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BRAINS

DANIEL BREEZE

Move over, quiz shows—this is the big time! The Chicago Philosophers and opposing teams from cities across the country scramble to reach the biggest game of all—the Brains Bowl. It's a story filled with ambition, underdogs, love and laughs.

I

The Recruit

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 7 - SUNDAY, DECEMBER 14

1

ON A COLD AND BLUSTERY evening in early December, an eerie calm settled over Chicago. Only the occasional screeching of an el train or the blaring of an ambulance siren shattered the stillness. Throughout the city and its sprawling suburbs, a million nervous people huddled in front of television sets.

In the Windy City Dome, most of the seventy-two thousand fans groaned in unison as the Chicago Philosophers, a team of weary and eccentric geniuses and pseudo-intellectuals, fell four points behind the Dallas Capitalists with a minute and twenty-four seconds remaining in the last game of the season. If the Phils won, they would land in the Brains playoffs for the first time. If they lost, their season would be over.

Philosopher Coach Rock Nelson, a short and intense man with thinning hair and a beer belly, signaled for a time-out. As Rock paced the sidelines mopping his brow with a sweat-soaked towel, he could have been mistaken for an old-time football coach, a Vince Lombardi in a time warp. Rock's exhausted troops gathered around him.

The crowd's deafening cheers and frantic screams played havoc with Rock's shattered nerves. He wanted to win the Brains championship—the Brains Bowl—more than any-

thing in the world. Well, almost anything. He actually wanted to win professional football's Super Bowl more than anything in the world, but since the popularity of Brains was on the upswing and pro football was slowly being flushed down the proverbial toilet, Rock had readjusted his goals and set out in pursuit of the Brains Bowl championship. Now his chances of making the playoffs hinged on the closing eighty-four seconds of the Phils' last game of the season.

Rock faced his weary crew.

"I believe in incentives," he declared in a voice rapidly becoming hoarse after a day of yelling his lungs out. "So I've got a big one for you. Think of all the things you dread most. Think of all the terrible things that could happen to you. Well, if you don't win this game, *they're all going to happen!* It will make the Texas Chainsaw Massacre look like a Sunday school picnic!"

Amos "Freud" Lawton, forty-six-year-old team psychiatrist and assistant coach, pulled Rock aside. Freud wore metal-rimmed glasses and stood a half-foot taller than Rock. His unruly brown hair looked as though it had been trimmed with a lawn mower. His gaze was piercing, his mind sharp. Freud had problems of his own, but next to Rock's they seemed inconsequential.

"Rock, you can't threaten the players at a time like this! The pressure has made basket cases out of them. Do you want them to freeze up completely? Do you want to screw up everything you've worked for?"

Rock took a deep breath. "All right, Freud. All right." He faced the harried players again. "Maybe I was out of line. Let me put it another way: This is what we worked for. We still have time. Try to forget this game means everything,

and that millions of fans are counting on you. Do your job and we'll come out of this all right. We're out of timeouts so I won't talk to you again until after the game, unless Dallas calls a timeout. So I want you to know one thing." He paused. *"I know who you are, I know where you live. If you blow this, I'm going to hunt down every one of you, and—"*

Freud restrained Rock as the Phils returned to their seats on the side of the playing court. Enough time remained for the Phils to regain the lead, but Rock couldn't shake the feeling that another disaster was about to befall the team.

Play-by-play announcer Moose Harrison described the scene for millions of fans viewing the game on television:

"THE DALLAS CAPITALISTS LEAD THE CHICAGO PHILOSOPHERS BY FOUR POINTS, 77 TO 73. THERE IS NO TOMORROW FOR THE PHILS IF THEY LOSE. IF THEY WIN, THEY WILL HOST THE FIRST PLAYOFF GAME IN FRANCHISE HISTORY NEXT WEEKEND. ALL THEIR HOPES ARE RIDING ON THE FINAL EIGHTY-FOUR SECONDS OF PLAY. THE SPECIALISTS IN POPULAR ARTS—BRIAN MARSHALL OF THE PHILS AND MARYANN PANTHER OF THE CAPS—ARE HEADING FOR CENTERCOURT TO FACE OFF ON A THREE POINTER."

Noise in the stadium swelled as Brian, the Philosophers' twenty-nine-year-old superstar from California, reached the Hot Zone, as centercourt was called. Brian was six-foot-two, muscular and handsome. He often was mistaken for a movie star or a surfer. Pressure was nothing new to him. Before joining the Phils he had worked for a Los Angeles advertising agency, and in advertising there was always pressure. But he had never faced pressure like this, with thousands of fans screaming their lungs out, ready to kill him if he screwed up.

Perspiration formed on Brian's forehead, but his blond

hair remained in place. He would look good to those watching on television.

The referee signaled for quiet. The clamor subsided to a dull roar.

"For three points ..." the referee said, his voice booming over the loudspeakers. "In 1969, *Midnight Cowboy* won the Academy Award for best picture." A clip from a movie suddenly flashed on the giant Brains Board behind the referee. "Which film won the Canadian Film Awards citation as best picture that year?"

MaryAnn, the fastest button pusher on the Dallas team, swatted her buzzer.

"*A Place to Stand?*" she blurted out, more as a question than an answer.

Behind her, the giant Brains Board flashed "OOPS!" Chicago fans cheered.

"That is incorrect," said the referee. "Do you want to try it, Chicago?"

These were the moments Brian lived for. All eyes were riveted on him. He seemed cool and confident. He smiled slightly as he said, "*The Best Damn Fiddler From Calabogie to Kaladar.*"

"That is correct!" the referee proclaimed. The crowd roared as fireworks exploded on the Brains Board. Brian and a shattered MaryAnn returned to the sidelines. The Phils had closed the gap to one point with 1:06 remaining in the game.

Brian's seat was transported back to the sidelines, where he was parked beside Margaret Kramer, the Phils' seventy-two-year-old Renaissance Woman. (On Brains teams, the Renaissance Woman or Man was expected to have knowledge of many subjects, operating as a modern-day Leonardo da Vinci or Thomas Jefferson.) Margaret, who had been

passing her golden years irritating the staff at a Phoenix nursing home when Rock signed her up, appeared slight and frail, but she didn't take guff from anybody—except Rock. Her hair was silver and her face was locked in a perpetual frown, partially the result of decaying teeth and partially the result of being constantly at odds with the rest of the world. But as Brian returned to the sidelines, Margaret was duly impressed he had come up with the title of the Canadian film. Perhaps she had misjudged him. Perhaps he was not a playboy who had wandered into the Phils' locker room by mistake.

"How on earth did you know the answer?" she shouted at Brian as the crowd cheered their hero.

"The flick aired on a cable channel a couple years ago when I was entertaining a girlfriend. I remember because we were making love on the sofa, and—"

"You're a disgusting pig," Margaret snapped.

"That's what she said."

The history experts—Tina Meredith of the Phils and the Capitalists' Bart Unger—moved onto the playing floor. Tina, a former corporate research director in her mid-forties, was a brunette who had been efficient, cheerful and relatively sane when the season began. As it progressed, she became increasingly nervous and distraught.

Tina surveyed the frenzied crowd. Most of the spectators were cheering her on. These were Chicago fans. But somehow, in the heat of battle, it was difficult to distinguish between friendly madness and unfriendly madness. Tina felt weak. Her face was flushed. She took a deep breath—and collapsed.

The crowd's frenzy slowed to a low rumbling. On the sidelines, Rock watched in horror. His dream of sailing into

the playoffs and capturing the fabulous Brains Bowl trophy had just suffered a monumental setback.

Freud and Archie Bolton, the team physician, rushed to the playing floor to examine Tina. Bolton checked for a pulse, found it was weak, and held one of Tina's eyelids open to examine the eye.

"Let's get her to the hospital," Bolton said. "She can't go on."

Tina's teammates looked on in shock as she was loaded onto a stretcher and carried through the subdued crowd to exits at the rear of the stadium. Television cameras followed the path of the stretcher. In the distance the massive scoreboard told the story—Dallas 77, Chicago 76 with fifty-two seconds remaining in the game.

THE SIREN WAILED INCESSANTLY as the ambulance weaved along Chicago's Lake Shore Drive, then turned onto Michigan Avenue, where Christmas decorations graced the windows of Lord and Taylor, Neiman Marcus and other glamorous stores along the Magnificent Mile. The ambulance driver radioed ahead to tell Emergency Room personnel he was bringing in the Phils player who had collapsed.

The ambulance slowed for a turn onto Chicago Avenue and two minutes later pulled into the receiving area at Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

In the Emergency Room, Bolton gave an admitting clerk information about Tina while the Phils starter was loaded onto a table.

"Another one," a young doctor grumbled. "What do they do to these people—torture them?"

Tina's blood pressure was high, her pulse erratic. "She'll be here awhile," the doctor said. "Looks like she probably had a breakdown."

In the waiting area, a pregnant Hispanic woman and a cop who had been shot in the arm watched the Philosophers game on television. Moose Harrison sounded excited:

"THE PHILS DID IT! THE PHILS DID IT! JULIE HOWARD'S FOUR POINTS AT THE BUZZER BURY DALLAS, 80 TO 77, AND PROPEL THE PHILS INTO THE PLAYOFFS FOR THE FIRST TIME IN FRANCHISE HISTORY!"

The crowd could be seen surging to the playing area hoisting their reluctant heroes—these weary, triumphant intellectuals—onto their shoulders.

"BUT CHICAGO'S VICTORY CAME AT A BIG PRICE. THE PHILS MAY BE WITHOUT THE SERVICES OF THEIR HISTORY ACE, TINA MEREDITH, WHEN THEY HOST THE POWERFUL CLEVELAND MIDDLE AMERICANS IN NEXT SUNDAY'S PLAYOFF GAME THAT WILL DECIDE THE MIDWEST DIVISION CHAMPION. CLEVELAND DRUBBED THE PITTSBURGH BOOKERS 96 TO 60 THIS AFTERNOON.

"ROCK WANTS TO WIN THE BRAINS BOWL MORE THAN LIFE ITSELF, BUT HE HAS HIS WORK CUT OUT FOR HIM IF HIS TEAM IS TO CONTINUE ITS STORYBOOK QUEST FOR THE TITLE."

2

CHICAGO'S TOWERING SKYSCRAPERS and noisy crowds seemed thousands of miles away the next day as a private jet carrying Freud and Ben Sloan, the owner of the Chicago Philosophers franchise, arrived at Indianapolis International Airport. A rented Chevy van was waiting for them. The driver did not recognize his passengers. All he knew was that the shorter man with big jowls seemed to enjoy ordering people around. The taller man appeared pale and glum.

"How long will it take to get to this little burg?" Ben growled, as his cigar polluted the air in the van.

The driver glanced at the rear view mirror. "Franklin? About a half hour."

Ben released a long sigh.

As the van rolled south into the Indiana countryside a few minutes later, Ben's thoughts turned to how he and Philadelphia millionaire Blackie Thornton had founded the Brains League four years earlier. Ben and Blackie already owned professional football teams, but they were disgusted because salaries, bonuses and ticket prices had spiraled to ridiculous heights. Abandoning football for a new kind of league was Ben's idea.

"Think of it," he told Blackie, as they carved up steaks at Michael Jordan's Restaurant on LaSalle Street in Chicago. "Teams of professional know-it-alls, based in cities across the country, competing to get into the playoffs and ultimately slug it out in the biggest game of all—the Brains Bowl!"

Blackie was slow to see the possibilities. "Have you lost your mind? Who would pay to see teams of nerds answer questions nobody cares about?"

"We're not talking about nerds, Blackie. You're missing the big picture. We'll sign up people from many walks of life. Some will specialize in popular subjects like movies, television, games and sports. Others will be experts in literature and history. Remember how popular 'The \$64,000 Question' and 'Twenty One' were years ago?"

Blackie grimaced. "I remember. I also remember the scandal that erupted because some of the shows were rigged."

"But this won't be rigged. Why, if we hype this thing right, we could make millions!"

Blackie finally agreed to go along with Ben—what the hell, if he put a few million into the stock market he'd probably blow it anyway—and the next year the Brains League was launched. Ben's Chicago franchise finished dead last in the Midwest Division. Blackie's Founding Fathers finished in the cellar in the Eastern Division. Not only that, it wasn't long before Brains players and their agents demanded a bigger piece of the action. Now, in the fourth season, salaries and bonuses were nearly on a par with the huge professional football payouts. Ben shelled out millions to players and barely broke even. If Rock could, by some miracle, win the Brains Bowl, it would bring in a truckload of additional revenue and dozens of opportunities to exploit the team nationally, but few people thought Rock and the Phils had

more than a snowball's chance in Hell of winning it all. The talented and intimidating San Francisco Hackers had won the last two Brains Bowls and most people figured they would win it all again.

As the van passed a grain elevator, Ben mused that just getting into the playoffs qualified as a miracle. At the start of the season, one Chicago newspaper columnist—that idiot who wrote for the *Post*, Harry Warton—suggested the Phils would be lucky if they could finish the season. But Rock and his team had proven Warton and the other so-called experts wrong.

It had not been easy. The Phils lost a heart-breaker to Blackie's Founding Fathers and barely managed to squeak by the Denver Ecologists and Cincinnati Populists in overtime games. And then, of course, there was that humiliating twenty-nine point defeat the Phils suffered at the hands of the New York Intellectuals, who had won the Eastern Division championship the past three seasons. But all that was old news. Ben was the owner of a playoff team. His mother had been right. There was a God.

Ben gazed out the window of the van and noticed with disgust that light snow was falling.

Wrapped up in his own thoughts, Ben did not realize Freud was struggling to avoid going into convulsions triggered by smoke from Ben's cigar. The rational thing for Freud to do would have been to tell Ben the cigar was gagging him, but Freud—despite his training as a psychiatrist—had trouble confronting people in positions of power. Obviously, he had a few issues that had not been resolved when he worked his way to a Ph.D. in psychiatry at the University of North Carolina. Perhaps no one would have noticed his peculiarities if he had opened a private practice in Chapel Hill after receiv-

ing his doctorate, as he had intended to do, but he couldn't scrape up the money. When Ben offered him \$600,000 a year to join the Phils as shrink and assistant coach, Freud could not refuse, and now his eccentricities were not only noticed, they were reported in news media from coast to coast. Perhaps that was a small inconvenience, however, because Freud socked away as much of the money as he could and one day he would use it to open his private practice. In the meantime, Rock, Ben and their team full of misfits offered exceptional opportunities for observing dysfunctional behavior.

The same could be said for the cranky old buzzard who was sitting next to him.

"Look around," Ben grumbled. "Nothing here but farmland. What the hell are we doing here? I don't see how a hayseed who gave up teaching to 'find himself' in the boondocks will help us in the playoffs."

Freud shrugged. "Our research department analyzed computerized scouting reports going back to the day you started the franchise. This looks like our best option. We don't have a lot of time to think it over."

Ben sighed. "All right. Let's sign up this redneck genius and get back to civilization. I'm supposed to be on Lennie Framton's radio talk show tonight. He'll ask me how Rock managed to get the Phils into the playoffs. Damned if I know."

I know, Freud thought. Threats and intimidation. That's how he did it.

"It's a mystery to me, too," Freud said diplomatically.

Snow fluttered softly to the ground as the van approached the outskirts of Franklin, a city with about 22,000 residents

a few miles south of Indianapolis. Ben noted with dismay there were no luxury hotels, department stores, or Trader Vic's restaurants in sight. A sign revealed Franklin was the home of Franklin College of Indiana. Christmas trees could be seen inside many of the brick and wood frame houses. It was a clean town, but it was no Chicago. Ben became increasingly restless.

The van slowed as the driver checked out the house numbers.

"That must be it," Freud said, nodding in the direction of a small white wooden abode. The paint was peeling and the mailbox hung at an angle.

Freud and Ben climbed out of the van and hiked up the four steps leading to the porch and front door. Freud knocked, softly at first, then more loudly.

"He ain't home!"

The voice came from a neighbor's driveway, where a white-haired man leaned on a snow shovel.

"Is this where Sam Winslow lives?" Freud asked.

"Yep. Only he ain't home."

"Any idea where he is?" asked Ben.

"Left about an hour ago carrying a basketball. My guess is he's over at the Franklin College campus. Shoots baskets there a lot."

The neighbor gave them directions to the gym.

SAM WINSLOW, LANKY AND AGILE, dressed in shorts, tee shirt and tennis shoes, dribbled a basketball to the left side of the court. His opponent, Carl Jeffries, a lawyer he had known since high school, followed.

"Shoot it, Winslow!" Jeffries said. "You haven't hit from three-point range all day. You're due."

Jeffries was baiting him, but Sam figured Jeffries was right. He was due to hit a three-pointer sooner or later. With his back to the basket, Sam dribbled to his right, pivoted on his left foot and let loose with a hook shot. The ball sailed high into the air ... and careened off the rim of the basket.

Jeffries grabbed the rebound and scored on a layup before Sam could recover.

Jeffries tossed Sam the basketball. "That does it for me. Gotta get back to the office. Some of us work for a living."

Sam pivoted again, went to his left and unleashed another hook shot. The ball sailed through the basket.

"Like you said, Carl, I was due."

"Yeah, but I didn't really believe it. That was pure slop."

"What's the old saying—I'd rather be sloppy than good?"

"I think it's 'I'd rather be lucky than good.'"

Sam shot a few free throws, then launched a long shot from three-point range on the right side of the basket. He missed by about four feet.

"My grandmother can shoot better than that. She's a hundred and two years old."

Sam hadn't noticed that two strangers in street clothes had wandered into the gym and were watching him shoot baskets.

"You startled me," Sam said.

Freud decided pleasantries were in order. "I wonder if you could help us. We are looking for Sam Winslow."

"I'm Sam. What do you need?"

"Are you the Sam Winslow who graduated with honors from Indiana University, then received a master's degree and doctorate in history from Harvard?"

"That's right."

"Our records show you are twenty-seven years old and unemployed," Freud said.

"I'm twenty-eight. What's up? Am I being arrested?"

"Should you be?" Ben inquired.

"Not that I know of, but my attorney just left. I can still catch him if I need him."

Ben grimaced. "Let's get this over with," he said.

"Sam, I'm Freud Lawton, the Philosophers' assistant coach and team psychiatrist, and this is Ben Sloan. He owns the team."

Sam was dumbfounded. It *was* Ben and Freud! He had seen them on television. The Philosophers had just landed in the playoffs for the first time ever. What were the owner and assistant coach doing watching him play basketball?

Freud glanced at his watch. "We don't have much time. Sam, you probably know that Tina Meredith cracked under the pressure in last night's game."

"I noticed."

"We need to replace her. Fast. Our scouting reports suggest you have the background we need. We want you to join the team for the playoffs. Actually, we intend to put you in the starting lineup. Our second-stringers aren't strong in history."

Sam's eyes opened wide. "This has got to be a joke. Did Carl or my brother Joe send you here?"

"Let's get out of here," Ben grouched. "I've got to get back to Chicago. This burg is so sleepy there's probably a seven o'clock curfew. I expect to see Andy and Opie walking down the street any minute. This was a mistake. Besides, we don't know if the kid knows anything about history. He has a couple degrees. Big deal. You can buy those on the Internet." Ben moved closer to Sam. "Name three of the biggest losers in history, hot shot!"

Sam smiled wryly. "Chevalier De Rohan. He thought he was great at deciphering messages, but he lost his life because he couldn't decipher a simple coded message. Cumberland Gap. They lost to Georgia Tech, 222 to 0, in the most lopsided college football game in history. And Melony."

"Melony who?" demanded Ben.

"Your wife. I recall reading an article in *Sports Illustrated* a few years ago that mentioned your wife's name was Melony. She's a loser because she married you!"

Ben glared at Sam. "You smart aleck punk kid. I ought to—"

Freud restrained Ben. "Take it easy!"

Ben tried to calm himself. "It's easy to spout off a couple insignificant facts when you're piddling around in the boon-docks, but what could you possibly know about handling big-time pressure when seventy thousand screaming fans are packed into a stadium and millions more are watching on television?"

Sam shrugged. He faced the basket, dribbled the ball a couple times and calmly sank a long shot. Ben was not impressed.

"So you can shoot a basketball. Big deal. Anybody can get lucky. But that's not pressure. Let's make it interesting. I'll bet you a hundred bucks you miss your next shot from at least fifteen feet out. What do you say?"

"A hundred bucks, huh?" Sam looked at the basket. It seemed a hundred feet away. "Okay, old man, you're on."

"My name is Ben. Don't call me old man, you little squirt."

Sam dribbled a few times and let the ball fly. It bounced off the rim.

"Just as I thought," Ben growled. "When the pressure is

on, you're lousy. We don't need you. We've got enough players who choke under pressure."

Sam realized his chance at glory, his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make it big, was fading fast. He had to do something. Besides, he didn't have the hundred dollars.

"A hundred bucks isn't pressure," he told Ben aggressively. "That's chicken feed. ... Double or nothing!"

Ben looked at Sam closely. "Two hundred? You sure you got that much?"

"Don't make me laugh, old man."

"You're on," Ben said, obviously enjoying the challenge.

Sam suddenly realized what was happening—his opportunity to be a Brains player and earn a lot of money hinged on whether he could make one shot with a basketball. Talk about pressure. He wished he had played basketball for his high school team instead of dropping out when the going got rough.

Sam dribbled three times and looked toward the bucket. He dribbled twice more, then let loose with a jump shot from about nineteen feet out. The ball sailed through the net.

"Not bad, kid," Ben said as he pulled two hundred-dollar bills out of his wallet. "But if you're as good as Freud says, how come you don't have a job? Why aren't you teaching at one of the big universities or making megabucks somewhere?"

"I taught at big universities for three years while I worked on my master's and doctorate, as I'm sure your scouting reports already told you. It wasn't for me. I wanted time to think before I decide what to do with the rest of my life, so I came back to Franklin. I'm jobless by choice. I'm working on a book."

"Who isn't." Ben handed the two hundred dollars to

Sam. "Sounds to me like you're lazy. Where's your ambition? Aren't you tired of sitting on the sidelines? Do you want to get back in the game? Do you want to get out of this mom and pop burg and see some real action? We're in the playoffs and if it's the last thing Rock does, he's going to win the Brains Bowl. I'll pay you a hundred thousand for each playoff game—and two hundred thou for the Brains Bowl, if we make it that far. And you'll get twice that for every game we win. What have you got to lose?"

A little fast math told Sam he could earn up to \$800,000 for four weeks' work if the Philosophers went all the way, winning two playoff games and the Brains Bowl. "I'll do it. But I want ten thousand dollars for signing. I always dreamed of getting a bonus for signing a contract."

"All right, kid," Ben said. "We'll expect you at the Palmer House Hilton in Chicago tonight. That's where the team's staying while we prepare for the playoffs. You're going to earn that money. You'll work harder than you ever worked in your life."

"We'll have a contract ready for you to sign tomorrow," Freud said. "You might want to get an agent. You'll be asked to appear in television commercials for everything from jockstraps to aspirin. An agent can save you a lot of time and paperwork."

"Don't tell anyone except your agent how much we're paying you," Ben warned. "And no more cracks about my wife!"

Ben and Freud started back toward the rented van as Sam dribbled the ball and began talking, to no one in particular. "And the pass goes to Sam Winslow, who just signed a huge contract with the pros. Sam fakes, shoots and ... *scores* as time runs out!"

“Just what we need,” Ben told Freud as they climbed into the van. “Another Looney Tunes player. Rock is going to kill me. ... Do you think Winslow understands he wasn’t signed to play basketball?”

THE PERFECT CANDIDATE

John
Westin

With the election only days away, two reporters wreak havoc in Illinois and California as they try to expose the secrets the Harry Jerome campaign is hiding from the public and the press.

I

GOODBYE

MORTON SEARCY

1

EARLY OCTOBER

Murray Denton lifted a pack of Harry Jerome collector cards out of the cardboard box on his desk and tore off the blue and gold wrapper. He rubbed his fingers lightly over the cards, feeling the slick, glossy coating. Then he shuffled through them. George Madden was right. Madden's company had produced classy cards—every bit as good as the best sports and non-sports cards distributed by Upper Deck or Fleer. Stamped in gold foil on each card was the "Harry Jerome" logo. In this pack, cards depicted Harry rushing for a touchdown at San Diego State University, posing with his wife a few years before she died in a car crash on a West German autobahn, shaking hands with John Wayne, working in his office at the Farrell Foundation in Peoria, saving the life of a convenience store cashier by taking a bullet in the shoulder, and giving a "thumbs up" after his primary victory.

The only thing missing was the gum, mused Denton. In the 1950s, most packs of cards came with slabs of bubble

gum. Nevertheless, the cards were beauties, and if Jerome one day became a senator, or President of the United States, they would be worth a small fortune.

Denton set the cards aside on his cluttered desk and loosened his tie. He was tired. Managing Jerome's campaign for governor of Illinois was taking its toll. In the old days, Denton could work from seven in the morning until midnight without a break, but as the years passed he lost a lot of stamina and more than a little of his black hair. Now, at fifty-two, he owned the Eulenco Consulting Group in Springfield, Illinois, and he let younger staffers do most of the campaign grunt work.

Over the years, Denton had managed a dozen campaigns. He thought he had seen it all, but the Jerome campaign was different. It wasn't just the collector cards. There were other unusual and troubling things about the campaign.

Denton set aside the cards and began composing on his Dell computer a memo outlining campaign spending priorities. A few minutes later, his phone rang.

"Murray? ... "

It was her—the campaign's mole in the enemy camp. She was whispering. Her voice was throaty and seductive, like Lauren Bacall's. She talked a good game, lacing her speech with sexual innuendoes, but the promise of sexual ecstasy was an empty one. Despite her voluptuous figure and the hints at foreplay, she was all business. Ask her about work and she'd gab for hours. Try to get her in the sack and she'd turn so cold you'd think hell had frozen over. But that voice ... listening to her and imagining what could happen almost made up for everything else.

"... You've got a big problem. One of your people visited

my office today. Said he could blow the lid off Jerome's campaign."

"What? Who was it?"

"Morton Searcy."

"Searcy? That hayseed? Where did he find the guts to cross me?"

"But, Murray, he's good in bed."

Denton felt his blood pressure rising. She wouldn't give Denton the time of day but she got it on with Searcy?

"Wonderful," he grouched.

She laughed softly. "Murray ... You didn't really think I'd let that twerp into my bed?"

"I don't know what you'd let into your bed."

"Don't be nasty, Murray ... Morton said he'd be back tomorrow, but he's nervous. Who knows what he'll do? Better take care of the problem."

Searcy's defection would mean big trouble for Denton. Searcy was a computer hacker who had played a key role in Harry's campaign. Searcy was a genius, and the problem with geniuses was that Denton never knew what they were up to. They could sell Eulenco lock, stock and barrel to a corporate raider without Denton knowing what the hell they were doing. Denton suspected something had irritated Searcy—perhaps something someone had said, or a rebuff when he asked for more pay, or sleepless nights caused by a guilty conscience—but the instigating event didn't really matter. The situation was critical. Searcy knew the campaign's dirtiest secrets.

Denton would have preferred to fire Searcy and let it go at that, but that was not an option. Searcy knew too much. He could not be trusted. Denton had his orders: if a prob-

lem arose, he was to notify Roger Moss, the man the campaign big shots had installed as security chief for Eulenco and the campaign. Moss would take care of the problem. Denton wasn't sure what Moss would do, but there was a lot at stake.

Denton reached for the phone.

"Moss? ... One of my people, Morton Searcy, has been poking into things he shouldn't. Find out what he knows and take care of the problem."

Roger Moss, a hulking bear of a man and former professional wrestler, relied on high-tech surveillance equipment and trained operatives to ensure that Harry Jerome's campaign ran smoothly. Although Denton had misgivings about the elaborate security setup, Moss had none. He loved it. Sitting behind the array of video monitors and control buttons, he could imagine he was Captain Kirk of the Starship Enterprise, exercising the power of life and death not only over people, but over entire planets.

Moss headed up a small Eulenco security force, but for messy jobs he didn't want tied to Jerome or Eulenco he used two freelancers—covert operatives who could be counted on to keep their mouths shut. Joey Randall was polished, efficient and professional. He hung out in fancy restaurants, luxury hotels and exclusive bars. The other freelancer, Wolfman, was primitive, brutal and emotional. He had a wild streak and was hard to control. He preferred dives and flea-bag motels. When Moss needed help, he looked to Randall first.

Moss reached for his phone.

"Got a job for you, Randall. One of our people, Morton Searcy, is getting nosey. Take care of the problem."

"You mean permanently?"

"Affirmative."

"What's the time frame?"

"Do it *tonight*."

"So what'll you have? For five grand, I'll gun down your victim on a dark street. It'll look like a holdup."

"Someone might ask questions. This has gotta look like an accident."

"How about a fatal crash on the interstate? Very tidy."

"How much?" Moss inquired.

"Ten grand."

"Ten? I thought it was eight!"

"Inflation. What can I say?"

"What else?"

Randall sighed. "Look, this works best when you tell me who you want whacked and you leave the details to me. I need space to do my own thing."

"O.K., Rembrandt. Take care of it. But don't screw it up!"

"This is me you're talking to, Moss, not that social misfit Wolfman. The job will be done!"

Randall slammed the phone down. "Peasant," he mumbled.

"Psycho," Moss muttered. A simple job, and Randall wanted to make a DeMille production out of it.

Twenty minutes later, Randall arrived at Eulenco. Morton Searcy was still in the building. Moss had arranged for a Eulenco security man to show Randall a photo of Searcy taken from the traitor's personnel file.

"Kind of ugly," observed Randall. "A geek. He's asking for it."

Randall waited patiently for Searcy to leave Eulenco. At forty three, Randall still had most of his dark brown hair,

and he considered himself handsome in a tough, Humphrey Bogart kind of way. An avid James Bond fan, he was decked out in a two-piece gray suit, as usual, and had a decanter of scotch on the seat next to him. You've gotta go through life first class, Randall believed. Let the Morton Searcys and Roger Mosses save bucks by going coach.

Given his views on operating with style, Randall was understandably embarrassed to be sitting in a beat up Ford station wagon. He hated using it on jobs, but his girlfriend had the Cadillac. Maybe it was a good thing. Searcy wouldn't think anyone would be stupid enough to follow him in a station wagon the size of a small house.

At 7:46, Searcy left the building by a side entrance and headed straight for a green Datsun. Randall had no trouble spotting him.

Through darkened streets, Randall followed Searcy at a distance, using a cell phone to keep in contact with Delphi—Moss' name for home base of the Eulenco security operation.

"What's the latest, Randall?" Moss asked.

"The pigeon is heading northwest."

"Must be going home."

"Affirmative," Randall said. "Nothing suspicious."

Thirteen minutes later, Searcy arrived at his two-story wooden frame house on West Lawrence Street. Randall parked the wagon a half block away.

"He's home, Delphi. I'm goin' in. In five minutes, he'll be on his way to Turncoat Heaven."

"You worry me, Randall."

"This is reality, baby. Wake up and smell the donuts."

Randall placed the phone on the car seat and headed for Searcy's house.

Randall planned to force his way inside the house and confront Searcy, but before Randall reached the driveway, Searcy dashed out of the house, hopped into his Datsun and roared off. Randall hustled back to the station wagon, revved up the engine and picked up his cell phone. "We're rolling again, Delphi."

"That was fast. Maybe something's going on."

Randall trailed Searcy as the renegade hacker sped along Walnut Street to the northwestern edge of Springfield. It became obvious Searcy was heading for Capitol Airport.

Things were not going smoothly.

"What should I do, Moss?"

Back at Delphi, Moss mulled his options. They were limited. If Searcy was flying somewhere for a rendezvous with state or federal law enforcement officers, he had to be stopped. Collateral damage was probably inevitable.

"Eliminate the problem," ordered Moss.

Searcy pulled into the long-term parking area and hurried inside the airport terminal. Randall followed at a distance. Searcy glanced furtively from side to side as he approached the ticket counter. By the time Searcy reached the head of the line, Randall was behind him. Searcy purchased a ticket for a Chicago flight that would depart in twenty minutes.

Randall returned to his station wagon, grabbed a few tools out of the back and cautiously made his way to the commuter plane that would carry Searcy to Chicago. When Moss was sure no one was watching, he went to work.

II

THE BASHFUL CANDIDATE

2

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 25

13 days before the election

Palm trees swayed in the sultry Fort Lauderdale breeze and waves crashed along the shore as David McGraw whipped his blue Corvette along A1A. He had overslept. Instead of cruising along at his usual leisurely pace, McGraw pushed the accelerator to the floor. If he covered the distance from his apartment to the *National Exposer* offices in record time, he could put in a full hour of work before lunch. Maybe it was the workaholic in him, but he decided to go for it.

A minute and forty-three seconds after leaving his apartment, the twenty-eight-year-old journalist pulled into the parking lot abutting a seedy stucco building nestled behind a rotting palm tree. A few moments later, so did News Editor Walter Boylan, a cigar-chomping New Yorker who happened to be McGraw's boss.

McGraw decided to beat Boylan to the punch.

"You're late!" McGraw snapped. "I've been out looking for you the last two hours."

"Stow it, McGraw. I got into the office about 8:30. I just took off a few minutes to grab a cup of coffee. But I appreciate you showing up before lunch."

"No problem, Walter. It's the least I can do."

McGraw threw an arm around Boylan's shoulder as they sauntered into the building. "What are the chances of taking an early lunch?"

"Pretty good for me. Lousy for you."

"I may complain about the working conditions."

"Won't do any good," Boylan said. "The publisher is in Bermuda this week."

A half hour later, McGraw looked up from the computer where he had been fine-tuning a headline and gazed out the window. On the other side of A1A, tourists trudged along a sandy beach. Seagulls swooped down from overhead. The sky had cleared after a morning shower, and the sun was shining brightly.

Gregarious and impulsive, McGraw was one of three copy editors who whipped stories into shape for the *National Exposer*, a tabloid rag that contaminated supermarket check-out racks throughout North America. About a million people shelled out a dollar and eighty nine cents for the *Exposer* each week to read stories like the one McGraw was wrestling with:

**ALIENS KIDNAP
OPRAH WINFREY;
SHE'LL RUN JUPITER**

Although some of the country's uninhibited supermarket weeklies had moved their offices to New York, the *Exposer* still operated out of Florida.

Walter Boylan peeked at McGraw's computer screen. "Try 'Mars'," he suggested. "It fits better than 'Jupiter'."

"The story says she's going to run Jupiter," McGraw protested.

"Change the story, too. Good grief, McGraw. Don't worry about accuracy in a yarn like this."

The copydesk phone rang. Boylan reached for it.

"Line 1, McGraw. Someone named Slater."

McGraw couldn't believe the state editor of the *Chicago Chronicle* was calling. Rick Slater rarely spoke to McGraw when McGraw worked for him. Why did he want to talk to McGraw now?

"How would you like to come back to beautiful, sunny Chicago?" Slater asked with forced cheerfulness.

McGraw knew that Slater, a harried man in his late forties, was a cantankerous workaholic who feigned friendliness only when he wanted something. McGraw also was aware the weather report in that morning's *Fort Lauderdale News* indicated Chicago would have a rainy day, with a high of forty-six.

"You've got to be kidding," McGraw snapped. "It took me twenty-seven years to get out of Chicago."

"Don't be hasty, McGraw. You know you're wasting your time at that crummy rag. I've never understood how a reporter can look at himself in the mirror when he works at a piece of crap like the *Exposer*."

Slater was right about that. Working for supermarket tabloids had many advantages—the higher pay and Florida's balmy climate came to mind—but there was one rather significant disadvantage: every time McGraw wrote a headline or edited a story at the *Exposer* he had the feeling he was selling a little more of his soul. McGraw missed the

respectability and prestige of working for a reputable newspaper. In Chicago, people were impressed when he told them where he worked: "Wow! You work for the *Chronicle!*" In Florida, the reaction was different: "Dear God! You work for the *Exposer?*"

"I'm offering you a way out, McGraw. Got a job for you. I can't go into details on the phone, but there could be a helluva story involving a candidate for governor. It'll take some digging, but it could be a career maker! I'm willing to forget you couldn't cut it here and give you another chance."

That got McGraw's dander up. "Couldn't cut it? Why, you has-been. I carried you for five years! You would have been fired long ago if I hadn't saved your ass."

"That's not the way I remember it. But what's past is past. Forget it. Just quit your screwing around and get back here! I need somebody *now*. The election is less than two weeks away."

"I don't understand why you're calling me," McGraw said. "You always hated my guts."

"Nonsense. What gave you that idea?"

"You told me you did, thirty or forty times."

"Well, sure, but I didn't mean it. I wanted to motivate you ... push you to do a better job."

"You must be in a real jam if you're asking me to come back."

A voice in McGraw's head whispered, "Don't be a sap, McGraw. Slater is a slave driver. Give up Florida to work for that jerk? No way, José."

McGraw leaned back in his second-hand swivel chair and gazed out the window at a shy tourist of college age who seemed to be debating whether to take off her jacket and bare all that her skimpy bikini would allow. She hes-

itated, started to take off the jacket, then thought better of it and slipped it back on. Still hanging onto the phone, McGraw leaned over to the open window.

"Do it, honey! Go for it! You're not going to have that body forever!"

Startled and embarrassed, the girl hugged her jacket tightly around her and hurried back to her Thunderbird.

"What are you yelling about, McGraw?"

"I thought I saw your wife across the street," McGraw lied.

"Can't be Myrna. She's in a de-tox center. Says I drove her to drink. That's ridiculous. I haven't driven her anywhere in months. ... Look, McGraw, you've heard the deal. I'm trying to do you a big favor. Just say 'yes' so I don't waste any more of my time. I've got a paper to get out."

Slater was always impatient—a Type-A heart attack candidate. He couldn't connect with the laid-back Florida lifestyle. He was chained to a desk all day and under a lot of stress, and like other *Chronicle* staffers, he wore sport coats and ties to work. At the *Exposer*, no one minded that McGraw chose to wear jeans and a dirty sweatshirt bearing the message "Let's Get Down and Dirty".

"Thanks, Slater, but I couldn't possibly tear myself away from writing headlines like 'WEREWOLF STUFFS SLY STALLONE INTO TRASH CAN'. Find yourself another pigeon. I've gotta go. I'm on a tight schedule. I've got to whip up a few slanderous headlines, lick some shit off the editor's shoes and run down to the beach to leer at Big Rosie. She's a free-spirited nymphomaniac who wears bikinis two sizes too small for her. But take care, you hear?"

"McGraw, wait! Don't hang up! ... Are you there, McGraw?"

McGraw sighed. "I'm here."

"Look, hotshot, stories like this don't come down the pike every day. This is a great opportunity, and there's a raise in it for you. This is your chance to get out of that swamp of mediocre fiction and lurid headlines. Come back to the real world! ... And there's another thing you might consider. If you don't help me, I'll see to it that you never work for a legitimate newspaper again!"

"You always were an asshole," McGraw grumbled. "Hang on a minute." He turned to Boylan, who was flipping through a folder in search of a recent photo of Big Foot. "My old boss in Chicago is offering me a job, Walter. Says if I turn him down, I'll never work for a legit paper again."

Boylan shrugged. "I thought *this* was a legit paper and everyone else was doing it wrong. ... Hell, take the job. You can always come back to Paradise and sewer journalism if you have to."

"All right," McGraw told Slater. "I'll be in Chicago in a few days."

"You'll be in Chicago *tonight*," Slater growled. "I'll see you at the office first thing in the morning. What do you think we're running here—a weekly?"

McGraw hung up. "I want to quit the *Chronicle* already," he mumbled.

"Better get out your snow shovel." Boylan suggested. "You must be nuts going back to Chicago and all that snow and ice."

"But you told me to!"

"Yeah, but I didn't think you'd be dumb enough to do it. You're too naive to work here. Go on, go back to the big, windy, cold city. And don't worry about Big Rosie. I'll tell her goodbye for you as we're sipping mai tais on the beach."

THE SPY BOOK

JOHN
WESTIN

The Soviet Union is on the verge of collapsing as the Soviets make a last-ditch effort to save their empire. Too bad they were counting on an unwilling spy and an American professor to do it.

Intrigue and laughs.

(Chapters 1, 4 and 5)

I

Orders from Moscow

August 1990

1

August

FROM THE STREET, Billy D's automobile repair shop in Brooklyn looked like hundreds of other car repair shacks scattered across the country. Out front were two gas pumps, three beat-up cars and a sign battered by storms. But this repair shop had something the others did not have—a Soviet secret agent working in the garage, only his shoes visible under an old Ford Escort.

A humorless man wearing a cheap blue suit waited impatiently inside the garage. "My car ready?" he growled.

Nick Boorstin, a thirty-eight-year-old immigrant with unruly black hair, crawled out from under the Ford. Grease covered his tattered overalls. "You come back in hour?"

"No!" said the customer.

Nick got to his feet and wiped grease off his hands. At five-ten he was about four inches shorter than the customer and at least sixty pounds lighter. "Well, I'm not finished. Wait here for hour?"

“No!”

Nick shrugged. “Okay. It’s ready.” He handed the customer the keys. The man headed into the office to pay for the repairs.

The Ford wasn’t really ready, of course. Nick hadn’t had time to adjust the brakes or tinker with the transmission. But what was he supposed to do? The man wanted his car immediately. If anything happened after the car left the garage, that was not Nick’s concern.

Three or four minutes later, the man emerged from the office, climbed into the Ford and drove off without so much as a “thanks” or “have a nice day”.

Nick kicked a wrench out of the way, getting ready for the next job, when he noticed a piece of paper stuck in his toolbox. He picked it up. It seemed to be blank, but Nick realized that on the paper probably was a hidden coded message the customer had left for him. Nick was trained to expect such things. He stuck the note in his back pocket. When lunchtime rolled around, he would return to his apartment and heat the paper to see if it contained a message from Moscow.

Sonuvabitch. So the guy was making a drop for him. The guy whose brakes were about to give out—probably in heavy traffic, maybe when he was going forty or fifty miles an hour—worked for the K.G.B., too. Well, how was Nick supposed to know? Nick assumed he was just another impatient slimeball who had wandered in off the street.

“*What’s next?*” Nick shouted to Billy Daniels, the owner of the shop.

“*Red Pontiac,*” Billy hollered. “*Check the brakes and the engine.*”

It occurred to Nick that his job gave him a unique opportunity in decadent capitalist America. Nick could knock off the whole population of America one-by-one simply by working on their cars. Sure, it would take a while, but Nick had time. Plenty of time. Moscow only contacted him every two or three years. Supervising the K.G.B.'s moles and sleeper agents in the Northeast—and South Carolina—was a part-time gig. The agents usually didn't give him trouble. Henry in Boston kept asking for more money and every once in a while Nick had to drop off a bag of loot for him, but most of the others didn't complain.

SHORTLY AFTER NOON, Nick devoured a hamburger at Maybell's, the greasy diner down the street, then drove his beat-up Chevy two miles to the three-story brick apartment building where he lived.

As "Maude" played on the Admiral television and his cat Ivan tore up another pair of slippers in his three-room furnished apartment, Nick held the note close to a candle and a message began to reveal itself. Very good so far.

Then the note caught fire.

Panicking, Nick reached for the nearest object and tried to blot out the flames. He singed his hand, crying out in pain.

A few seconds later, he smelled something burning—and discovered the object he had used to douse the flames was his billfold, which was now burning. Nick threw the billfold into the kitchen sink, turned on the faucet—and realized the flames had damaged his driver's license, credit cards and fifty-three dollars in paper money.

He sat at the table as though in a trance while Ivan stared at him with a "you are *so* dumb" look on his face. Then Nick noticed all was not lost. He had indeed saved most of the message from being destroyed. He fetched the code book taped to the bottom of a dresser drawer in his bedroom and returned to the kitchen table, where he attempted to decipher the message, which Moscow had sent in English because Nick's Russian was rusty. On a corner of the paper was inscribed "E3", so Nick opened the code book to page E3. It was a simple code; it involved starting at the bottom right and going up one column and down the next and up the next until the message was decoded. He took another look at the message. The letters were in the middle of the page so the fire had not defaced them:

	N	E	H	S	S	A	V	E	M	N	A	N
Y	R	A	E	I	A	Y	I	R	U	O	T	E
T	O	T	L	E	P	M	V	O	S	T	A	T
I	U	A	P	H	D	O	E	T	T	S	L	A
R	T	D	I	M	O	N	S	W	T	R	I	V
O	E	N	N	I	N	O	O	O	E	U	E	I
I	T	O	G	H	T	C	V	H	L	H	P	T
R	O	C	U	L	T	E	I	R	L	T	R	C
P	P	E	S	L	E	T	E	E	H	F	O	A

In a short time, he had decoded the message in its entirety:

ACTIVATE NATALIE.
 PROF THURSTON MUST TELL HER
 HOW TO REVIVE SOVIET ECONOMY ASAP.

DON'T TELL HIM HE IS HELPING US.
ECON DATA EN ROUTE.
TOP PRIORITY.

So, Moscow was assigning him to oversee a project with the highest priority. Nick thought about the ramifications. If the project was a success, Nick would be praised and recognized in the highest circles of government and undoubtedly promoted and given a hefty bonus. If the project failed, Nick would be held personally responsible. That would not mean retirement and a state pension. Moscow probably would decide to eliminate Nick, and one night when he least expected it, perhaps when he was in bed with the waitress who lived in the apartment down the hall, a quiet man with a vaguely familiar face would knock down the door of his apartment, gun down Nick and Molly—what a waste, she had a nice rack on her—and then hastily retreat. Police investigating the murders would conclude that Molly's husband had slain them, for what other motive could there be?, and the poor sap would be convicted and executed, and that was all right. When Nick died, he wanted to take some people with him. Maybe that's what the shrink back in Moscow meant when she said Nick had antisocial tendencies.

Nick knew he must move on this immediately. He called Billy Daniels and told him he wouldn't be back for a day or two, that the hamburger at Maybell's diner had given him food poisoning again. Then he threw a few things into an overnight bag, and—with message in hand—climbed into his blue Chevy and headed south on Interstate 95, the first leg of his trip to Charlottesville, Virginia.

4

NATALIE KRAMER RESIDED in a brick apartment house surrounded by dogwood and oak trees on a quiet residential street in Charlottesville, a city of about 50,000 people near the Blue Ridge Mountains. To her neighbors, this slender brunette seemed happy, friendly and perfectly normal—and even that had not aroused their suspicions. From conversations with her they had surmised that she liked ice cream, hamburgers, the novels and poetry of Robert Penn Warren, and a young plumber named Harry whose Pontiac often was parked in front of the apartment house.

The neighbors never had any reason to suspect she was an agent for the Soviet Union. Natalie had a hard time believing it herself, because she loved living in the United States and was very fond of Charlottesville, which was only about two miles from Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home-
stead.

If Natalie had appreciated life in the United States nine years earlier, when she had been an undergraduate major-

ing in history at Columbia University in New York City, she never would have become a spy for the Soviet Union. But she was younger then, a radical inflamed with contempt for the injustice and inequality she saw around her, and when a boyfriend took her to a meeting of a Communist cell a few miles from the university, it had not seemed all that threatening and despicable. Nick was the coordinator at these meetings—"Moscow's stooge," some called him—and his job was similar to the snake's function in the Garden of Eden. He wanted to corrupt these idealistic young people. In Nick's case, the motive was to put them in the service of Moscow. And Nick was very good at his job. He first encouraged them to participate in rallies for just causes, rallies where the Communists were only a small minority and the youngsters felt they were doing something worthwhile. Then he gave these young Communist sympathizers tasks to do, little things that would help Moscow in a minor way but, more importantly, would involve the recruits in Communist espionage activities. Then the importance of their work escalated, and before long they were deeper into the party than they had ever imagined possible. Nick had made it clear, the last time he had seen Natalie, that one day she would be called on to provide an important service for Moscow—and if she resisted, Natalie or her mother would be "eliminated." And so Natalie had become a mole for the Soviet Union.

NATALIE WAS BRUSHING her hair when the telephone rang at a few minutes after four that August afternoon. She always felt a twinge of fear when the phone rang, even after

all those years, because she never knew when Nick might call. Her life seemed to be sandwiched between telephone calls.

Rrrriiiiiinnng.

She could only hope it was Harry calling. Reluctantly, she picked up the receiver.

"You want to buy cemetery plot?"

It might be Nick calling. That was the opening gambit Nick had chosen to use instead of passwords. Unfortunately, Nick, who in some ways was dull-witted and conformed to the stereotype of the plodding Russian, had chosen an opening line that a number of other people might be using. Six times in the past five years Natalie had received such calls, and by the time she found out it wasn't Nick calling, she had purchased another cemetery plot. Television commercials said one should have enough funeral plots for the entire family, but Natalie lived alone and she had six.

"I might be interested. Do you have one in my shape?"

If Nick was calling, he would know now that indeed Natalie was on the other end of the line. It was such a stupid line she was embarrassed to say it.

"Definitely. Are you in good health?"

It was Nick's way of asking if she was alone and free to talk. She wanted to hang up on him, but she was too deeply involved with Nick and the Soviets to back out gracefully.

"Good health."

"Excellent. I am glad you have a listed telephone number."

"What?"

There was a deep sigh on the other end.

"Forget it. You would not understand ... We should meet to discuss cemetery plot."

Natalie yearned to exercise the prerogative of every American and say, "No, I do not want a cemetery plot, to hell with you," but Nick would not be amused.

"I suppose so."

"Tomorrow morning. Nine o'clock. Be there."

THE NEXT MORNING, NATALIE took a shower, brushed her hair and applied lipstick. (Force of habit, Nick wasn't worth it.) After breakfast, she drove her brown Volvo through the streets of Charlottesville as she speculated about how much danger she would be in. A simple assignment, such as copying names out of newspapers, would be nice, but it was no use kidding herself. Russia didn't use its moles for such uncomplicated tasks.

5

MINUTES LATER, SHE ARRIVED at the location Nick had selected three years earlier: Monticello.

Familiar with stories describing how Thomas Jefferson had invented a device to code and decode messages, Nick thought it would be ironic and amusing if they rendezvoused at the home Jefferson had designed for himself more than two hundred years earlier.

Natalie parked the Volvo and admired the beautiful red brick neoclassical Roman home Jefferson had created. Tourists milled around the grounds. "The next tour begins in a few minutes," a white-haired lady was saying. "You may purchase your tickets now."

Nick shelled out money for his ticket and kept his distance from Natalie. She recognized him immediately. Nick would always look the same—a little plodding man who had become trapped in the spy game and would never find his way out of the maze.

SHE BOUGHT A TICKET and within a few minutes the tour of the first floor of Monticello began. The second floor was off limits because of fire regulations. Then she noticed Nick had purchased a ticket for a different tour—to see the gardens and grounds. That idiot.

When Nick realized what had happened, he shelled out more dough for a ticket to tour the house.

As the tour guide talked about various gadgets and books that had belonged to Jefferson, Nick moved closer to Natalie.

“Better be worth it,” he said. “Had to buy two tickets.”

As the tour guide described the architectural ornamentation, Nick guided Natalie into a side room.

“Your time has come! You have opportunity to perform great service for the Fatherland!”

“My Fatherland is the United States,” she pointed out.

“Okay. Great service for *my* Fatherland—Soviet Union.”

He noticed a surveillance camera focused on them. “Maybe this was not good idea. Everywhere, there are cameras. What’s the matter? Don’t people trust me?”

“Nick, you’re a Russian agent. Why should people trust you?”

“Yes, but they don’t know that.”

“What do you want, Nick?”

“Back home they are having troubles with economy.”

“That’s putting it mildly. I read things are so bad Gorby turned his dacha into a bed and breakfast.”

“Gorby? You call our great leader, Comrade Gorbachev, Gorby?”

"There are a few other things I could call him."

"I suggest you show respect! Remember what we can do to you and your mother if you do not cooperate. Besides, he has *not* turned it into bed and breakfast. He sometimes has overnight guests, but I am sure they do not pay!"

"What do you want, Nick?"

"Moscow has important assignment for you. *Very* important. Why they want *you* to do it, I do not know."

"Get to the point, Nick."

"They want you to convince professor at university here—name is Thurston—to analyze why Soviet economy is in trouble and tell them how to change things."

"They might try capitalism."

"Very funny. Keep your sense of humor. You'll need it in Soviet prison. Things they do to women like you, they are not pretty."

"How am I supposed to get Thurston's help?"

"That is up to you. Just do it. By the way ..." He handed her a sack he was carrying. "In here is a wheel cipher."

"A real cipher?"

"No! A *wheel cipher*! Since Thomas Jefferson invented it, thought we would use it to exchange messages. I made two of these. One for you, one for me. Took two, three months."

She peered into the sack. "This thing looks complicated!"

"Instruction book is in sack. One more thing. I passed Last Chance Motor Lodge on way into the city. We'll use bench in front as our dead drop when we need to communicate."

"You like this cloak and dagger stuff, don't you, Nick?"

"This is very serious business. One mistake, we wind

up in prison! ... Okay, let's get back to tour. Is very interesting."

NICK DISAPPEARED BEFORE the tour ended. Natalie made her way to the parking area, climbed into her Volvo and drove back into the city, turning onto a street winding past large old houses with massive lawns. The assignment from Moscow was very confusing. How was she supposed to secure the professor's help without his knowledge? And yet, it must be that way, for she did not want to put the professor's life in jeopardy. Or hers.

She drove slowly back to her house. It had not been a good week. First, the kitchen sink had plugged up, and that annoyed her. Then Moscow activated her, and somehow the sink did not seem very important.

Later that day, she signed up for two of Professor Eugene Thurston's economics classes.

Three Cat Tales

Jack Gilhooly

Three cat treats in one package. A Christmas story about Smokey and Boomer, and two memoirs in which Boomer and Princess tell about their memorable lives with a Midwestern couple.

Introduction to Boomer's Story

This is Boomer's book. And this is his story.

To be honest, Boomer did not type up his story. I typed it for him on a computer. He's smart, but he's not that smart.

When I wrote *Smokey and Boomer* a few years ago, both cats lived with my wife and me in central Illinois, and both cats were healthy. But Smokey died later as I prepared the book for publication. He was sixteen years old when he kicked the litter box, so to speak. They say one cat year is equivalent to about five years in a human life, so in human terms Smokey was eighty years old. Basically, he just grew tired and weak and died of old age.

Boomer is eighteen as I write this. Bless his heart, he seems to be doing well. He loves

to get under the covers to take a nap, and at night he often sleeps next to my feet.

Some people say my wife and I spoiled Smokey and Boomer, but I don't think so. We simply try to treat them as the precious little creatures they are. They don't ask much, and they bring a lot of happiness to people around them.

As I was sitting in a chair in my study thinking about what to say in this book, I felt a little tug on my left arm. I looked down and there was Boomer. It was obvious he was trying to tell me something. It was as though he was saying "you don't need to decide what to write about me. I will tell you what to write. After all, it is *my* story."

It's going to be a great story, Boomer assured me. Everybody will want him to appear on radio shows and television network talk shows.

Well, I don't think that is going to happen. Boomer is ninety in human years and he's slowing down a bit. Instead of sleeping eighteen hours a day, he sleeps about nineteen.

He's really not up to gallivanting around the country promoting his book. He would be on "The Tonight Show" with Jay Leno and Jay would say to him, "So, Boomer. You've written a book. What are you going to do next?" and Boomer would be working on his next nap. *That* is what he would do next.

Boomer and I discussed what the book should be called. I suggested he call it *It's Not Easy Being Me*. For a while we considered titling it *My Life and Hard Times*. Finally, Boomer decided *Boomer's Story* would do just fine. It has a certain ego-boosting simplicity to it.

Boomer says we should tell you about the authors. I pointed out that the whole book is about Boomer and people will learn about him as they read it. Perhaps I should tell them about *my* accomplishments.

Boomer growled a little. "If you must," he was saying, "but keep it short. Just say you were born a long, long time ago, graduated from college, worked on newspapers and wrote some books." I typed what he suggested,

but before I finished I felt one of his little paws brushing against my hand again. “That’s enough about you. What are you going to do, hog the whole book?”

I suppose he is right, since it is his book, but Boomer and I will discuss the subject further when Boomer is hungry and trying to get me to give him more of his moist cat food.

1

I Find a Home

Pa said to me:

“So, Boomer. Do you want to start your story by telling how my wife found you and your brother and sister in a box in the parking lot of the Kroger grocery store a few blocks down the street from us?”

I gave Pa a withering look that showed I was disgusted. He talks about it like it was no big deal. Like it was as simple as a walk in the park. But that’s not the way it was. It was terrifying. It was like something out of *Jumanji*, where the big, fierce animals come to life and terrorize the people playing the board game.

My brother and sister and I were little kittens, and the world looked big and scary to

us. Someone dumped us in the parking lot because they didn't want to take care of us, and there were these huge humans roaming all over, and big automobiles cruising around. We didn't know what would happen to us.

Then this lady came riding up in her electric cart and she and her caregiver said they would take us to her house and find homes for us. I was still nervous when I heard that. For all we knew, this lady was going to do terrible things to us.

But someone placed the box on top of her cart — I found out later the lady used an electric cart because she was handicapped, on account of she had polio as a child — and we began the bumpy ride to her house.

Well, we got there, and then for the first time we saw Pa, and we still didn't know what to think. Ma and Pa decided to keep us in the garage for the time being because they had a dog and a cat roaming around inside the house. They placed an ad in a newspaper offering to give us away free to people who would take good care of us.

A few days later, they found homes for all

three of us kittens. They sent my sister and brother and me to three different families. But it didn't work out for me — the girl's boyfriend didn't want me around — and she brought me back to Ma and Pa's home. Ma called someone else and said they could have me, and a short time later I was given away again. But that didn't work out either.

So I wound up back at Ma and Pa's house again, and I was tired of all this. I wanted a home where I could feel secure and happy. Well, the Old Man didn't understand that, and again they called someone to come and take me to their home. The latest prospective cat owner was on his way to the house when I fell asleep in Pa's arms. I was looking as cute and cuddly as I could, and Pa said, "all right. We can keep him."

It was a little after that when Pa and Ma decided on a name for me — Boomer, on account of I kept coming back, just like a boomerang. I knew where I wanted to be. But it sure was hard getting the thick-headed old man to realize what I wanted.

Love in the Caves

Jack Gilhooly

A funny and touching story about I Think and his family and friends, who lived long ago when the world was still young. Read all about the first chariot, the first dictionary, the first election, the first fast food restaurant and the first saloon. They did it all, baby!

1

A Long Time Ago

On a scale of one to ten, weather in the old days rated about a minus eight. In winter, snow piled up high above the caves where people lived. People did not know it was snow, or where it came from, and that made it worse. Red Eyes, one of the cavepeople in the settlement near Bethlehem, Pennsylvania known as Utter Bliss, dug out of the family cave one morning and noticed everything was covered with white again. "What in the world is this stuff?" he asked. "Every year it falls on us, like taxes. Are the gods angry with us?" It was not until years later that I Think, Red Eyes' son, named it snow and said that it was the same color as clouds because snow was actu-

ally fallen clouds. Obviously the poles holding up the clouds had collapsed.

In the spring, the snow melted and rain fell. Not little showers, but torrential downpours which gushed out of the heavens and flooded the area.

Then, the warmth of summer would dry the land and nature was in its glory. To cave-men, it was the bonkball season. They would take vacations and sleep outdoors.

In autumn, leaves on the trees would turn colors, days became cooler and the men went on hunting expeditions to find enough food to last through the winter. Storytellers would begin a new season of storytelling and let the old reruns die.

Then winter would arrive and the cycle would start again. And so it was for I Think and his family and friends.

One chilly autumn evening Red Eyes staggered home from the swamp where he had overindulged in berry juice with friends and he asked his wife, I Dunno, if she wanted to have a child. "I Dunno," she said, and the next

year—after a cold, long winter—I Think was born.

The science of name selection was still in its infancy. Children did not have names at birth, but a year or two later they would be given names. People would ask “How’s the kid?” or “How’s your son?” I Dunno would say, “I dunno,” but Red Eyes would say, “He’s gonna make a great little caveman.” They considered calling him Great Little Caveman.

I Think’s first words were “I Think” and, like many other children, his name came from his first words. This was also true of his mother, I Dunno. In other cases, names were the result of a trait or characteristic others saw in the person, as it had been for I Think’s father, Red Eves, who drank too much; the teacher known as Old Ironsides; and the student called Puzzled.

I Think was an unusual child. When other cavechildren roamed through the countryside pestering little animals, I Think would sit around thinking. I Dunno tried to break him of the habit but did not succeed.

When I Think was a few years older, other

children allowed him to play bonkball with them, but they put him in right field and forgot about him. They told I Think he was too skinny and too short to be a good athlete. “What do you expect?” I Think asked. “I’m only eleven years old. You don’t get Willie Mays for the salaries you are paying.” (This could be a latter-day forgery.)

Among I Think’s friends were Let Go, an appealing girl who had to fight the boys off; Foul Play, the school bully; Hug Me, an affectionate and well-mannered girl; Didja Hear, a boy who was always telling funny stories that began “Didja hear the one about ...”; Listener, a quiet boy who was known as a good listener; and Fast Talkin’, a caveboy who fancied himself as a ladies’ man.

Teenage Years

When I Think was thirteen years old, he ventured out on a double date with Fast Talkin'.

Let Go and Fast Talkin' were smooching when I Think still was trying to figure out what to say to his date, Hug Me.

"You think a lot, don't you," Hug Me noted.

"Yes."

"What do you think about?"

"Getting out of jams like this."

The girl giggled. "You are kind of cute."

"Hug Me..."

"All right."

I Think was going to say something to her, but Hug Me moved closer and he hugged her.

Courting a cavegirl was easier than I Think had expected it to be.

As the first few years of school passed, I Think felt a growing uneasiness about his education and his future. He wanted to know more. Simply counting to seven and drawing primitive artwork on cave walls did not seem fulfilling. He could talk to the more intelligent members of the small cave community, but that wouldn't take years, that would take an afternoon, and there was still so much more to know. He often asked Red Eyes questions, like "why are there stars in the sky?"

"To give us light at night when the sun is sleeping," said Red Eyes.

"You told me that one day everything was dark in the middle of the day. Then, everything was light again. What caused that?"

"The sun was taking a nap. Suns get tired, too."

I Think decided to think about that.

When I Think was fourteen, Red Eyes and the other fathers took him and his friends of the same age hunting for the first time. They

wore togas, carried spears, ventured far from their caves, and huddled close together when animals came near. They heard wild animals, but didn't see many. Usually the animals were dead when the hunters brought them back to show the children.

I Think was told that henceforth, he would be expected to go on the hunts as long as he was in good health and not too old. Things like that made him hate the word "henceforth".

When he was seventeen, I Think decided to move out of his parents' cave and live in a cave of his own in a new development in a suburb of Utter Bliss. Didja Hear and Fast Talkin' visited him in his new home.

"How did you get your parents to agree to let you leave home?" Fast Talkin' wondered.

"I'm not sure. I think I insulted my mother's cooking and my dad's grocery."

"No wonder they didn't object," Didja Hear said. "They probably helped you pack."


But I Think did not cut the ties with his parents. He needed to earn hopeks to pay for his cave, so he agreed to help Red Eyes run his little grocery store.

Christmas Village

Jack Gilhooly

Two children discover what it's like to actually visit inside a tiny Christmas village that sits on top of a table. Come along and visit the little town as residents prepare to celebrate Christmaas.

It's Beginning to Look Like Christmas

he pilot flipped on the seat belt sign and the United Airlines jet began a slow descent as it neared Indianapolis. Below, cars and trucks cruised along slippery snow-covered interstate highways. Brightly lit homes and businesses dotted the landscape.

As David Wilson viewed the scene from his window seat, it reminded him of a miniature Christmas village, like those sold in department stores. When the plane dropped lower, he could see little people going about their business in the village. Was that how humans on earth looked to the Almighty up in Heaven? Like little people living in miniature villages?

The jet slid to a stop and David and the other passengers made their way to the terminal. Once inside, David claimed his suitcase. He slipped on his gloves, pulled his black leather jacket tighter around him and ventured out into the wintry wonderland in the general direction of the long-term parking lot where he

had left his dark blue Chevy Blazer. This particular “village” did not seem so cozy and warm when he was down in the middle of it.

Snow pelted the Blazer as David pulled out of the parking lot and merged into traffic. The roads were hazardous. A few drivers already had slid into power poles or other vehicles. It quickly became obvious the journey to his house on the east side of Indianapolis would be a slow one on this December evening.

He reached for his cell phone. “I’ll be home in twenty minutes,” he told Nancy, his wife. “I am back in the city, and I am officially on vacation.”

“Why are you calling? You shouldn’t be on your phone when the roads are bad! You’ll have an accident!”

“I’m fine,” he insisted. “I’m a careful driver and—”

A Dodge lurched into his lane, forcing him to swerve to avoid a crash. Brakes squealed.

“What happened?” Nancy asked nervously.

“Can’t talk now. Too many crazy drivers on the road.”

“And I’m married to one of them!”

David hung up and focused on his driving. To him, it seemed the roads were clogged with three species of drivers: amateurs who had no idea how to drive on ice and snow; aggressive type-A road hogs in pickup trucks and utility vehicles with four-wheel drive who

saw it as their mission in life to run the amateurs off the roads; and a small band of sensible, knowledgeable drivers like David who were caught in the middle.

He flicked on his car radio. A deejay reported temperatures had fallen steadily since hitting the day's high of 24 degrees Fahrenheit. Snow would continue another three or four hours before tapering off. David paid attention to details like that because he was one of the on-camera weathermen for Weather Today, a cable television channel. He had just returned from an assignment in Michigan—his last before his Christmas vacation.

The Blazer plowed on through traffic, passing Christmas decorations displayed in store windows and colorful lights draped on trees, until it reached the eastern fringes of Indianapolis. A mile up the road, David turned onto a snow-covered driveway and parked in front of the three-bedroom wood frame house where he lived with his wife and two children. It was a comfortable home, large enough to provide ample room for the family, yet small enough to feel cozy. Strings of lights were draped across the gutter along the front of the house. Brightly lit wreaths adorned the windows.

As David closed the front door behind him, six-year-old Rudy gave him his usual warm greeting—"What did you bring me, daddy?"—and nine-year-old Amanda showed David the damage Rudy had wrought that day. "He broke the arm off my doll!"

Nancy had dinner ready—a macaroni dish with

sauce and beef and a few unidentifiable elements thrown in—and then David settled into his favorite recliner in the living room to relax. In one corner of the room, a brightly lit Christmas tree stretched to the ceiling. Scattered nearby were Santa, snowman and reindeer decorations. Over the fireplace hung Christmas stockings bearing the names of all four family members.

David skimmed the *Indianapolis Star* as Nancy watched “Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?” on television. Rudy rolled a toy truck over the carpet. A few feet away, Amanda built a house out of Lego blocks. As they played, Rudy and Amanda gabbed excitedly about the trip to their grandparents’ house the family would take the next day. David’s parents lived in Cedar Corners, Indiana, about a hundred and fifty miles north of Indianapolis.

David suddenly looked concerned. “Oh-oh, Rudy. The newspaper says little boys who have been bad this year won’t get anything for Christmas.”

Rudy stopped playing with the truck. “What?” He approached the recliner. “It says that? In the paper?”

Amanda frowned. “Boys shouldn’t get presents anyway. Only girls should, ‘cause girls don’t get into trouble as much.”

Rudy scrunched up his face. “It’s not fair!”

Nancy smiled. “Daddy and Amanda are just being mean, Rudy. Of course you’ll get presents ... But I don’t think Daddy will.”

Rudy returned to his truck. "No, 'cause Daddy's bad."

David sighed. "Isn't it your bed time?"

Amanda looked at her watch. "I think it is. It's almost nine."

Rudy studied his play watch, which didn't work. "No it isn't."

"Well, you'd better go to bed anyway," said Nancy. "We've got a big day tomorrow."

"Yes!" said Amanda. "Grandma's cookies."

"And Grandpa's Christmas Village!" exclaimed Rudy. Grandma Hazelle always made Christmas cookies for them, and Grandpa Raymond always set up a small Christmas Village on a table in the living room of his house.

As the children headed up the stairs to bed, Nancy confronted David. "I make cookies, too. Why do they think your mother's cookies are better than mine?"

David shrugged. "Maybe because you slice yours off a roll of dough you buy at the store, pop them in the oven and they're done. Mom makes her cookies from scratch."

"Well, she has more time than I do."

"She makes her cookies with love."

"There's love in the refrigeration section at the grocery. I feel it when I buy cookies that I can bake in a few minutes. I love that!"

"You're hopeless."

"I know. I like your mom's cookies, too."

"You won't get any because you've been bad this year."

"We'll see what your mom says about that."

"She's the one who told me."

"Rudy is right. Daddy's bad."

"Is that so? Well, at least Daddy knows a good cookie when he sees it."

"Keep it up. You'll be sleeping out in the snow tonight."

She put her head on his shoulder as the Bruce Willis flick *Die Harder* started on television. In the film, Willis battled the bad guys in an airport terminal at Christmas as a storm raged.

"I think I've been through this once already today," David commented.

"Really?" said Nancy. "Did you beat up any villains?"


"I pushed a little old lady out of the way when I was trying to buy my ticket. Does that count?"

"My hero."

"Seriously. Don't I remind you of Bruce Willis?"

Nancy gave her slightly overweight hubby the once-over. "No."

"And *that* is why you aren't going to get any of my mother's cookies."

he next morning, Rudy barged into his mother's and father's bedroom a few minutes after six.

"Time to go!" he announced.

David was still sleepy. "Go? Go where?"

"Grandpa and Grandma's house!"

"It's too early. Go back to bed."

Rudy stared at his mom and dad.

David pulled his pillow over his head. "Is he gone yet?" he asked Nancy.

Nancy opened her eyes. "He's not leaving. You might as well get up."

David yawned. "Is it too late to trade him in for another kid?"

"Hey!" said Rudy.

Nancy put on her bathrobe. "Daddy is joking." She poked David in the stomach. "Get up, Daddy."

"Must be that silly watch he carries around," David grumbled, as he slipped on his blue flannel bathrobe. "We're all on Rudy Time."

"Yes! Rudy Time!" Rudy shouted, as he scampered out of the room.

Nancy made sure everyone had packed enough clothes for a four-day stay in Cedar Corners. After breakfast, the family piled into the Blazer, David and Nancy in the front seat, Rudy and Amanda in back.

The storm was long gone, but two inches of snow blanketed everything. The sun was hiding behind clouds, and the temperature hovered in the lower 20s. Not much of the snow would be melting.

As they drove north on U.S. 31, David's thoughts turned to why he liked these Christmas-time journeys to Cedar Corners so much. It was more than just spending Christmas with his wife and children ... and getting away from the pressures of his job ... and visiting his mother and father. It was because it was like actually going back to a time when things were more carefree and less complicated. At least they had seemed care-free and simple to him. His mother and father might not think so. He probably had caused them all sorts of grief.

His thoughts were interrupted by Rudy. "I bet Grandpa changed the village again this year!"

It was a safe bet because every year Grandpa changed something in the village. He might add a new building. Or get rid of an old one. Or add new people figures to stand in the snow outside the buildings. Or he might come up with new accessories, such as benches or light poles or trees. When David was young, he looked forward to seeing what was new in the village as much as Rudy did now.

Their Grandpa was in his sixties, but the Christmas village endured because Grandpa's heart and mind were forever young. Sure, he had been a practical man all his life. Before retiring, he repaired everything from cars to buses to small airplanes at a local garage. He was able to fix just about anything. But he always had an impractical side too. Grandpa Raymond liked to tell children that it was no mystery how televisions

worked. There were little people inside the televisions, acting out the shows and delivering the news. Copying machines? Simple. Little people inside the machines drew on sheets of paper whatever was supposed to be copied. Computers? There were little geniuses inside the machine who searched for information or added and subtracted numbers very fast and then put the results on the screen.

The Christmas Village was a manifestation of Grandpa's imagination that returned every year and never stopped flourishing. It was a little world that brought joy to Grandpa and everyone else who saw it.

Grandma Hazelle was a loving person, too. She devoted herself to her family and she loved Christmas. The cookies were one of the ways she showed that love.

"David!" said Nancy, stirring him from his reverie. "Didn't you miss the turn?"

"No. I thought I'd go a different way this time."

In the back seat Amanda laughed. "He missed the turn," she told Rudy.

Over the River and Through the Woods

Cedar Corners was a small town, home to about 12,000 people and numerous cats and dogs. David's parents still lived in the same two-story house on Clinton Street where they had lived when David was a boy.

There was something special about growing up in a small town. You knew many of the people in town. It was easier to make friends with other children. Many of the businesses were clustered together near the Courthouse. And it was easy to walk to schools and most other places you wanted to go. The people in town took pride in their high school sports teams—particularly the basketball team. Like most people in Indiana, the residents of Cedar Corners went crazy over high school basketball.

The yard surrounding the Clinton Street house was large. In the backyard, areas that had been worn bare when David and his brother Jerry shot baskets at a make-

shift basketball goal had mostly disappeared and were now covered by grass. An old backyard swing set had been removed years ago to make room for Grandma's garden.

The Blazer pulled up in front of the house and Rudy and Amanda jumped out. Raymond and Hazelle hurried out of the house to greet them.

"Grandpa! Grandma!" shouted the kids.

"Well, who are you?" asked Raymond. "I was expecting a little girl and boy. You are big children!"

"It's us, Grandpa!" exclaimed Rudy. "Rudy and Amanda!"

"Well, so it is!"

Grandpa and Grandma hugged the children and then helped David and Nancy carry their suitcases and boxes of wrapped Christmas presents into the house.

It was cozy inside. The Christmas tree in the living room was a real pine tree, not an artificial one like the tree at their house in Indianapolis. In the fireplace a real log burned; their fireplace back home had a light that lit up to make it look like a log was burning. And the smell of fresh baked date and sugar cookies filled the room. It was like the difference between Christmas in a store window and the kind of real Christmas people celebrated years ago.

Under the tree were presents Grandpa and Grandma had wrapped. Rudy's eyes wandered to the far corner of the living room where the little Christmas Village was nestled on a table. He hurried over and gazed at the scene in amazement. The table was covered with a white cloth and shreds of cotton to look like snow. Every once in a while Grandpa would drop more little bits of cotton on the village to make the snow a little deeper. A dozen little buildings were scattered around the village ... three homes, a church, newspaper office, police station, movie theater, library, general store, a bar, a bank and another building on the edge of town. Rudy couldn't make out what it was. Near the buildings were little people ... a pastor standing near the nativity scene in front of the church, a man driving a snowplow, a Santa Claus, a storekeeper outside of the general store, a man hailing a taxi outside the bank, a tramp near the bar and children sledding in the Town Square. Near the square was a vacant space. Apparently Grandpa had not decided what building to put there. Next to the road a sign announced "Welcome to Belle Center".

"What do you think?" Grandpa asked Rudy.

"It's terrific, Grandpa. Where's the train?"

"Well, I didn't put the tracks and the train around the village this year. If the people want to get out of town, I reckon they can go to the bus station."

He pointed at a building Rudy hadn't been able to

identify—a bus station with two buses parked beside it. A mother and child waited to board one of the buses.

“Yes! That’s neat!”

Grandpa picked up the library and set it aside. “The front steps are damaged. I’ve got to repair them.”

The family talked about the weather and what the children had accomplished in school the past year and David’s job reporting for Weather Today and Nancy’s job in a craft store. Then the children played with toys they had brought along until it was bed time. Every once in a while Rudy would look under the tree, wondering what Grandpa and Grandma were giving him this year.

A few minutes after nine, Rudy and Amanda headed upstairs and slipped on their pajamas. Shortly after that, Hazelle tucked their covers around them.

A few minutes after ten, the rest of the family went to bed. Rudy was still not asleep.

“Amanda!” he said.

“What?” she replied, sleepily.

“I think they’re in bed. Let’s go downstairs and look at the presents.”

“Let’s not.”

Rudy hopped out of bed. “C’mon!”

Amanda reluctantly climbed out of bed and put on her bunny slippers. "I think you're going to be a burglar when you grow up," she whispered.

Rudy laughed. "Or a fireman."

"Someone like you should never be allowed near fire."

The kids cautiously peeked into the hallway. The coast was clear. As they started down the steps, the wood creaked.

"Quiet!" whispered Amanda. "They'll hear us."

They took a couple more steps down the stairs. The wood creaked again.

Then the kids scampered the rest of the way down the stairs and piled into the living room. Amanda flipped the switch that lit the Christmas tree so they would have some light.

They tried to read the nametags on the ten or twelve presents under the tree.

Rudy pointed to the biggest present. "This one is mine!" he said.

Amanda examined the nametag. "No it isn't. It's for mommy." She found two presents with Rudy's names on them. "These are yours!"

Rudy picked one of them up and shook it. Then the other one. "Let's open them!"

"We can't. They'd be really mad at us."

Rudy headed over to the Christmas Village. He flipped a switch on the box that controlled the street lights and lights in the newspaper office and the gen-

eral store. He flipped another switch; lights in the theater and bus station came on. He flipped a third switch and two houses lit up.

“You’d better stop that,” cautioned Amanda, as she walked over to the village. “You don’t know which switches to push.”

Rudy ignored her and pressed another switch. The police station lit up. Then he pushed on two of the switches at once.

Suddenly the room was filled with a blinding flash of light that scared the children. Moments later, they noticed something was happening to them. They felt strange. They seemed to be shrinking in size—and falling toward the village. They screamed.

