself,” Susan said excitedly. “I’m sure he’ll be visiting Willow often, giving her notes. I can be go-between and give Willow notes from you which she will deliver to James.”

“I know,” Tom said with a haggard expression. “It will be quite the espionage.”

Tom thought a moment. “Let him sweat a bit. I’ve got to get a message out to Brown. They’re looking for him too. Since President McGuire declared martial law over the whole nation, communication has become difficult and slow. We are a conquered people in our own nation.”

“Sort of like the Native Americans, huh?” Susan smiled as she enjoyed the excitement of being a spy.

“Yet,” Tom said looking quite pensive, “we are the majority.” He peered into

Susan's eyes. "Don't let this go to your head. Take care of yourself. There's no one out there who can."

She gave him a hug. "I love you, Daddy."

"I love you too, Sugar." He took her by the shoulders. "Go softly."

She knew there was a lot of meaning in those words. When she was a little girl and bullied by the other girls at school because she was chubby, Tom would tell her to walk softly. He explained it as not judging others because that would fill her with fear. And being without fear, she could see clearly what to do and say that would keep her out of harm's way. She did that now by pretending she wasn't a spy. She felt more alive and awake, paying attention to the present moment, like a wild animal on alert.

* * *

Willow walked to the co-op to get some groceries and ran into Susan. Willow didn't like the girl, but because she was Tom's daughter she was interested in her and greeted her cordially.

"Hi Sue," she said as she grabbed a shopping cart. "You staying home for the summer, I see."

"Yes," Susan responded, pulling her shopping cart alongside. "I thought I'd help out at the farm and here at the co-op. Dad's away on a needed vacation. I guess he wants me to learn some responsibility or something."

They moved up and down the aisles, picking things off the shelves together and discussing their food value.

“I heard James has gone off and joined the Guard again,” Susan said nonchalantly.

Willow strained to keep a straight face. She hadn't heard anything for a couple of days about her husband and wondered if what Susan was saying was true or just small talk, but because there was a military presence in the store, she went along with her. “Yes, you just can't keep a soldier at home.”

“Maybe,” Susan said raising her eyebrows, “he will come home for a visit. I understand he was stationed here before.”

“Yes, he was. That's how we met.” Willow gripped the bar of the shopping cart hard as she tried to control her racing heart. It was pretty evident by the tone of her voice that Susan was trying to tell her something. “It would be nice to have him stationed here again.”

“Wouldn't it be nice to have company tonight?” Susan emphasized the word “tonight” and winked.

They both looked around as they left one aisle and turned into another. No one was looking in their direction. Susan put up three fingers and mouthed “tonight,” putting her hand on Willow's. Willow had to hold her breath to keep from exploding with excitement.

* * *

Willow had picked up a roast at the co-op and now placed it in a pot with some carrots and potatoes around it. Putting the lid on the pot, she placed it on the top shelf of the oven and used the oven door to slide it in. She couldn't stop her heart from racing as she made the final preparations for the three expected guests, one of whom would be her

beloved.

She didn't know if she was angry or elated. James had been on the run for so long, and now she got that cryptic message from Susan to expect him tonight and that he had rejoined the National Guard. How could he? She would like to bop him and kiss him at the same time. Maybe she would pulverize his face and then kiss it to make it better. But how could she blame him? He was a professional soldier. He would be for the rest of his life. But to turn his back on the NPU? She couldn't forgive him. And she loved him. Her feelings were so mixed up.

Timmy arrived home from school and said, "Yum! It smells good. What's the big deal?"

Willow covered her face with her apron and ran out of the room into the bedroom.

Timmy followed her. He saw her sitting on the bed weeping and shuddering.

"Gee, Mom."

She grabbed him and gave him a hug. With his face pressed to her breast, she said, "I just miss James."

"I understand," he said, returning her hug.

Willow got up, wiped her eyes, patted Timmy on the head and went in to set the table. When she set it for five people, Timmy started jumping up and down.

"James is coming home," he yelled. "James is coming home!"

Willow didn't say anything. She just smiled.

* * *

It was time for the news. Willow walked in from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron and grabbed the remote.

“Aw, not the news!” Timmy complained.

“You might be too young to understand it,” Willow remarked, “but I need to know what's going on with the nation.”

With a background of cacophony, the newscaster announced, “The country is alarmed. Ted Bradley, head of the AFL-CIO, has called for a national strike. Factories and stores throughout the whole nation are closing down as millions of workers walk. The nation is at a standstill.”

Chills ran up and down Willow's spine and froze her jaw. She wished she had some Valium or whiskey. Her emotions boiled. She sat down on the couch. It was too much for her to take. She covered her face and bawled.

Timmy scooted over to her, said, “Mommy,” and put his arms around her expanding tummy. He put his head down and tried to hear the baby's heartbeat.

* * *

There was a knock at the door. Men's jovial voices could be heard on the other side. Willow answered it, having just put eye drops in to hide the fact that she had been crying. She met James with a hug and kiss, but with a lot more solemnity than she wanted.

“You've heard the news, I see,” James said, giving her another hug. Then seeing how big she was getting, said, “How are you and the baby coming along?”

“Everything is okay,” she smiled.

Timmy stood behind Willow until James called his name. Then he came and hugged James's legs. James tousled his hair and lifted him up, introducing Cord and Priestley.

James got a fist in his ribs from Willow. She whispered, “Why didn't you tell me?”

He answered in a whisper, “Because this is what happens when I do.” They smiled at each other and he pointed to the table with a wave of his hand. “You got my message. Don't complain.”

“But why?” She turned to the other two soldiers and said, “Have a seat. I'll get the food.”

“It's complicated,” James said as he followed her to the kitchen.

“It looks like,” Cord said to Priestley as the two lovers talked in whispers in the kitchen, “O'Reilly warned his wife we were coming. Look at this spread.”

“Yeah,” Priestley said. “It was probably this Susan. She's the one who knew where he was.”

“Better keep an eye on her.” Cord winked.

When Willow and James came back Cord said, “And it looks like congratulations are in order.”

“Thank you,” Willow said curtly, putting a hand on her stomach.

“You can use the extra money James will be getting,” Priestley commented, “now that he's back with the Guard.”

“We don't need any,” Willow said, peering down, “thank you.”

As the dinner progressed and everyone was enjoying the roast, carrots, potatoes, and left-over chicken and rice, Cord said, “The Guard has been spread pretty thin, and now this strike happens.”

“How much do you think the NPU has to do with it?” Priestley nodded at James.

“I think they acted on their own.” James took a bite of roast.

“How's that?” Priestly asked.

“I think,” James swallowed and took a drink, “that they just wanted to show who's in charge. They saw how powerful the NPU is and decided to strut their tail feathers. It's not against the government they're showing off, it's against us, I mean, the NPU.”

“I know what you mean,” Cord said. “You still associate your self with this NPU. But as long as you is in the Guard, you see, you is in the Guard. Any other alliance and you is in front of a court martial.”

“Yeah,” James complained, “I know.”

“But what are you fellas going to do?” Willow asked. She took a drink to wash down some potatoes. “You have the whole nation upset.”

Cord set his glass down hard and looked around with disgust. “It's not up to us. We just follow orders. Our commander-in-chief is calling this one. I wonder what he's going to do.”

“Yeah,” James added. “What's good old McGuire going to do with this one? Next election may be his last.”

“Will be his last,” Priestley said. “He's been in twice already.”

“Oh, yeah,” James said, stuffing his mouth with roasted carrots. “I forgot. Time sure does fly. But I'm thinking both parties are about to lose out. This national situation is going to bust both of them.”

“Of course,” Cord interjected, “President McGuire may opt to stay in office for awhile. At least as long as he thinks the NPU is a threat to the nation.”

“The United Nations won't allow it,” Willow objected. “We'll appeal to them.”

“I doubt, little darlin’” Priestly said, trying to imitate John Wayne, “they have the power to do anything.”

“We'll see.” Willow stabbed her roast in frustration.

In the background, the weatherman announced a new hurricane called Delilah forming and entering into the Gulf of Mexico.

Chapter Seven

Ed Murphy was an unofficial leader of the NPU. Being free of such entanglements as being voted into an office of some kind, he was not a target of the government. Yet, the NPU in the area centered around him. He was the one who allowed his store to be the starting place of organizing the neighborhood. He never joined the NPU, but he allowed them to use his store to form a co-op. Now, because of the absence of city leaders, everyone came to him for advice. He became, unofficially, the acting mayor and head of the co-op. He was the one that made sure the constables visited their families and saw to it that the poor of the city got the basic necessities they needed. He even headed Bible study groups so people became familiar with Common Law. So when hurricane Delilah hit New Orleans, Ed was the first one to organize a relief squad and a convoy of trucks to rush to their aid.

* * *

Ruth Murphy turned on the news. Her husband Ed was going to be on the cable. Her hand trembled as she lifted the remote and pushed the “On” button. Her children, John, Ruth, Edmund, Clara, Seymour and little Darla, gathered around to see their dad on cable-TV.

The newscaster's voice could be heard in the background as the camera showed a convoy of ten semi's rolling down the highway passing trees covered with Spanish moss. “For several days now, convoys of trucks carrying medical supplies and emergency food,

water, clothing, and tents have been moving towards cities such as New Orleans and Mobil, Alabama, the hardest hit areas along the Gulf Coast. They came from as far away as Los Angeles on the west coast and New York City on the east coast. The first convoy was from a suburb of Chicago. It ran into a snag as National Guardsmen tried to halt the trucks only thirty miles from New Orleans. Most of the land was underwater, they said, and the Guard was doing all it could to rescue the stranded. We go to Ted Groberg at the NPU camp just outside of New Orleans. Ted?"

"Thank you, Martha McVeigh. We are talking now to Edward Murphy from the Chicago area." The camera zoomed out to include Ed on the screen.

"Ed, tell us what happened when you were stopped by the National Guard." Ted put his microphone up to Ed's face.

"Ted, we were flabbergasted," Ed began. Ruth Murphy had to calmly shush her children as they clapped and yelled watching their dad on the screen. "How could the Guard stop us when all we wanted was to assist? No begging would change their minds. Then I pleaded to any one of them who belonged to the NPU. A soldier came up to the officer in charge. An argument ensued, and the private was dragged away. We were amazed at this lieutenant's stubbornness. When we told him we were coming through, all the soldiers pointed their guns at us. I had the driver honk his horn. The NPU is always prepared. We didn't think we would have to confront the Guard, only looters, so we brought a small army with us. From each truck, five to ten armed men jumped out. There were about seventy-five armed men confronting fifteen National Guardsmen. To say the

least, they acquiesced. Then I asked all the Guardsmen that were NPU to join us. Three of them did. And so, here we are setting up a refugee camp, helping as many as we can.”

“Ed,” Ted continued, “are you aware of how many convoys are on their way coming from throughout the States to the rescue, going to coastal towns from Corpus Christi, Texas all the way to Tampa, Florida?”

Ed raised his eyebrows. “No, Ted. I don't know the details, only that the NPU is answering the call. We love our fellow Americans. The hurricane brought a lot of tornadoes that ravaged the South, and we have come to their aid. We help wherever we can.”

“Thank you Ed Murphy. And now, back to you, Martha.”

The camera returned to the desk of the national news with Martha McVeigh. “The nation is astounded by the response of the NPU. After President McGuire put the nation on alert and declared martial law, their leaders have been hounded and arrested. Their national congress has been suspended. Even as the unions came to their support, putting the nation at a standstill, they have overcome all obstacles to rescue our southern coast.”

Ruth turned off the cable-TV and sat on the couch, tucking her legs beneath her. The children raced away to play, all except six-year-old Darla who crawled up onto her mother's lap.

“Mommy,” Darla said dreamily, playing with her mother's curls, “when will Daddy come home?”

Ruth wished school would get back in session. The national strike affected the

teachers as well. She sighed. "It may be next month, little one."

"Will he be home by my birthday?" Darla lay her head on Ruth's breast.

"I hope so. I surely hope so."

* * *

Miss Aiken put a pan on the stove and poured in a can of minestrone soup. Then she thought, "Oh, I could have used the microwave." She turned on the burner and the small radio sitting on the windowsill. The newscaster told of the thousands of cars and buses arriving in Washington, D.C.

"People are coming to Washington to demand their constitutional rights and an end of martial law. National Guardsmen have been overwhelmed as roadblocks have been overturned. Tear gas and rubber bullets have not stopped the march as people of all political persuasions lined up along the National Mall to hear speakers with megaphones and microphones. They are rallying the people and demanding their civil rights. It was like this back in 1963 when the blacks had had enough. Now, the people of these United States, whether they belong to the NPU or not, have had enough as well. They want an end to martial law and to the strikes. The NPU want their constitutional rights to govern themselves."

Miss Aiken said aloud, "Good for them." She looked at the little kitten she had recently acquired at her feet. "I wish I were there."

* * *

"Where are you going?" Maggie asked, shocked that her husband had decided to

pack a suitcase.

“To Washington. That's where I'm needed.” He slapped some clothes and his shaving kit into the suitcase.

“You can't go. You have no way to get there. I can't go with you. I'm not prepared.” She had been washing dishes, heard the news and saw him run into the bedroom and grab his suitcase. He was making a lot of noise talking to himself. “I'm your wife. We are supposed to be in this together.”

“I love you, Maggie, but I also love my country.” He grabbed his suitcase off the bed and kissed her.

Maggie called after him as he ran out of the apartment and down the front stairs. “You can't just leave me! I won't be here when you get back.”

“What I have to put up with for love and country!” he said to himself as he slammed the outside door behind him.

Michael Beaty hitch-hiked to Washington. The only cars on the road were the ones going to the march, and if a car wasn't full, it found other hitch-hikers going their way.

* * *

Michael climbed the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and grabbed a megaphone from the next guy that sat down, who had spoken so long that he had lost his voice. He couldn't talk anymore, so he gladly gave it to him, nodding his head in permission to Michael.

“Mr. President, we demand our rights!” Michael started out. “We have a

constitutional right to govern ourselves. We the people ... we the people have established a government for the people, by the people and of the people. When in the course of human events, the government becomes so corrupt and self-serving as to pass laws that give rights to the rich and grind upon the faces of the poor, not representing the people, but only the special interest groups, when the laws are made by the minorities of this great land, and when monies are given to large corporations who fail so they can continue to have their parties and give each other millions of dollars in bonuses, patting each other on their backs for robbing the poor of their homes and jobs, when the rich manipulate the prices of essentials like oil and gasoline so they can line their pockets with gold, and when the invaders of our country are given more rights than those that live here legally or who come into this nation legally, when people are fed up by the high cost of living because of the selfishness of a handful of others who think it their right to govern, and when we are robbed of the power of the vote, not being able to elect our own representatives in lawful and legal assemblies, then I think it is our right to pull down that government and establish a new one based upon the constitution before it became corrupted by a congress who cares only about their own pocketbooks. We are tired of a congress who vote themselves a pay raise at the expense of the citizens of these United States.”

Michael noticed the cheering of the people below him, but he went on. “We the National People's Union have seen fit to vote into being another congress based in Philadelphia. We set up headquarters there. We ignored the congress in Washington. We

make fair laws and decide which laws we need to get rid of . We have been spending most of our time getting rid of unnecessary laws. We don't want the citizens of these United States to have to wade through a swamp bog of laws, so many that you just can't help breaking one of them and becoming a criminal. This congress in Washington has treated everyone as a criminal. They can't help it. They don't even know all the laws themselves. They make laws by the ton without regard to the rights of individuals like you and me. They make laws that turn people against each other. The courts are so backed up there is no justice anymore. 'Justice and liberty for all' has become a forgotten phrase.

“We of the National People's Union have regained a sence of sobriety. We have resurrected Common Law and common sense. Each community elects their own judges who judge according to common sense and the common good according to the vote of the people.

“ A lot of people accuse us of robing them of their property and the right to own property. But we only cut down the rich to make them equal to everyone else. We believe that all men are created equal, and we will pull down anyone or anything that raises one man above another. We wish that all men become rich. But it takes the responsibility of taking care of your neighbor. When land is owned by the community, and when the community votes together for the common good, when all the blessings of the earth are shared by everyone, then no one person is rich, and no one person is poor. Poverty vanishes.

“Lunch is free. It was always meant to be free. But some people want to horde the lunch and dole it out to people as they work for it. The basic necessities of life are or should be a right, a constitutional right for everyone. And until it is, there will always be poverty.

“Work needs to be enthroned and taught to our children as a necessity for life, liberty and happiness. It is a basic part of life and a right. We live to work, not work to live. Let me reiterate. Live to work, not work to live. Everything you can do, any service you can give, anything you can grow, manufacture or create, belongs to your neighbor, belongs to the common good. It is our duty as men to provide for our families by giving to our neighbor. It is our duty to help our neighbor by giving our labor voluntarily, without cost and without money. And it is our duty to give our produce and our creations to our neighbor without cost and without money. We can do away with money and base our economic foundation upon the labor of our hands. Think of what we can accomplish if we put our wits and our means together. What we can imagine, we can do. There are no limits. We can explore the Universe if we want. Money will not be a problem, only resources and time.”

Michael went on speaking for three hours until his voice gave out, and he handed the megaphone to someone else who corroborated everything he said. Someone gave him a bottle of water and a ham sandwich which he ate in gratitude.

Bands were playing all the national and political songs. People were shouting “Rights to the People” and variations on that theme. Speeches were given late into the

night. People camped in the National Mall. Some of the trucks going to help the suffering South took a detour into Washington to deliver food and water and toilets.

* * *

Meanwhile, President McGuire consulted with his advisers. Staring out the White House window he wondered about the noisy crowd demonstrating outside. He turned and said, "Maybe I made a mistake, General Whitehead, but I made a promise to America to uphold the Constitution. So did you. We are walking on eggs here."

The General stood beside him smoking a very thick cigar. The president tried to avoid the smoke coming from the general's mouth as he spoke. "You're going to lose the election if you keep going in your current direction, sir. *If* we have another election. In any case, you have to show you are the friend of the American people because over fifty percent of the people now belong to that infamous "P-U" group."

"I have to do what is best for the citizens of these United States." The president put his hands behind his back and continued to stare out the window.

Secretary of State McMurdie suggested, "You would lose the election if you went up against the NPU unless you can win them back to the party."

"Under martial law," the president addressed the window. "there is no election. I would have to consider that."

National Security Advisor Monroe put in his two cents. "If there were an election, you would lose. Everyone's angry."

"Yes, they are." The president thought a moment and said, "I never agreed to be a

popular president, only a good president. I have to hold this nation together. I feel like the father of a bunch of teenagers ... rebellious teenagers!”

“The problem is,” McMurdie said, folding his hands under his chin, “you can't invite the NPU people into just one party. They have to come back into a two party system, and you don't represent both parties. Having to deal with three separate parties is the killer. It's too complicated.”

“If you bring back elections,” Monroe commented, “the two party system is doomed. The Democrats and Republicans will have to merge. They won't want to do that. It will be a catastrophe. Everything will fall apart.”

The president pointed his finger back to Monroe. “That's what I'm thinking. I called for martial law to hold everything together, but it's bursting out at the seams.”

The president looked at the cabinet sitting around the oval table. “I don't hear any of the rest of you making any suggestions.”

The Secretary of Education raised an index finger and said, “You have to bring back elections and let the people decide.”

He asked several others and they agreed. One of them with a large sharp nose and white curly hair said, “I think you are too harsh on the NPU. Look what they are doing for the decimated South. They didn't hesitate to send help. We couldn't have done it so fast. And ... they didn't let the National Guard get in the way.”

McGuire fumed. “Are you an NPU member?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How in the hell did you sneak in?”

“I changed parties recently.”

President McGuire stared out the window at the flag whipping in the wind outside. Suddenly the wind changed, and the flag flew in the opposite direction. “Political winds, gentlemen,” the president announced, “are blowing the nation in a different direction.” After a long drawn out argument, President McGuire acquiesced and rescinded martial law. Then he got on the bandwagon and challenged the NPU to a duel with TV ads.

* * *

Without martial law, most of the NPU leaders were released from jail. When Maxwell was set free, he was accompanied by a hoard of reporters swamping him with questions.

“What are you going to do now that you are released ?”

“Is the NPU Congress defunct, or are you going to resurrect it?”

“Now that elections are allowed again, are you going to run for president?”

The questions went on until Maxwell was backed up against his black limousine that had come to pick him up. He leaned against it to answer the mob.

“I have felt the call of the political wagon. I've heard the band playing my song and have seen the eagle flying overhead screeching my name. I see the rallies ahead and want to breathe the air of the crowds. I call upon President McGuire and challenge him and all other contenders to a debate. It's time for the tournament and the banners, the lights, and the winds of chance. And no, I am not going to resurrect the NPU Congress. We have

enough support to elect an overthrow in the present Congress. Then we will bring forth our own agenda and free the people of these United States.”

* * *

Amanda watching Maxwell on her cable-TV sighed and ran her slender fingers through her red, curly hair. She would get to see her friend and lover once more before he hit the road again. She was hungry for his embrace and could just eat him up. He had called her on his limousine phone. He would satisfy that hunger tonight. She also had some ideas he could use in his campaign.

Later that night, after making love, Maxwell asked Amanda, “Do you want to marry me?”

“Huh?” She asked, surprised.

“According to the articles in the People's Declaration, darling,” he leaned over and kissed her forehead, “we are already married. It is natural law. When the elections are over, all we have to do is to sign a paper. You could declare it right now if you wanted to. I am obligated to support you. So it will be for all those couples who are now living together. They will all wake up in the morning and find they are married.”

Amanda turned over. “You like to spoil things.”

He slapped her bottom.

“Okay, you asked for it.” She grabbed her pillow and began attacking him. They spent the next five minutes in a pillow fight and then made love again.

* * *

James Maxwell and Amanda Pug both radiated as they stepped up to the stage at the dinner party. He wore a black shiny tuxedo, and she was poured into a purple ankle length dress with short puffy sleeves. The top bared her collar bones. Each round table below hosted big business, movie stars and a few congressmen.

When the ten thousand dollar dinner got underway, Maxwell stood up to the microphone. “Don't worry folks, money doesn't embarrass me.” His audience laughed. “It's all a means to an end, and I hope it will be an end to money. If I get elected, I will relieve all of you of your pocketbooks.” Everyone clapped. “I'm no ordinary socialist. I don't believe in a government controlling the people, but a government controlled by the people.” More clapping. “People shouldn't have to suffer, go without work or without the means to support their families. People shouldn't have to live on the streets.” The audience cheered. “We have all had a dream since the sixties of getting rid of poverty. We've tried one program after another, and another and another and another. Nothing has worked. We have thrown money into projects, tried education, put money into people's pockets and into the pockets of businesses. We've taxed and taxed and taxed, and yet, the budget has skyrocketed. We've given business incentives enough. Unemployment continues to grow.” One senator bellowed, “Here! Here!”

Maxwell continued. “I'm not going to say anything about the president or other contenders. I believe in a clean campaign. I know they will be talking about me for sure.” Everyone clapped. “And just to dissolve any hint of scandal, Amanda here is my lover and my wife ... my common law wife ... not according to man's laws, but according to

the laws of nature, and we are obligated to each other through common consent.” Some people laughed and clapped.

“Now, I'm going to talk tonight about my principles and how best to solve the nation's problems. Let's start with unemployment. The bills I am going to push through Congress will not just stimulate growth in industry, but will get men back to work.” There was loud applause. “It is simple common sense. If a person has been laid off from work due to financial concerns, let him go back to work. If he has been downsized, let him go back to work. The government will pay for it. That's just a way of saying bills will be taken care of. There won't be any money. His former employer doesn't have to worry about a thing.

“We need to adopt the Asian philosophy, 'We don't fire anyone.' ” Cheers from the audience. “We find work for everyone in the company. We are not or should not consider ourselves individuals, but part of a community ... and in the United States, a greater community.” More cheering and clapping. “The once and future king of Judea said to love your neighbor. But it's natural in man to do so. A child has to be taught to be prejudiced and selfish. We are not born that way. It is only natural to support your neighbor and your neighborhood.” There was a loud whistle or two.

“I propose a national employment office where people go looking for people who are unemployed instead of sitting around waiting for them to come to the office. What I propose is nothing more than the care being taken by the constables of the NPU. They are trained to aid a certain number of families. We need to get every town and city organized

so that every family and single person's needs are met by the visiting constables. They not only protect their life and limb, but their livelihood.

“Now, you thought I was going to set up a new bureaucracy, didn't you?” Everyone laughed. “Well, that's not the case. All the states can breathe easy because I'm not trying to take their organizations away. I don't want to mess with state governments, except to pull the plug on money. They will have to find resources the way I have had to do. Ask and you shall receive. Let everyone go out and work with their hands and give to each other. That's the basic law I propose, and the NPU is organized in such a way as to make that possible. Everyone can have the resources they need. All we have to do is share. We will all be rich with no poor among us.” Everyone there cheered except a few representatives from other governments. They looked at each other and wondered how this was going to impact the world market.

Maxwell next talked about natural resources and then about world trade. He liked the idea of real trade where countries exchanged goods for goods and services for services without exchanging money or gold. He said that gold should be given to industry to use as a metal, that we should have no standard of currency except the labor of our hands.

The meeting went well for Maxwell and his supporters. The news media called him a hypocrite. He was taking money for his campaign and yet preached against its use. When asked by reporters why this was so, he said, “I have not yet convinced the news media to work without pay.” They all laughed.

That night, there was a lot of name calling by the president and others of the two national political parties. Maxwell was silent and kept to his black limousine and his secluded apartment, making love and laughing with his natural wife.

* * *

Maxwell went from one rally to the next. He traveled to the Southern States where he was welcomed like a hero carried on the shoulders of the crowds. He went to the industrial north where he promised a lifetime of work with no layoffs. He visited the western ranges where he participated in rodeos to the consternation of The Secret Service. He enjoyed himself where ever he went and partied, got drunk, and partied again. The news media painted him as a wine 'biber. In all the debates he attended, he pointed out the foibles and weaknesses in each candidate's programs to save the nation, and boldly told of the progress the NPU was having in every aspect of that nation's life and livelihood. And each night, he went home to his wife and made love. By the time the campaign was over, she was spent and had to take a vacation. She went on a world cruise with what was left of the campaign funds. She had had enough. As for Maxwell, when it came time to vote in the primaries or vote in the national elections, he kept on campaigning. It consumed his life and helped him stay out of a lonely bedroom. Maybe, he thought, she would come back after her vacation to be the first socialist lady in the White House.

* * *

“You hear that, Maggie?” Michael poked his head into the bathroom where Maggie

was taking a shower. "I'm out of a job. The NPU Congress has been canceled."

"Maybe you can get your old job back at the high school, and we could go home," she yelled from underneath the spray while rinsing the shampoo out of her hair.

"Nothing doing," he said grinning. "We will be going back home, but only so I can run for the district. We have grassroots meetings to go to. I'm going to Congress. The real congress. The NPU is going to swamp the place. We're going to mop up and take over."

Maggie came out of the shower dripping wet and reached for her towel. "Well, you seem all excited, but you can count me out."

"Oh, honey, you said that last time. You might as well get used to it. I know where my place lies now." Michael reached into a little basket on the counter near the sink and grabbed a bobby pin. "I see a blackhead right next to your scar on your back."

Maggie turned her back to him and he put the loop of the bobby pin over the blackhead and scrapped gently. A large black looking thing oozed out. He put it on his finger and showed it to her. "Look. It's not a blackhead at all. It's a piece of stitching that never dissolved."

"After all these years," she said, wrapping her hair with the towel. "I was sixteen when they cut my back open and straightened my spine."

"Huh." Michael left the bathroom and went into the bedroom and started packing.

* * *

Michael didn't do much campaigning, not like Maxwell did. He put his name up all over the district and went to a few grassroots meetings and a couple of debates on cable-

TV. When it was time for the vote, his name was on the ballot, and that was all he cared about. He was surprised, excited and gung-ho when he found out that he won.

* * *

Maxwell stood in front of the cable-TV and watched the numbers climb. He was surrounded by his constituents who all yelled when the figures reached over fifty percent. As the moon rose and the night became the length of a tight-rope, people yelled out the news.

“We got Washington!”

“We got Georgia!”

“We got New York!”

With that shout, the whole room shouted.

The TV commentators named most of the states. It was a landslide.

Usually the board showing all the states would fill up with two colors, red for the Republicans and blue for the Democrats. But this time, a third color was added. It was green for the NPU. Most of the states had turned green, and when all the excitement was over, the room was filled with shouts of congratulations. There was a lot of kissing and hugging, and Maxwell waltzed with all the girls, dancing all over the room as people made way. Fireworks filled the night sky as everyone stayed glued to the cable-TV to see what representatives and senators were being elected. Just as suspected, the NPU also filled up Congress. There was only a handful of Democrats and Republicans, just enough to make a stink.

* * *

Back home in the old community, Maggie and Michael packed their bags again. This time Maggie was silent but proud of her husband. He was legal now, a real congressman. He had been right. They wouldn't live in Washington D.C. proper, just outside, maybe in Arlington. It may be hard to find a white neighborhood though. On the other hand, maybe a stylish hotel would be nice. He wouldn't have to commute to work each day. When the bill to end money passes, she thought, they would go on a vacation somewhere in the South, and they could work on their genealogy.

The bill did pass. The Bank of America was turned into an accounting house where accounts payable and accounts receivable were there just to watch what people bought and sold so they could catch people who hoarded food and things. The IRS, the Federal Reserve, and Social Security were dismantled. There was no need for them. Although the Federal Reserve was kept going until all dollar bills and coins were collected and destroyed. The coins were to be melted down and the metal given back to industry. That meant there was a lot of copper and silver available. From now on, people got paid in credits according to how many hours they worked and how many wives and children they had to support.

Chapter Eight

Mable Robinson went to the door and picked up the mail. She had spotted the mail carrier from the kitchen bay-window.

She called out, "Thank you, Sandra," as she shut the door.

Going through the envelopes, most of them junk mail, she spotted one that stood out. It had a government seal on it. She sat back down at the table where she had been going over her e-mail. She opened the odd envelope and almost shouted. Her arms shook with excitement.

"Fred! Fred!" she called out to her husband. "Come down here right now. The credit card has come."

Fred, a tall, two hundred and fifty pound bald wrestler in a blue bathrobe, coming from the bathroom, slowly maneuvered down the stairs. He smelled of a cool aftershave made of menthol. When he got to the table, he tousled Mable's short curly red hair and bent down and kissed her.

"Let me see," he said. "Is there one for each of us?"

"No." She raised the card up to let him see. "There's only one."

"Humph," he grunted. He looked at the blue card with the eagle, its wings covering a circle of stars. A number was embossed across the bottom, and on the back, a place to sign it.

"You have a pen?" he asked. "I'll sign the thing."

Mable handed him a ball point pen. He leaned over and signed it. "Here."

"I guess we will have to take turns using it," she said wistfully, investigating it, turning it over and back again. Then she waved it back and forth slowly as if she didn't know what to do with it.

"Put it in your purse." He smiled and said, "I'm going back upstairs and get dressed, then we're going out for breakfast."

"Maybe we can stop at the store afterwards." Her eyes followed him up the stairs.

He yelled back, "I wonder if you can use it on the bus?"

"Probably not yet."

* * *

When Mable and Fred got to the restaurant, they had to park a block away. The parking lot was full, and there was a small line forming at the door. When they got in line, another couple came up behind them. It was the Mercer's, a couple nearing their retirement years. Albert was as short as his wife and round with little wisps of hair on his head. Phyllis's curls were really a wig. She kept her hair short after her cancer. She didn't want to bother with her hair anymore.

"Hello, Fred." Albert greeted them with a handshake.

"Hi, Mable," Phyllis said with a smile. "It sure is hot today."

"Isn't it though," Mable said, "and so early in the day."

"Well, Fred," Albert laughed and slapped his friend on the back. "It looks like you're here for the same reason we are."

“Looks like everyone got their credit card today.” Fred grinned.

“Yep,” Albert said confidently. His face changed to a more serious expression.

“Hope they have something left on the menu when we get in there.”

“I'm sure they will,” Mable smiled back at the two. “They are backed up by the NPU now.”

“Oh, Honey,” Phyllis said. “That don't mean a thing. Why, I imagine everyone will be buying so much at first that somebody's bound to run out of something.”

That was a sobering thought. The two couples had to chew on that one for a while and then went on to talk about other things cheerfully.

By the time they were seated, they were quite hungry. The waitress handed them their menus, they hunted for the items each of them liked, but then they started seeing other things, especially Fred. He wanted more than perhaps his stomach could hold. When the waitress came back, they were out of waffles, they were out of apple juice, they were out of steaks, but they could have potatoes in any fashion, only two eggs each (Fred had wanted four), and if they hurried, they could have some bacon. There was plenty of coffee.

After the two couples had their breakfast, they went shopping together and found that all the stores were also crowded. The Mercer's got tired by mid-afternoon and had to go home. The Robinsons fought the crowds one more hour before they quit.

* * *

Driving home, Fred said, “I hope this isn't how it's always going to be.”

“Phyllis was right,” Mable said. “This is the weekend. People will be going back to work Monday. It's just something new and people are all excited.”

“I thought that man at Walmart was going to start a fight,” Fred said as he pulled into the drive.

“He had to have that particular TV. Said he had his eye on it.” Mable opened the door as soon as the car came to a stop. She had to heave herself out. “I'll take this bag and go and fix some dinner. You bring in the rest of the stuff.”

“Okay.” Fred got out and opened the trunk before getting things out of the back seat. “I'll be setting up this new computer.” He smiled as he grabbed the box.

Mable looked back at Fred as she entered the kitchen door under the carport. “Make sure you put things away first.”

“Okay, okay, don't get upset because I have a little joy in my life.”

“Who's getting upset?” she called from within the kitchen.

As Fred put the new TV into the bedroom and the new vacuum cleaner into the downstairs closet, Mable made sure they could both hear the news from the old TV in the living room.

“Hello, America. This is Ted Groberg coming to you from our studio in Washington, D.C. Martha McVeigh is on assignment in India.” Ted picked up some papers, looked at them and smiled. “Today, the first wave of federal credit card deliveries swept the nation. People are going wild at the stores. It's like the stampede you see the day after Thanksgiving when all the major stores have a sale. People are trampling each

other in the aisles.”

“He got that right,” Fred said as he reached for his coffee cup. He poured filtered water in it and put it in the microwave. “It was hell in the store. You couldn't move without stepping on someone's foot.”

Mable put a chicken in the roaster oven. “I'm sure things will settle down. Did you connect up the new TV?”

“I'll do that later. I still haven't unpacked the computer.”

Ted Groberg went to a new story. “President Maxwell can't stay at home. He says it feels empty. Today he is visiting the University of Colorado.”

The picture on the cable-TV switched from mobs in the stores trampling each other to President James Clerk Maxwell talking to an auditorium full of college students. He was speaking about how the new society will become rich by everyone sharing what they have as well as their talents and abilities.

“It's all socialism.” Mable cut up some lettuce for the salad, and added some sliced tomatoes and radishes.

Fred answered from the living room where he was setting up his new computer on his desk. “It's a new kind of socialism, Dear. The people control the government, not the other way around.”

“We'll see about that.” Mable started on some peas and carrots. “Already, there's a new law limiting the amount of groceries you can have in your house.”

“Well,” Fred said as he smiled at the start-up page coming onto his new flat screen.

“You can't have people hoarding, now, can you?”

“No, but when will it stop? I mean, how far will this new government go? They say they're tearing up all the old laws and putting in new ones. They'll probably tear up the Constitution too.”

“Remember, it's we the people who have to ratify any changes in the Constitution.”

Mable and Fred had a fine dinner. Their cupboards were full. They had new appliances, and their retirement was secure. The government would pay for it all.

* * *

George Pigsley, a short little man with gray hair combed back to cover his bald spot, a pug nose and a grin plastered on, approached the cashier at Garden Groceries. He held out his new federal credit card. He had all his groceries lined up and sorted. He watched the cashier take each item and scan it, and when she was finished, she took the card and swiped it through the slot in the machine.

She said, “Uh-oh.” She looked at him with a disappointed frown. “I'm sorry, but this card isn't valid.” The card was handed back to him. “It shows zero hours of work. In this new society of ours, we have to work for what we get. Sorry. Please leave the bags here. I would suggest you go down to the Labor Department. They will help you get what you need.”

With a red face, George said, “Oh. Okay. Thanks.”

He left and the cashier called for a bag boy to take the groceries and put them away.

George left with his head hanging down wondering how this could have happened. He had worked before. He was just hard up on his luck. He thought that now the government was paying for everything, he could take a vacation. No, he didn't tell anyone he was leaving, he just left. He didn't like that job anyway. Everyone was always mad at him, making fun of him. He would go to the Labor Department. They would help him. They would give him some food.

When he got to the building, he noticed a large sign that said, "Labor Department, Work Force Services," he passed through the double glass doors, went through another set of double glass doors and found that he had to wait in a long line.

"Oh, great!" he said to himself. He asked the man in front of him, "How long do you think?"

"All day," he said with that dull look one gets when he waits in government lines. "I've been in this line three times already. You have to go to this window and fill out papers, then that window and hand them in and back to his window to talk to someone, and if you made a mistake, you have to go to the back of the line and start all over again!"

"Great!" George said, sarcastically.

So an hour passed and George arrived at the window.

"Fill out these papers please." The over-fed woman with wrinkles and bright red lips handed him a bundle of papers. "You'll find a table over there." She pointed to his left and behind him.

“I don't have a pen,” he said sheepishly.

“There's a box of pens on the table.”

“Thank you.”

George walked through two lines of people to get to the tables. He sat down, grabbed a pen from the almost empty box and started reading the papers. He mumbled as he filled out all of his personal information and where he had worked before, if he was in need of food or medical care. He had to say everything out loud as he filled in every field. It annoyed the guy to his right who kept looking at him with a menacing expression.

Three hours passed and George was able to talk to one of the people in the windows. He was an NPU representative with slick black hair and a Lebanese nose.

The rep looked through the papers. “It shows you want to join the NPU.”

“Yes.”

“You will be able to get some groceries at the NPU Co-op after you sign up on the work schedule.”

“Okay.”

“Ever worked on a farm before?”

“No.”

“That's all right. They will teach you what to do. Show up in front of the co-op at five thirty in the morning.”

“That early?”

“Yes. And here is a chit that will give you a day's worth of supplies at the co-op.

You'll receive another chit after work each day. You'll be given the afternoon off starting at two to look for work. We're more efficient in helping you do that now-a-days, so don't worry. You should have a job within two weeks. Next.”

George stepped out of line with a “Thank you.” He left and went to Murphy's. He knew Murphy. He had worked for his father.

George ate well that night. He made sure he was at the co-op the next morning. He was worried that if he didn't he wouldn't eat the next night.

* * *

Sally Dumas, white hair cut into a short page boy, accentuated her worry wrinkles by looking at the stack of bills on her table. She took a gulp of pink bismuth for her ulcers and sat down to think of a way to do away with either the bills or herself.

She never answered her phone for fear of bill collectors, didn't tell her family or friends about the bank ready to foreclose, and that she couldn't pay the taxes. The electric company threatened to cut off the power, so she wouldn't be able to cook or have a warm shower. She didn't listen to the news because it was too depressing and didn't know about the good news that was coming.

Sally inherited all these bills after her husband died. She tried looking for a job, but no one needed a receptionist to answer the phone. That was done by machines now. Social Security said she hadn't worked long enough to retire, and when she went back to their office, it had closed. The church couldn't help her. They wanted what money she had left. She didn't think she could handle it. She sighed and wondered if her husband had left

any bullets for that gun of his.

The door bell rang. “What now?” she moaned.

Sally shuffled to the door zombie-like in her bath robe, with uncombed hair, and make-up still in the bedroom. She hadn't bathed for days. She was a mess.

She saw two men through the three cascading windows in the door. Police, she thought, come to carry her away. At least in jail, she would get free room and board. Her hand was more curious than she. It reached for the door even though she wanted to stand there until they went away. The doorbell again. Her hand turned the doorknob of its own accord.

“Yes, what'd'a want?” She stared at them, thinking they looked like Laurel and Hardy, thick and thin.

“Sally Dumas?” the Hardy one asked. He didn't have a mustache or he would have been a perfect match.

“Yes. Don't care. I'm ready to go.”

Laurel and Hardy looked at each other puzzled. Then the Laurel guy understood. “Oh. We're not the police.” He smiled. “I'm Jake Bookman, and this is Dan Moultry. We're from the NPU. Can we come in and talk?”

“About what?” Suspicion squeezed her eyes nearly shut.

Dan said, “We want to lift a great burden off your shoulders. We've come to help.”

“Help?” Sally turned away. “No one wants to help me.”

“We do,” they said in unison.

“Go away. I don't have any money.” Sally turned away, walked to the dining room table, sat down again and put her head in her hands. Tears of self pity filled her eyes.

The men followed. Jake sat on her right and Dan on her left.

“Really.” Dan smiled. “We want to help.”

“How can you stop the bank from taking my house or pay all these bills or give me peace? I have no way to live. I might as well shoot myself. In fact, I was sitting here debating with myself how best to do that. I was going to see if my husband left me any bullets!” Sally said it all in anger leaving her lips tight.

“Didn't you receive your Federal Credit Card?” Jake asked.

“What's that?” Sally turned her head and waited for Jake to answer.

“Is that pile all your mail for the last month,” he asked, nodding his head to point with his chin.

“Yeah,” she sighed. “Can't get myself to touch it.”

“This is our job,” Dan said. He reached his hand towards the pile. “May we?”

“Be my guest. Have it all,” Sally said sarcastically.

Dan looked through the pile. “Yes. Here it is. You have it.”

“Have what?”

Dan expressed surprise as his eyes widened. “Your credit card.”

“I can't afford a credit card! You haven't listened at all. I said I don't have any money!” Sally huffed. “Go on. Leave me alone.” She started to get up.

“This, Mrs. Dumas,” Dan said, waving the card at her, “will give you all you need.

It will give you your retirement, and you won't have to pay a cent.”

“It replaces money,” Jake said as they all stood.

“What do you think I am? Stupid or something?” Sally was now thinking of getting the gun to shoot *them*.

Dan had an idea as Sally walked away. “This is your Social Security. It just comes in a card now instead of a check.”

Sally turned. “You mean, you guys are from the Social Security office?”

“Something like that,” Dan said.

“Yes,” Jake said.

“Let's sit down again,” Dan invited, “and we'll show you how to use it.”

Sally grabbed her bathrobe to hold it together tighter. “Well, why didn't you say so in the first place?”

The three of them sat down again and Dan opened the first envelope, the electric bill. “You see, you just write your number, this number, on the bottom of the card here, into this box on the bill. Fold it.” he wrote the number in, folded the paper and put it in the envelope. “There. It's ready to mail.”

“I don't have any stamps,” she said, trying to think of some excuse not to mail the thing.

“You don't need stamps anymore,” Jake said.

“This card takes care of it,” Dan said, handing her the sealed envelope.

“How can that be?”

“Don't worry,” Jake said, “the government has taken care of that detail.” He smiled and continued. “Now we have a paper for you to sign. We can get you some groceries or anything you might need until you can get out and use your card at the stores.”

“What paper?” she said suspiciously. “My husband said that I shouldn't sign anything until I read it first.”

Dan took the papers to join the NPU out of his pocket. It explained that she needed to support the Constitution and the Proclamation of the People. She read the Proclamation and the rest of it that explained that she would need to contribute in some form such as labor or a service she could do for her neighborhood. It seemed agreeable, so she signed it.

“Now we have a grocery list along with household items.” Jake handed her the form. “You just check off what you need and we will go and get it for you.”

“You will?” She filled out the form, wondering if she was allowed a steak.

“Yes,” Dan said. “And you can have anything on the list.”

After she finished filling out the grocery list, Dan and Jake stood, taking up the papers. Dan said, “Fill out all those bills with the number on your card and we will be back with your groceries. We will even mail all those bills for you. Okay?”

Sally rose, trying not to cry in their presence. “Okay.”

Dan and Jake turned in the doorway. Dan said, “We will come around at least once a month to check up on you to see if you need anything.”

“Thank you.”

After they left, Sally spent the rest of the morning paying her bills, wetting them with her tears. That afternoon, after putting away her groceries, she took a long bubble bath and then went shopping.

* * *

“Charles?” called Mrs. Bordermer, hair up and dressed for breakfast.

“Yes, Madame.” The tall skinny butler with a slight pouch of a stomach showing through his tuxedo, entered the dining room that opened out onto a terrace.

“Have you joined that horrible NPU?” Mrs. Bordermer walked out onto the terrace and sat down to eat, starting with crumpets and eggs.

“Yes, Madame.” Charles stood, waiting her reaction.

Putting strawberry jelly on her crumpets without looking at him, she asked, “What will I ever do without you?”

“Oh, Madame, I hope to stay here and service your every desire. You see, it is one of the principles of the NPU to be of service to everyone.” He bowed a little and smiled.

“What are we to do with all our land and holdings?” She took a bite of egg and crumpet to mix them in her mouth. “Is the government to confiscate everything?”

“No Madame.” Charles folded his hands, still having to bow a little to see her face. “They are simply saying that the land now belongs to no one, and the people in the neighborhood can do with it as they see fit. If we live on the land, or if we support a factory, that is fine, it is our stewardship. We will have to sign some document to the fact.”

“And what is this new credit card that came in the mail? What are we supposed to do with that?” She glanced up at him and filled her mouth again.

“It is simply going to replace all your other credit cards, Madame.” Charles smiled. “Will that be all, Madame?”

“Yes, Charles, for now. I may think up some more questions after breakfast.” She put down her last crumpet and smiled at Charles. “I do hope you stay.”

“I will Madame.”

* * *

Young Bordermer stormed through the front door, throwing his tennis racket to Charles. “Put those away, will you, Charles?” he asked without looking at the man.

“That's it!” He complained to the air. “We've had it. We're done for. All our money's gone. All our property is gone. All we have left is the house and what's in it.” Young Tyson Bordermer's straight black hair bobbed up and down when he talked, drooping down into his face. He jerked his head to fling it back in place. “We have securities in Switzerland, I'm sure, but we can't liquidate them or spend our money unless we move to Europe. We may not have the factory by tomorrow. It's being taken over by the the workers. They say they own it now. They will run the damn thing. All we have is a single credit card. We can't even use that unless I show up at the office every day. The world is gone to Hell!”

Tyson's mother, Mrs. Bordermer, came into the foyer from the drawing room, immaculately dressed as always. “I'm sorry dear, but now you have to work. It's the new

order, I guess they would say. Everyone has to work that can work or we don't eat." She handed him a letter. "It says that you have a meeting to go to tonight. It's all about the neighborhood and what they're going to do with the properties. You will have a vote at least."

"That's another thing." Tyson took the letter, jerked his head back and looked at it. "What right do the neighbors have telling us what we can do with our property?"

"Well sir," Charles butted in. "It seems that you can also tell them what they can do with theirs."

"I have a good mind to do so."

* * *

George sniffed and gingerly turned the knob of the door that led into the personnel office at the Bordermer's plastics factory. He handed a letter of endorsement to the secretary behind the counter. "It says that I can come back to work."

The secretary glanced at the letter and handed George a clipboard holding several forms. "Fill these out and give them back to me." Her brown hair was puffed up in a 60's style hair-do, and she talked through her nose. "You can sit over there." She pointed to some slanted chairs along the inside wall behind him.

It was deja vu. He had filled out these forms at least a dozen times in his life. They never amounted to anything, never gave him a good job. He was always a janitor or line worker. They never gave him enough space to tell about all the jobs he'd worked at.

He handed the forms back to the secretary. She told him to wait. He spent most of

the week filling out forms and waiting. He felt like telling them what they could do with their blankity-blank job. When they hired him he would simply tell them to shove it, and when he was ushered into the interviewer's office, he was very angry, yet, when faced with an actual person, his angry transformed into timidity.

“Well, George,” Mr. Visitor began. “This is your third time starting a job here, isn't it?”

“Yes,” he said, “but I get sick sometimes, and I have a string of bad luck. I don't get along with some people.” Whenever George got embarrassed about anything, he grinned like the Cheshire cat. “They either say I have ass burgers or I'm emotionally impaired or something.”

“George,” Mr. Visitor said, his sharp nose hovering over the papers in front of him. “We need a guy like you.”

“You do?” George's eyebrows drew up like a couple of caterpillars ready to fight.

“Yes, we do.” Mr. Visitor set the papers down and grinned, his thin lips spreading over his gaunt face. “What do you do when you're unemployed? How do you get along?”

George shrugged his shoulders. “I ... I borrow from people.”

“Do you ever pay back the money you owe?”

George looked away, smacking his lips. “I usually borrow from one friend to pay back another.” He grinned.

“Do you always pay back in cash?”

“No, no. I usually borrow things and give what I can to my friends.” George

looked up at the ceiling half smiling. “If they don't like what I have, I go and borrow something else from another friend.”

“Do you know what we call you, George?” He stared at George expectantly.

George opened the palms of his hands. “I'm no thief. I can explain. I just borrow.”

“George, we've had our eye on you.” Mr. Visitor exaggerated his stare by raising one eyebrow.

George's worry wrinkles covered his face again, and his head sank into his shoulders. “Now you're sounding like the police.”

“You have been able to supply a lot of people with the things they need, George. We call that being a broker.”

“A broker?” George's eyes popped out. “I haven't broken anything.”

“George, we want to hire you as a broker. That's a person that goes looking for things, finds them and brings them back for exchange. You have a natural talent for that.”

“That's not what they told me at the Labor Department. They said that I would be working with plastics again.” George's Cheshire grin turned down at the edges.

“That's partially true. You'll need a little training on the computer. I see you have some typing skills. You will be shown how to connect to all your friends who have friends and others you don't know yet. This is how we will be getting our supplies from now on. Our industry will be on your shoulders. It will be up to you. You can't be lazy now. You will have to be a hard worker, but you will be doing what you naturally do. Do you understand?”

With a burst of ego, George Pigsley stood him on his feet. He was allowed to function in his natural habitat, doing what he did best, find materials for the company. He could connect with people who knew other people who had the materials the company needed and would be able to find materials to barter with, letting others exchange at deeper and deeper levels. One person had a paint sprayer but needed a wrench. Another person had a box of nails but needed a paint sprayer. Another person had a bolt cutter but needed a box of nails. Another person had a wrench but needed a bolt cutter. So the wrench was exchanged for a bolt cutter, then exchanged for the box of nails, then exchanged for a paint sprayer. George found a new confidence and great satisfaction in his new job, using his quirky personality to his advantage. He didn't think of escaping from his job anymore as he had a two week vacation every year. He worked diligently to please, and everyone was pleased with him.

* * *

Julia walked slowly with her friend Mable. They dressed alike, wore identical clothes, the same short hair, and twin red barrettes. They stopped at the jewelry store and noticed the diamond necklaces, bracelets, and earrings displayed in the window. They looked at each other and giggled. They had never been able to buy diamonds.

Approaching the door, Julia said, "After you, dear."

Mable said, "Oh, no. After you."

Both tried to go through together, bumped into each other and giggled again. Julia went first.

When they went in, they noticed that most of the displays were empty. There was a white haired salesman in a white coat and white gloves, placing necklaces in one of the glass cabinets. He carefully placed the necklace in its Persian blue velvet tray, stood and smiled. "How may I help you ladies?"

"We would like," they said simultaneously and giggled.

Julia finished, "to look at two very fine necklaces."

The salesman brought out several necklaces which they tried on as they oohed and awed. After they had chosen, the salesman wrapped up the packages in two toned silver paper. They each handed the man their federal credit cards. He frowned, slid the cards through the card reader and handed them back. Under his breath, the salesman said, "This is the end of the diamond business."

As the girls left the store, they squeezed their packages and screamed at each other like teenagers.

* * *

More angry than scared, Tyson's heart beat a little faster than normal as he entered the little theater where the neighborhood meeting was being held. He was greeted by an usher who gave him an agenda. He looked around to spot anyone he knew. He saw his next door neighbor, Mr. Booth, who always smelled like new shoes or a leather coat. He sat down beside him and shook his hand.

"Mr. Booth," he said cordially. "What is this thing all about?"

"From what I heard," Mr. Booth said, rubbing his cleft chin, "it's about what are we

going to do with all this land in the neighborhood.”

Tyson crossed his legs and sat on one hip so he could talk without twisting his neck. “What do you mean 'all this land'? What about your land and my land?”

“According to the new laws, the land isn't owned by anyone. The neighborhood takes care of it.” Mr. Booth dropped his hand and stared at Tyson for a moment. “We have a committee now.”

“When did that happen?” Tyson showed surprise by clenching his eyebrows down.

“All the neighborhood got together last month and got organized.”

“I was in Europe.”

“Oh.

Both men turned to face the front because the meeting was starting.

Mr. Booth mentioned, “I understand our new leader is your grandfather.”

“Yeah?” Tyson put his finger to his lips as a sign of interest.

An elderly man rose and approached the podium. His hair had been dyed black. His eyes were framed by high cheekbones and bushy eyebrows. His square jaw protruded as he spoke. “Hello, I'm Judge Black.”

The End.