

The Arrangement

(Novel in progress)

By

Eric Gorton

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Chapter 1

Tim hung up the phone, rolled his chair away from his desk, stretched his legs and looked blankly toward the windows on the other side of the newsroom, completely oblivious to the first snow of the season. Thoughts of \$100,000 a year, bonuses and raises, and "probably much more" ran through his head like a broken record. Eventually, a few questions worked their way in: What am I waiting for? What if it's not so great? What will Karen think? The dizzying torrent of thoughts continued until some movement near the entrance to his cubicle got his attention.

"Roger!" Tim said, obviously startled. "Sorry, I didn't realize you were there."

"I didn't mean to sneak up on you," the burly editor said with a chuckle.

"Just thinking about a good way to wrap up this story about Cook. It looks like he really screwed up." A good recovery, Tim thought.

"What's the latest?"

"No charges yet. Cook is still denying everything, but Thomas seems to be pretty confident in the evidence. It will probably be scheduled for the grand jury in January, but I have a feeling there's already a deal in the works. We'll see."

"Has Thomas given you anything?"

"A little."

"Does anyone else have it?"

"I don't think so."

"Good. I love watching XTV playing catch up. As soon as you're done with that, you can get an early start on your vacation. You've earned it."

"Thanks. I could use a little extra time."

"Be careful out there. The weather is supposed to keep getting worse through tonight. I imagine everything will start shutting down pretty soon."

"Well, I guess I have an excuse if I can't finish my shopping. I'll blame the weather."

"I might have to try that too. Have a good holiday. Merry Christmas."

"Thank you. Merry Christmas to you."

Thoughts of \$100,000 a year started running through Tim's head again as soon as Roger walked to the next cubicle. In two years, he would make more money than he would make in six years at the newspaper. They would be able to pay off Rob's college loans and maybe even pay for Holly's college. Henry sure seemed to be in a hurry. Hopefully he could delay him a bit. The trip could not be canceled, even for the promise of \$100,000 a year, and he would like to give Roger a couple weeks notice. He glanced at his cell phone and saw that Karen had sent him a text: "I told Rob you will pick him up when you get off work. He's waiting for you at the dorm. I will see you guys at home. Be careful. Roads are getting bad."

Tim stood up for a closer look. This time he noticed the snow blanketing the cars and the parking lot. Still, the thought of

\$100,000 a year, and probably much more, had most of his attention. Henry had to be on to something. He said he would be a part of history. "Why me?" became one of the questions as he glanced back at the computer. He needed to get his mind back on the Cook story. Just another sentence or two about Cook's four terms as city treasurer would do.

Tim scooted his chair back to the computer and scanned a couple articles he found in the archives. James Cook became the youngest elected official in city history at age 24, barely beating long-time treasurer Willis Smith. The city received several commendations for its stewardship of taxpayer dollars during Cook's first term and he won a second term by a little larger margin. While the state battled crippling financial woes during his third term, Cook was credited with keeping the city in the black. He was elected to a third term in a landslide and more accolades followed. He even made appearances on cable and network news shows to discuss how the city was able to avoid the troubles plaguing so many other cities in the state and around the nation. Cook basically ran unopposed for the fourth term. A former employee of the treasurer's office ran a short campaign against him, alleging the boy wonder was not all he was cracked up to be. However, the former employee couldn't get enough financial backing and dropped out long before voters had a say. He never hinted that Cook was doing anything illegal, only that he was getting a lot of credit for the work of others.

Tim added the final details, sent the file to Roger and texted Rob that he was on his way.

"Merry Christmas, Tim. Take lots of pictures on your trip. I can't wait to hear about it," said Nancy as she hurried past. Nancy had been in a panic about the storm since it was forecast three days ago. Now that it had arrived, a heart attack seemed certain.

Thoughts about Henry's offer flooded back as Tim brushed the snow off his car and he hardly realized he was doing it. He started the engine and sat for a moment in a funk before putting the car in gear. He eased out of the parking lot still preoccupied by Henry's phone call and started heading for Rob's dormitory. The red lights flashing on in front of him jolted him into reality. He hit the brakes hard and felt the car slide forward. His body lunged a bit as his car made contact with the car in front of him. He looked in the rear view mirror and noticed that the driver behind him managed to avoid a collision and had stopped at an angle.

The driver of the car he hit was half way to him when he opened his door.

"Are you OK?" the man asked.

"Yes. Are you?"

"Yes. I seem to be," he said, sort of looking himself over. The long scar running across his left cheek was obviously the result of something else. "Let's see here," he said, leaning over and brushing some snow off the bumpers that rested against each other. "It doesn't look like more than a scratch, if that."

Tim took a quick look and agreed. There didn't seem to be anything the insurance companies needed to know about.

"I'm really sorry," Tim said. "Do you want my insurance information?"

"Nooooo," the man said politely. "This is nothing. Happy holidays."

"Same to you," Tim said as his victim turned and headed back to his car. The driver of the car who slid to a stop behind Tim was not as forgiving and shouted a few obscenities as he drove around in

the other lane. Tim controlled the urge to give him a special holiday greeting and got back behind the wheel. "How about thinking about what you're doing you idiot," he scolded himself.

He tried to keep a respectable pace as well as a good distance between himself and the car in front of him as he made his way down Main Street and headed for University Drive. Thoughts of the winding hill down to the dormitory now preoccupied him. The university crews usually did a good job of keeping the roads clear, but this was no ordinary storm. Forecasters were predicting a foot by late evening and the way it was coming down, that prediction might be on the low side. The city was going to have its first white Christmas in years, something Tim had been looking forward to, and not just for the nostalgia. For the moment, though, he was hoping the storm could let up for half an hour.

Rob came out the front door as soon as his father pulled up, wearing a backpack bursting at the seams, carrying a laptop computer in one hand and dragging a duffel bag crammed with laundry with the other. He tossed his stuff on the back seat and joined Tim in the front. "Thanks for the lift," he said, dusting snow onto the floorboard.

"No problem," Tim said nonchalantly, managing to chuckle at himself. "Looks like we'll finally have a white Christmas."

"Yup. First one I've ever had. Can we go by the mall real quick. I need to get something for Lori?"

"Are you kidding? The mall is probably closed already."

"She's going home tomorrow. She plans to stop by our house on her way out so we can exchange gifts."

"You should have thought about that before today."

"Sorry. I've had exams and projects. Can we just check."

"I don't know. What are you going to do if the mall is closed?"

"Wait until after the break, I guess. But I'd really like to try."

Tim paused for a moment to consider the request and to discern if the snow really was coming down harder now than when he left the office. "You push if we get stuck," he said. "Call Mom and let her know what we're doing."

"Thanks. I owe you."

Tim managed to get the car back to Main Street with only one close encounter with a sidewalk. His blood pressure rose again when he had to stop at a traffic light before making a left turn. It didn't help that Karen was unhappy about their little side trip, but Rob was dealing with her. When the light turned green, Tim shifted into low gear and pressed gently on the gas. The tires spun, the car slid a little to the left and then moved slowly forward. He began breathing again as he got into a line of traffic and the tracks it had created. The trip to the mall, which normally took 10 minutes, took 25, but it was still open. He parked in what would do for a parking spot and headed inside with Rob.

"Let's not be too choosy. It's the thought that counts," he said as they reached the doors.

Rob headed straight for a jewelry store. The announcement that the mall would be closing in 15 minutes came over the PA system just as they arrived. Tim watched for a moment as his son scanned the displays looking for the perfect gift. When the announcement came that 10 minutes remained before the mall would close, he offered some fatherly advice.

"Have you got her a card yet?" he asked.

"No."

"Let's go to the card store. They have gifts too. You've only been dating a few months. I think the jewelry can wait."

Rob agreed. He settled on a stuffed animal and a humorous holiday greeting just as the final warning to shoppers sounded.

The trip home was slow but relatively uneventful. Thoughts of \$100,000 a year returned as he pulled in the driveway. Tim wanted to rush in and break the news to Karen but fought the urge as she greeted them and started asking to see the present for Lori. Holly showed up for a peek as well. They both approved and Holly volunteered to wrap the gift.

"How are the roads?" Karen asked.

"Covered," Tim said. "Nothing is moving too fast." No need to mention his little mishap on Main Street since there wasn't any evidence. He looked at the clock. Henry asked him to call back around seven—four hours to go. Calling sooner probably wouldn't hurt. Henry seemed to be in a hurry, but shouldn't he think it through? He told Karen he wanted to take a short nap before helping with any chores and headed to the bedroom. There was no way he was going to sleep, but he needed some time alone to think. Of course, the only thing he could think of was \$100,000 a year and probably much more. How much thought did he really need to put into it? Maybe if he could get his mind off it for a bit, he could be a little more thorough in his evaluation.

It took about 10 minutes to realize there was nothing on TV that would divert his attention. He had some presents to wrap, but wasn't in the mood. He had a book to read, but wasn't in the mood for that either. He watched the snow for a bit while humming "Let It Snow" and feeling somewhat ashamed of himself. Finally he

decided to write his resignation letter. He didn't need to hear any more about Henry's job. He was going to take it, whatever it involved. Henry didn't get to be a millionaire by chance. He was a bona fide genius and this project, like all the others, would certainly succeed. Tim wondered if Henry got as excited about the others as he seemed to be about this one. What to tell Roger? Well, it was pretty simple really. He would be leaving the newspaper to take a job with a friend. It was an opportunity he couldn't pass up. He pulled out his computer and started the first draft. After two sentences, he stopped. He really needed to think about it with a clear mind. A jog on the treadmill might do the trick. All he would think about was, "Why am I doing this?" He changed into running clothes and headed for the basement.

"I thought you were taking a nap," Karen said from the kitchen where she was busy with her traditional cookie baking.

"I can't sleep. I'm going for a run on the treadmill," Tim said.

"You need to wrap those presents."

"I know. I'll get to them shortly."

Henry said his invention was bigger than the wheel and he was dead serious about it. Tim strapped on his music player and started the treadmill while replaying the phone call in his head once more and wondering what it could be. Trying to get just a basic understanding of Henry's other inventions was a monumental task, so how could he help him with whatever his new invention was? He turned up the volume on the player, but thoughts about Henry continued. What in the world was he going to ask him to do for \$100,000 a year. And couldn't he get someone else more qualified? Tired legs soon diverted his attention a bit. Just 10 minutes into the run and he didn't know if he could make it another five. He cranked the volume of the music a bit more. The questions couldn't be answered until he talked to Henry again. He would take the job

if \$200,000 was guaranteed. That way, if it didn't work out, he would have enough to hold him over until he found something else. With his decision finalized, he managed to stretch the run to 20 minutes.

* * * *

With the last piece of tape firmly in place, Tim stacked the final present with the others and surveyed the mess around him on the floor: A pair of scissors; the tape dispenser; scraps of wrapping paper too small to be useful; a couple leftover rolls of paper scattered about; ribbon; bows; two packages of name tags, their contents spilling out in several directions. It could be cleaned up later. There was no need to wait any longer. He picked up the cell phone, hit the speed dial for his new boss and nervously awaited the answer.

"This is Henry."

"Henry, it's Tim."

"What did you decide?" Henry never was one to beat around the bush.

"I want the job, but I can't start right away. I need to give my boss a couple weeks notice. And Karen and I are going to London next week to celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary. We won't be back until the fourth."

"Hey, that's great. Twenty-five years. Congratulations. I know some great places in London you need to visit. I'll give you some information before you go."

"Thanks. I'd appreciate that."

"I'm glad you're taking the job. It's going to be a lot of work, but it will be worth it. You will be a part of history. What day are you leaving for London?"

"We fly out Monday night. We will be leaving the house about three in the afternoon to get to the airport. The flight leaves around nine."

"Let's meet Monday morning at my house. You can fill out the paperwork and I can tell you more about the project."

"OK. I should have some time for that. What time do you want to meet?"

"I'll try to get my drive cleared out by 10. If I have any trouble, I'll call you."

Tim paused a moment as the door opened a crack and Karen peeked in. "Uh, 10 on Monday. That should work. As long as I can get back home by one."

"It won't take that long. Maybe an hour, maybe a little more."

"Great. I'll see you then. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas. See you Monday."

Tim hung up and exhaled. There was no going back. His newspaper days were coming to an end, at least for a while. A hundred thousand and probably much more was on the way for doing something that would make him a part of history. Exactly what that was, he couldn't even guess. He would have to wait for Monday.

"Can I come in?" Karen asked, still peeking into the room.

"Sure. I'm all finished."

"Who were you talking to?"

"Henry."

"Henry?" The name was familiar but she couldn't put a face to it.

"Henry Kessler."

"Oh yeah. From the soccer team."

"Yeah. And I have written some stories about his inventions."

"Did I hear you say you were going to meet with him Monday?"

"Monday morning. It won't take long. He wants me to do some freelance work for him, some editing." Tim was proud of his quick thinking. He didn't have enough information about the job to break the news just yet.

"Couldn't it wait until we get back?" Karen asked, obviously unenthusiastic about the plan.

Tim quickly quelled the urge to tell her about the offer. At this point, it would lead to a thousand questions he couldn't answer and probably some sour feelings. "Yeah, but it won't take long. I want to see what he's working on." Before Karen could get her next words out, he assured her he would be home in plenty of time to leave for the airport. She was not exactly appeased, but it would do.

"Can you help me wrap the cookies? Holly fell asleep and Rob is talking to Lori."

"Sure, I'll be right there." He straightened the room a bit and picked up the presents to take to the tree in the living room, where they would sit for 12 hours or so before getting packed in the car for the trip before the trip, a whirlwind tour of the state to visit and exchange gifts with the in-laws and then his relatives—unless the storm could pack enough punch to alter those plans. It would be much less stressful to make the Christmas visits after returning from London. And they would have more to talk about, much more as it turns out. Unfortunately, his suggestion was quickly shot down. Instead, there would be another round of visits following the London trip. A glance out the window did not lift his hopes. The heavy snow had given way to a few flurries and the moon could be seen through breaks in the clouds.

* * * *

Longtime XTV reporter Leslie St. Claire started the 11 o'clock news with a chilling shriek as she frantically jumped out of the way of a snowplow that came a bit closer than she expected to her spot on the square. In an attempt to aid her escape, the cameraman stumbled over his tripod, sending both himself and the camera to the ground. The crew in the control room was a bit slow to react, perhaps stunned by the proceedings, and XTV viewers were eyewitnesses to the whole debacle.

"Oh my God!" Karen gasped as her hands rose to her cheeks. Tim quickly sat up from his lounging position on the couch and scooted to the edge.

The camera continued to roll as it fell into a snow bank. The cameraman went down in front of it, blocking the entire picture. Leslie St. Claire was suddenly out of the shot, leaving viewers with some muffled sounds and wondering what happened. It took a few

seconds for the scene to shift to the anchors in the studio, who were ill-prepared for the moment.

"Where's Leslie?" were the first words from anchorman Bill Prescott, who was looking to his left and not at the camera. The scene shifted to co-anchor Marsha Lansford, who fumbled some papers in front of her as she stuttered something about technical difficulties and getting back to Leslie shortly. She then introduced weatherman Alston Rediffer, who appeared remarkably unfazed. Rediffer deftly righted the ship by providing a crisp account of the storm, which had dropped about 14 inches of snow on the city, the most from a single storm in more than 20 years, but was winding down. He finished by promising to report later in the broadcast about another possible storm and then sending the show back to Leslie St. Claire, "who's braving the elements out on the square."

"And dodging snowplows," Tim quipped to himself as Leslie appeared without a scratch, or any sign of her close call, and began talking about the road conditions and the prospects for holiday travelers. Tim returned to the relaxed position he was in before Leslie's brush with disaster.

A couple more weather-related stories followed Leslie's report and the first commercial break arrived without a word about the troubles of city Treasurer James Cook. It was a safe bet that the XTV staff, as well as the viewers, wouldn't find out until reading the morning paper, which would appear online around 2 a.m.

"I'm going to bed," Karen said. "I think we should plan to leave by 10. It sounds like the roads should be in good enough shape by then. Don't stay up too late."

"I won't. I'll be there soon."

Tim watched the rest of the newscast and then went to the computer. The radio station didn't have the story either, at least not

on its website. He was going to leave The Journal with one last triumph over the competition. His thoughts returned to Henry's job. Sleep was the last thing on his mind. He spent 30 minutes finishing the first draft of his resignation letter to Roger and then went to the window. The full moon now beamed brightly in a mostly clear sky, lighting up the fresh snow and creating a postcard scene in the backyard. Tim stepped outside to get a better view of a drift the wind had sculpted into something resembling a wave at the beach. Had it been a real wave, the picnic table would probably be in the neighbor's yard in pieces. The diversion was temporary. What in the world had Henry invented? And what could he do to help him? The wait for Monday wouldn't be easy, but at least the holiday would keep him occupied.

He returned to the computer and logged into The Journal archives where he looked up the stories he had written about Henry's earlier inventions—a device that measured the strength of steel and another device used in particle physics experiments. He did a better job than he remembered explaining those projects for Journal readers. Maybe he was qualified for Henry's job, assuming it had something to do with him writing. Feeling a little better about himself, he logged out of The Journal and started playing a computer game. He needed to kill about an hour before the The Journal would be posted online and he was anxious to see where the editors placed the Cook story. He also hoped the game would make him sleepy.

After losing the first three games, he decided to get an eggnog and brandy in hopes that would bring on some fatigue. The first one didn't seem to have much effect and it did nothing to change his luck in the game, so he went for a second. After 40 minutes and drink number three, consisting mostly of brandy, he finally won the game and, more importantly, started to yawn. Just a quick check of The Journal website and he would be ready for bed.

A story about the storm along with a rather large photo of children pulling a sled down a snow-covered road during some of the heaviest snowfall took up most of the top of Page 1. The story about Cook being investigated for embezzlement still received good placement, starting at the top of the far left column. The editors had found a fairly recent head-and-shoulder photo of Cook talking at a meeting to put with the story. Satisfied with the placement, he turned off the computer and took another look outside. The snow-wave remained precariously poised to the left of the picnic table. The clock chimed 2:30 as he made his way to the bedroom.

Chapter 2

He was just about to fall off the cliff when he felt someone grab his shoulder, shake him and call his name.

“Tim! You need to get up. It's already eight o'clock. You need to get out there and shovel the driveway so we can get going. There's another storm coming and we need to get on the road.”

When he came to his senses enough to realize what just happened, he was disappointed he didn't go off the cliff. “Get Rob to do it,” he groaned while squinting into the sunlight streaming through the windows that just seconds ago were covered by thick curtains.

“He's sleeping.”

“What do you think I was doing?” he complained.

If Karen heard him, she didn't acknowledge. She was already half way out of the room, on her way to accomplish whatever her next task was. Tim propped himself up with his elbow, rubbed his eyes so he could focus, glanced at the clock and did the math. It was now 10 after eight and he clearly recalled hearing the clock chime three. If he was asleep at 3:30, then he got about four and a half hours of sleep before being rudely saved from falling off the cliff. And now she expected him to shovel the driveway, pack the car and then drive for three hours. At least he would have a good excuse to nap as soon as they arrived.

He laid back down, turned his back to the window, pulled a pillow over his head and closed his eyes—but only for a second. It was no use. The orders had been given. She had warned him not to stay up late. He couldn't win. As thoughts of \$100,000 and probably much

more returned, he rolled over, slung his feet over the side of the bed and pushed up to a sitting position. Maybe Henry would allow him to work a flexible schedule that didn't require setting an alarm clock.

"Here are your gloves. You're going to need them," Karen said, no doubt returning to make sure he had not gone back to sleep rather than to ensure his comfort outside. "I'll get Rob up," she said as she disappeared again.

The bright sun beaming through a clear blue sky created a false impression of a nice day. A biting wind greeted Tim as he stepped outside, causing his eyes to water. Another gust whipped snow from his first shovel-full back into his face. He turned the other direction and heaved the next shovel-full beyond the edge of the driveway, then dug in again. He wondered what good it was going to do to shovel the driveway when the plows had not come down the street yet. There was no way the car would make it through. Maybe the plows wouldn't make it in time and the Christmas visits could be put off until after the trip to London. He started humming "Let It Snow" again as he turned his back to the wind once more and tossed another shovel-full.

After 15 minutes, he managed to create a path to the mailbox. He rested a moment and listened to a disheartening scraping sound. The plows had made it into the neighborhood and would be clearing his street shortly. When Rob finally appeared on the front porch, it wasn't to lend a hand. Dressed in jeans, a T-shirt and no shoes, he yelled to his father, "I'll be out in a few minutes. Lori is following a snowplow this way. She should be here any minute." He quickly disappeared inside.

Two snowplows, with Lori in close pursuit, showed up minutes later, creating a mountain of snow across the front of the driveway as they passed. With nowhere else to park, Lori stopped on the other side of the mountain and got out.

“Merry Christmas, Mr. Ross. Is it OK if I park here for a minute?”

“Merry Christmas Lori. I don’t think you have much choice,” he said. He helped her over the pile that came to his waist, watched her go inside and then dug in at the top, determined to clear a path so Lori would have an easier return to her car. The job got a little easier when he realized he could now afford a snow blower.

* * * *

Getting out of bed was pure torture. The pain in his neck and back that had kept him awake half the night apparently wasn’t going to go away anytime soon. He opened the curtain just enough to peek out at the wintry landscape and paused a moment to revel in the fantasy once more. By this time next year, Winston Dobbs would be in some tropical paradise, sipping exotic cocktails under palm trees on a white-sand beach and doing nothing more stressful than deciding where and when the next meal would be. There wouldn’t be anyone giving him orders and there wouldn’t be anyone, other than waiters and waitresses, taking orders from him. He let the thought pass, closed the curtains, checked the clock on the nightstand and made his first call.

“Jacobson,” came the answer after half a ring.

“Anything new this morning?” Dobbs asked.

“Nothing,” Jacobson replied through a yawn.

“How about my flight?”

“It’s all set.”

“Good.” Dobbs hung up without another word and went to the medicine cabinet for some aspirin. He was definitely getting too old for this he thought as he washed down four tablets. He left the bedroom and walked gingerly across the hall to his office. “Just don’t let him get to you,” he cautioned himself, then breathed deep and finished dialing his second call.

“Murphy.”

“What’s happening?” Dobbs demanded.

“Uh, nothing really.” Murphy quickly raised the binoculars to his eyes and adjusted the focus.

Dobbs’ blood began to boil. Jacobson was OK, but Murphy had to go. “I want details, damn it! I’ll decide what’s important.”

“Well, he’s shoveling his driveway,” said Murphy, thankful he was able to get into position just in time to give a report. “And some girl just parked in the street in front of the house and went inside. A real cutie.” Oops. Probably shouldn’t have added that, he thought just after the words slipped out.

Dobbs was unable to heed his own advice and shouted, “I want a report every time someone moves an inch, you understand that asshole?”

“Yes sir,” Murphy said emphatically.

Dobbs ended the call and was about to throw the phone at the wall when a shot of pain nearly put him on his knees. He took a deep breath, gently set the phone on his desk and eased into his chair. He would make the other calls as soon as the pain allowed.

Murphy lifted the glasses for another look, but he couldn’t concentrate. The view to Tim’s house was great, but the leafless

forsythia bush he wedged into wasn't providing any cover. If Dobbs had given him more notice, he could have scouted the neighborhood and come up with a good spot. He was lucky no one had come out of any of the nearby houses or driven by yet. They surely would have seen him crouching there with the binoculars. Figuring Tim would be busy with the driveway for a bit, he decided to look for a safer spot to set up.

Tim dug in one more time, lifted and tossed the snow away from the driveway. Most of it landed on a mound he could no longer see over. He stepped back to rest and to admire his work. The snow that the plow had piled up at the mouth of the driveway was gone. With some help from Rob, the rest of the driveway could be cleared in half an hour. Now, if he could just get Rob to help. Then again, there really wasn't any hurry. He noticed some clouds were starting to move in from the southwest and began humming "Let It Snow."

* * * *

There was no reason to expect a day off, even Christmas Eve. Jeremy Franklin knew how it would be when he entered this line of work. Some years were more difficult than others. This assignment wasn't too bad. Henry was waiting for him when he stepped out of the guesthouse and walked through the blowing snow to the parking area at the top of the driveway.

Henry, dressed in jet-black tights, a black and white windbreaker, a red wool cap, gray scuba gloves, dark sunglasses and his newest pair of high-end running shoes, nodded to greet him upon his arrival. "Ready?" was his only word.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Jeremy responded. He removed his sunglasses to dab at his watery eyes with the glove on his right

hand and then tugged his cap down a little more in hopes it would stay over his ears and the back of his neck.

The run usually started at the top of the driveway, but since Henry hadn't cleared it yet, they walked in silence through the snow to the recently plowed road, a distance of about 250 yards. Once there, Henry did a few more stretches. He started by bending at the waist and easily touching his toes with his fingers. Jeremy followed his lead and took the opportunity to scrape out some of the snow that had gotten inside his running shoes. He stood back up just before Henry and slowly scanned the surroundings while bouncing around a bit to try and warm up. The quads were next, starting with the right. Each man lifted his right leg behind him, grabbed his right foot with his right hand and lifted the foot further up behind him while balancing on the left leg. Then they repeated the exercise with the left leg, balancing on the right leg. Jeremy continued to scan the surroundings. There just wasn't anything good about this. The routine and the route needed to change. Unfortunately, Henry was as stubborn as he was brilliant.

From his comfortably-heated living room with a somewhat obstructed view of Henry's property, Jacobson called Dobbs with the latest. Henry and his security guy were getting ready to begin their daily run. Dobbs responded the usual way, telling Jacobson to sit tight and to let him know when they returned. There was no need to do anything else at this point. Jacobson looked at his watch, jotted down the time in his log and stretched out on the couch. Another long, laborious day was just getting started. It certainly didn't feel like a holiday.

Henry finished stretching, adjusted his cap and nodded at Jeremy. Jeremy took another quick glance around and motioned he was ready. Henry started his stopwatch and then began a leisurely jog toward the bridge crossing the Shenandoah River. The first couple hundred yards were mostly flat and even slightly downhill, and then the eternal climbing began. Jeremy jogged alongside, to

Henry's left, happy to be moving. He kept an eye out for any movement along the sides of the road and occasionally took a glance behind them. Once they crossed the bridge, opportunities to escape were almost non-existent, unless Henry could climb hills like a mountain goat or trees like a squirrel. Steep slopes crowded with trees and jagged rock outcroppings bordered each side. Then again, maybe he could. He certainly had no trouble running the hills. Jeremy still marveled at how easy Henry made it look. He hoped he would be able to do the same when he reached that age.

At the top of Quail Gap, just three miles into the run, Henry suddenly stopped at an overlook.

"Are you OK?" Jeremy asked. Henry didn't appear to be in any distress.

"I'm great. How about you?"

"I'm good." Jeremy breathed in deep and blew out some steam, which the wind quickly whisked away.

"Will Tim be able to do this?" Henry asked.

"No way," Jeremy answered.

"He runs OK on the soccer field, but he doesn't last very long."

"He spends too much time behind a desk. I don't think fitness is a real high priority."

"We may have to change that."

Jeremy chuckled at the thought. "You'll have to be patient. He's no spring chicken."

"Neither am I."

"You've been doing this your whole life."

"Will he be able to help you?"

"Yeah. I think so."

Henry began jogging in place. "You don't sound too convincing."

"We'll see."

"How soon will they be on to him?"

"By the time he leaves here Monday."

"Then what?"

"They'll make contact with him."

"Is he safe?"

"Yeah. They need him."

"So do we."

"He'll be fine."

"Should we continue?"

"You really need to change up the routine."

Henry shook his head in exasperation, the way he normally did when Jeremy broached the subject, and restarted the run. Jeremy gazed momentarily at the river and the valley below and then ran to catch up. Only five miles to go.

* * * *

A knot formed in Murphy's throat as he looked through the binoculars. The back of the car was loaded with presents, suitcases and pillows. A luggage carrier was attached to the top of the car, Tim was driving, his wife sat beside him and their kids were in the backseat. The Ross family was obviously headed out of town. How was he supposed to know? They loaded the car in the garage. Other than the shoveling job, nothing happened outside to indicate this. He wasn't in any mood for Dobbs' temper, but made the call. The money was worth the abuse.

To his surprise, Dobbs was rather pleased with the new development. Murphy gladly accepted the order to keep watching and to call back in an hour with an update, unless there was a need to give one sooner. He returned to his car and cranked up the heat. Once he warmed up a bit, he would return to his lookout spot.

Since there didn't seem to be any rush to return to the cold, he pulled out his laptop and did another Internet search for Tim. There were plenty of Tim Rosses, but nothing he hadn't already seen on their man, except for the breaking story on the woes of City Treasurer James Cook. He read the lead paragraph and then continued his search.

* * * *

With about 300 yards to go, Jeremy slowed up and let Henry get ahead of him. When Henry noticed Jeremy had dropped back, he slowed up too and glanced over his shoulder. Jeremy waived that he was OK and watched as Henry resumed his pace. For the next 100 yards, Jeremy slowed a bit more and did his best to observe

the house neighboring Henry's property without being obvious. He didn't like it.

His research indicated it belonged to some pharmaceutical company executive who lived in New Jersey. Tax records indicated it was worth about \$500,000 and that the property consisted of about 40 acres of cropland and another 10 acres of woodland. The wooded area was mostly on the perimeter and consisted mostly of maples and oaks with some scrub evergreens mixed in. During the months of the year when there were no leaves on the trees, the woods did little to obscure the neighbors' view of each others property. The owner didn't live there, at least not full time, and he had hired a property company to manage it. Jeremy was pretty certain someone was living there, but he hadn't been able to confirm it. Henry certainly was no help. The only people he associated with were a few business contacts and the guys he played soccer with every summer.

Henry was stretching again when Jeremy reached him. "Are you OK?" he asked while continuing to touch his toes.

"Yeah. Felt a little twinge in my right hamstring. I think it was just a cramp. Feels fine now."

"You'll have plenty of time to rest it. I think I'll take tomorrow off. Merry Christmas."

"Thanks. I could use a day off."

* * * *

A light snow began falling as Murphy stepped out of his car, adding to the ambiance of the evening. He adjusted his black fedora, tugged his wool scarf a little tighter and shoved his hands

deep into the pockets of his black overcoat as he began walking the winding street down the hill toward Oak Lane. It was nice to be out of the car, nice to be doing something other than watching and waiting. What better way to spend Christmas Eve. Santa Claus is on his way, he thought, and chuckled to himself.

At the intersection of Maple Street, he paused and looked in each direction. So far, he seemed to be the only person out and about. The Ross home was just a few houses up on the other side of the street, at the corner of Maple Street and Oak Lane. He took a left and walked away from the house. At Apple Tree Drive he made a right and paused as a family pulled out of their driveway, obviously heading to church. He returned a friendly wave as the car passed him and continued on its way. He made another right at Spruce, which took him to the lower end of Oak Lane. He stopped on the corner to admire an especially well-decorated house and to look around him again. So far, just the family in the car had seen him, at least that he was aware of. An anticipation he had not felt in a long time set in as he made his way up Oak Lane.

Since the Ross house was on a corner, there was just one neighboring house. It was dark and apparently abandoned for the holiday. The driveway and the walkway to the front door had not been shoveled and there were no footprints anywhere. Lights were on at the three closest houses across the street. Murphy didn't notice any activity near the windows. He walked up to the corner of Oak and Maple and then made a right on Maple. Of the closest houses on Maple that faced the Ross home, one was dark and two were lit, though one had no Christmas decorations. The home directly behind Tim's was nicely decorated and as he approached, the garage door began to open. Murphy stopped and waited as another family headed off to church.

Murphy maintained his casual gate as he stepped from the road into the snow in Tim's backyard and headed straight for the door at the back of the garage. He would figure out what to do about his

tracks on the way out. The chances of them being spotted and causing any concern on Christmas Eve was highly unlikely. At the door, he reached into his pockets and pulled out his tools and a small flashlight. Holding the flashlight with his teeth, he went to work. With only the doorknob lock to pick, it took less than a minute to get in. He closed the door behind him and looked through the window for a moment.

The inside of the garage was partially lit by a streetlight not far from the front of the house. He stooped down so he could not be seen through the windows and took a quick inventory. Perhaps he could use one of the brooms in the corner to cover his tracks on the way out.

He eased his way to the door leading into the house and removed his boots. Again holding the tiny flashlight in his teeth, he made quick work of this lock too. Child's play, he thought. He would never tire of this, even working for a hothead like Dobbs. The door opened into a foyer. To his left were stairs to the second floor, straight ahead was an open door to a room and to his right, another open door to another room. He closed the door to the garage and walked into each of the downstairs rooms, spending just enough time in each to determine their use.

A stair creaked on his way up and he stopped to listen. For the next minute, a clock ticking somewhere close to the stairwell made the only sound. At the top of the stairs, Murphy studied the layout. In front of him was a great room. A counter with bar stools separated it from the kitchen a bit to the left. To his immediate left was the living room, complete with a decorated Christmas tree near some windows covered by thick curtains. To the right, a hallway that undoubtedly led to the bedrooms. The clock he heard was hanging on a wall in the living room.

The first order of business, as always, was to check out the refrigerator. He didn't particularly care for the beer selection, but it

was better than nothing. And since there were several of them, Tim might not notice one missing. And if he did, well, maybe the boy would get a lecture. Murphy imagined the scene with a sense of pride as he popped open the can and took a big swig.

Chapter 3

An hour ago, still 30 miles from home and staring into a never-ending stream of headlights zooming the opposite direction on the interstate, it was all he could do to keep his eyelids open. Now that he could go to bed, and needed to go to bed, he was wide awake with thoughts of "\$100,000 a year and probably much more" running nonstop through his head again. Occasionally, a thought about the trip to London slipped in, but mostly it was the job. In just 12 hours or so, he would finally get the scoop on what he would be doing to earn his nearly 300 percent pay increase.

"Mom, where's my crystal unicorn?" Holly's excited yell abruptly interrupted his thoughts.

Karen came out of the bedroom and stopped at Holly's door. "I don't know, honey," she said, trying to calm her distressed daughter.

"I never move it," Holly said in a very concerned tone. "I looked behind the desk, on the floor, everywhere. It's not here."

Murphy, sitting in his car more than two blocks away, smiled as he inspected the baseball-sized novelty sitting on his dashboard and listened intently to the crystal clear reception he was getting. Things were getting a little tense in the Ross home as Holly started blaming her brother for a cruel prank. Rob was shouting he had nothing to do with it. After about five minutes, the parents convinced Holly the gift from a close friend would show up after a good night's rest.

As the commotion eased, Murphy's phone rang. It was Dobbs.

"You idiot!" he screamed. "Why can't you just do your job. I don't need this aggravation."

"I did the job!" Murphy shot back. "Find someone else if you don't like it."

"Keep it up and I will! You're such an ass."

After a moment of silence and a deep breath, Murphy asked what he should do next.

"Nothing more tonight," Dobbs said tersely. "Get back in position in the morning before Ross goes to his meeting with Kessler and call me."

Murphy gladly ended the call and returned his attention to the unicorn, which, depending on what way he tilted his head, reflected the light from a nearby streetlight into various rainbow colors.

Following the excitement, Tim decided a beer and a few minutes of the evening news would be the perfect medicine for his insomnia. He could have sworn there were five of them in there when they left on Friday morning. Rob? No way. He must have miscounted.

* * * *

Tim dragged his suitcase next to the others near the top of the stairs, placed his passport and the tickets on top and looked at the clock once more, although there was no need. It wasn't going to move any faster. Henry wouldn't mind if he showed up a few minutes early.

"I'm heading to Henry's," he yelled to no one in particular. "I'll be back by one."

He made a quick stop at the gas station to top off and then headed into the county, feeling a little silly about the butterflies in his stomach. But he couldn't help it. He turned on the radio and cranked up the music. A perfect song to play full blast with the windows down, if it wasn't so cold out. He turned it up as loud as he could stand with the windows up and tapped his fingers to the beat on the steering wheel. He even started to sing the chorus until an oncoming car appeared.

After two left turns, he headed down a narrow road that appeared to run into the base of Massanutten Mountain. Snow-covered cornfields and cattle pastures straddled the road that felt like it was 150 miles outside the city rather than just 15. After a couple of bends in the road, he spotted Henry's mailbox on the left. He made a right onto Henry's long driveway and drove between piles of snow to the plowed parking area near the house, which sat atop pilings that put it above the floodplain. He parked beside Henry's old pistachio-colored pickup with assorted rust spots and holes, lowered the radio volume, cut the engine and tried to breathe. One of Henry's black labs bounded through the snow to greet him, wagging its tail and offering a friendly bark as he stepped out of the car. He patted its head and glanced toward the Shenandoah River, which flowed behind Henry's house. Ice jutted out from each bank, but the water in the middle continued its lazy journey northward. Henry and his wife, Sheila, appeared on the porch with the other lab not far behind.

"Glad you could make it. How are the roads?" Henry shouted down.

Tim raised his right hand to his brow to shield his eyes from the morning sun as he looked up at the silhouettes standing there. "The

transportation department has done a good job," he shouted back.
"The roads are in good shape."

"Congratulations on your anniversary, Tim," yelled Sheila. "Karen should have come with you."

"Thank you. I told her we had time, but she wanted to make sure the kids finished packing," Tim hollered back, still standing beside his car.

"Well come on up," she said. "We have some guides and things on London that might interest you."

"Great."

"Would you like some coffee?" Sheila asked as he reached the top of the stairs.

"No. I'm fine. Thanks."

Henry led the way to the living room and to a table buried under a pile of maps, brochures and other information about London. Under normal circumstances, this would have been enough by itself to keep the butterflies flying.

"Pull that chair up here," Henry said, pointing at a rather shabby-looking recliner with cracked upholstery in the far corner. Tim scooted the creaky chair across the hardwood floor as Henry and Sheila took seats on an equally shabby couch on the other side of the table.

"You've got to see the Faraday exhibit at The Royal Institution," Henry said, picking up a brochure from the top of the pile. "Where are you staying?"

"The Hilton on Edgware Road."

"Oh that will be easy to get to. The public transportation is pretty good there. A lot better than New York."

"I think they should go to Windsor Castle," Sheila said, reaching in front of Henry and pulling out another brochure.

"Everybody goes there. We have some other stuff here that's not the usual tourist stuff," Henry said, sifting through more of the pile.

After about 30 minutes, Tim began wondering if the job would come up. His mind began to wander until a photo hanging on the wall above the couch caught his attention. It appeared to be a family of four posing near some buildings. The words on a nearby sign were in French. One of the tall, lanky boys in the photo was definitely a young Henry Kessler, probably 10 or 11 years old. He assumed the grownups were his parents. The other boy looked a lot like Henry, just a bit taller and perhaps a bit older. Henry had never mentioned having a brother, but Tim didn't really know him all that well.

"Sweetie, they're only going for a week." Sheila's scolding brought Tim's attention back to the table.

"Well, you can take this stuff with you," Henry finally said. "Let's talk about the job."

The moment he had been waiting for produced a knot in his throat.

"We're going out to the barn," Henry said to Sheila, who had left the room and headed toward the kitchen. "It's a little muddy. You probably should wear these." Henry handed Tim a pair of rubber boots at least three sizes too large, which made going down the stairs a bit of an adventure.

The old hay barn sat a few hundred yards from the house and served as Henry's laboratory, office and airplane hanger. The path Henry plowed ran parallel to the river. His grass airstrip was somewhere on the other side of it and remained snow-covered. Henry apparently had no plans to fly his new employee to the airport. Another house, a new addition to the property, had been built beyond the runway in an area that had been a cornfield. Tim was about to ask Henry about it when Henry repeated, "You are making a good decision." He led the way through a door into the office portion of the barn. "Have a seat."

Tim sat down in a metal folding chair that was as cold as the snow outside. Fortunately Henry noticed the chill in the air and turned on an electric heater.

"That should warm things up pretty quick," he said. He took a seat behind a desk cluttered with papers, electrical components and a few other miscellaneous gadgets and started digging into a briefcase that he had picked up off the floor behind his chair. Hanging neatly on the wall behind him were his college diplomas and a few other certificates. Tim noticed framed copies of the stories he had written about Henry's other inventions hanging on the wall too, along with some old black and white photos of people he did not recognize.

"Here we go," Henry said, pulling a two-page document out of the briefcase. "I need you to sign this before I can tell you about the project. It's just a typical nondisclosure agreement."

Tim wondered briefly if he should have a lawyer present. He let the thought pass, took the document and started reading. It seemed pretty straightforward. Basically, if he told anyone about the project, he would be fired and sued for everything he owned. "May I borrow a pen?" he asked.

"This is the only part that concerns me," Henry said as he handed over a pen. "I'm serious about this. You cannot tell anyone, not even your family. Sheila has no idea what this is, only me."

"I understand. That won't be a problem. I deal with confidential information all the time," Tim said. He shivered a bit as he added his signature and it had nothing to do with the cold. The office had warmed up nicely.

"Good." Henry put the document back in the briefcase, shuffled some more papers and pulled out a four-page document. "This is the contract. I need you to sign this too before I can tell you anything. Mainly, I want you to be my PR person and maybe you can help me write a book about this too."

Some of the contract repeated the non-disclosure agreement. The section on responsibilities stated Tim would arrange meetings, press conferences and other events as necessary; schedule media interviews; write press releases; and perform other duties as needed. There was no mention about writing a book, but that seemed to be a minor detail at this point. The job didn't sound too difficult. He took particular interest in the part about compensation: \$2,000 a week for a total of \$104,000 a year for two years beginning Feb. 1. Until then, he would be paid \$50 an hour. Another sentence noted there could be bonuses and raises at Henry's discretion. The contract made no mention of vacation or sick leave. He debated whether to bring up the matter. Henry obviously noticed his hesitation and broke the silence.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Uh, I don't mean to be picky, but there is nothing in here about vacation or sick time."

"Oh. Let me see that." Henry took the contract, poked around the briefcase again, pulled out another copy and studied them side by

side. "I gave you the wrong one. I'm such a klutz. Here's the final draft. This is what my lawyer approved."

Tim was glad he asked. The official version stated Henry was going to pay him \$75 an hour for any hours beyond 40 hours a week and that he would give him vacation and sick leave as needed. That was good enough. Tim signed the contract and handed it back.

"Good," Henry said. "You are going to be a part of history." He put the contract in the briefcase and pulled out two more sheets of paper. "Take a look at these," he said as he handed them across the desk.

Tim took the papers and studied them closely. "Wow! How much of that time were you here?" he asked after a moment.

Henry leaned back in his chair and smiled, satisfied how quickly his new employee caught on. "Most of it. We were in Europe for a few weeks last summer and I was in China for a few weeks in the fall, but Sheila was here then."

"So the invention has something to do with this?" He didn't really need to ask, but felt like he needed to say something.

"It has everything to do with that. Let me show you the HK-1. I have it in the barn."

Tim followed Henry out of the office and through a maze of parts belonging to a pathetic looking airplane parked beside the office. "Be careful," Henry said. "I really need to put this back together."

Parked beside the plane in shambles was Henry's pride and joy, a late model six-seater that appeared like it had never left the showroom floor. In the corner just beyond its tail sat the invention that Henry promised would make history. For all it could

apparently do, the HK-1 looked remarkably unremarkable, much like a few of Henry's other inventions with some wires, some lights, some gauges and some other doodads all mounted to some boards.

"This is my test model," Henry said, and then he began a full rundown on what the HK-1 was and what it did. He excitedly opened up a flip chart and started showing all sorts of diagrams and figures that might as well have been in Chinese. Henry talked faster and louder as he became more excited. Tim was able to grasp what the HK-1 could allegedly do, and if Henry was right, there was no doubt he would make history. Understanding the fine details was going to take some time and perhaps a few more college courses.

Tim's cell phone rang as Henry started going over some of the other intricacies of the HK-1. It was Karen and the time was five after one.

"Sorry," Tim said to Henry. "I need to answer this." He told Karen he was just leaving, hung up and looked back at Henry.

"You need to go," Henry said. "I didn't mean to take up that much of your time. We'll get started when you get back. Have a great trip."

"Henry, this is fantastic," Tim said, extending his hand to shake the hand of the world's next great inventor. "Thank you for letting me be a part of it."

"I'm glad you have agreed to it. We have a lot of work to do, but it's going to be worth it. Don't forget those brochures."

* * * *

For the third time in the past 30 minutes, Karen was lamenting that the kids would not be going with them. Rob and Holly again assured her this was a special occasion and that they would have plenty of opportunities to travel in the future. Rob even mentioned that he was looking into a study abroad opportunity in the fall, although Tim couldn't remember the subject ever coming up. Tim could change the subject in a hurry and perhaps get Karen's mind off the trip without the kids for the rest of their drive to the airport by announcing his new job, but he bit his lip and kept the secret. The perfect time to announce it would be during their anniversary dinner. He knew exactly how it would go. Karen would start talking about the kids again, and maybe about the cost of the dinner, and then he would spring it on her. With Rob at the wheel, he reclined some in the passenger seat and closed his eyes to picture the occasion once again.

Chapter 4

The adrenalin rush was long gone by the time the plane landed and they made it to the terminal. All Karen and Tim really wanted to do was get to their hotel room as fast as possible and go to sleep. Karen hadn't even mentioned the kids in the past hour or so. They had six more days to explore as much of London as they could. The vacation was going to begin with a nap.

Unfortunately, the security people weren't overly concerned about the fatigued travelers. They had a job to do and Tim, whether due to his somewhat disheveled appearance or luck of the draw, was pulled off to the side for some extra scrutiny. Karen continued through the line and watched helplessly from the other end as Tim was asked to remove his shoes, to open and empty their carry-on luggage and to answer an assortment of questions about his reasons for being there. It sure wasn't for this, but he kept his composure and got through it.

"Well, that was entertaining," he said as he finally rejoined Karen.

"I told you to shave," she teased, patting him on the back. "I think we can get the tube down there." She pointed toward some signs where lots of other luggage-toting travelers were headed.

They reached the platform just as a train pulled in and quickly boarded, along with a hoard of others. Tim and Karen wound up nearly crushed against one end of the car with their luggage mashed against them and no room to move. Karen squeezed Tim's left arm and rested her head on his shoulder as the train pulled out. Tim's mood brightened a bit when he got his first glimpse of the city above ground, even though it looked remarkably like every

other city he had seen, except that the traffic racing along the highway on both sides of the track was traveling on the “wrong” side of the road. Karen perked up a bit too and they smiled at each other. Then she squeezed tighter and put her head back on his shoulder.

After about 15 minutes, the train arrived at Piccadilly Circus, one of the must-see attractions according to Sheila Kessler. Tim and Karen planned to heed her advice, but getting to the hotel was the top priority at the moment. They exited the Piccadilly train and headed for the Bakerloo line, which would take them the rest of the way to the hotel. Thankfully, there was less of a crowd and they were able to get seats. They even had plenty of room for their luggage.

Excitement replaced fatigue as they reached their stop, left the train and headed for a map on the wall. A friendly attendant greeted them as they reached the map and pointed out their hotel just two blocks away. A cool drizzle greeted them as they reached the sidewalk and took their first steps in the downtown area.

“Looks like a city,” Tim said.

“There’s something we don’t have,” Karen said, pointing to the warning painted on the crosswalk that advised pedestrians to look to the right before stepping off the sidewalk.

“That too,” Tim said, pointing out a large sign in a plate glass window advertising a cricket match.

The clerk at the hotel desk was amazingly efficient and polite and minutes after entering the hotel lobby they were on the elevator heading for the 10th floor. The door opened to a room that appeared basically the same as any other hotel room Tim had been in. He wasn’t sure what he expected, but he felt a little silly

making such observations. The weary travelers closed the door, dropped the luggage and embraced.

“We’re here!” Karen said.

Tim squeezed her tight. “I love you.”

They let go and walked to the large window that provided a spectacular vista of the city, even through the rain drops speckling the glass. Tim pulled out his cell phone, snapped a photo and added it to a quick note to Holly and Rob: “We’re here! Check out this view from our hotel room! We’re going to take a nap and then start exploring. Will send more updates later.”

“Let’s get to bed,” Karen said. “I want to do everything, but I need a nap first.”

Tim closed the curtains, undressed and joined Karen in bed, a bed remarkably like any other hotel bed he’d been in.

* * * *

Sometime during their nap they had separated and moved to different sides of the bed. Karen was apparently still fast asleep. She didn’t move as Tim eased out of bed and dressed as quietly as he could. He sat in a chair near the window, read Rob’s reply to his e-mail, studied the room a bit and debated waking her. She still had not moved by the time he found a pad and a pen in a nightstand drawer, so he jotted a note: “I’m exploring the hotel a bit. Call me when you are up.”

His first stop was the exercise room on the second floor, which he doubted he would use but decided to check out just in case. The

second floor had little else of interest so he headed to the first floor. A menu posted on the wall outside the hotel restaurant caught his attention just off the elevator and he realized he hadn't eaten in more than 12 hours. Karen needed to wake up soon or he would have to snack without her. The gift store across from the restaurant was next. The glass replicas of Big Ben and some of London's other main tourist attractions got his attention first. They looked nice and would easily fit into suitcases. The kids probably would be happy with them, but there was plenty of time to decide on mementos.

"Can I help you?" the clerk asked, coming from behind the counter.

"No thank you. Just looking right now."

"Take your time," the clerk said. He turned and headed toward two other men who had just entered.

Tim moved on to the postcard display and then spent a few minutes perusing some clocks. When his stomach started to growl, he decided it was time to get Karen up. He never noticed his abductors follow him out of the shop and by the time he realized what was happening, the man with the gun made it clear he should not resist. They rushed him out of a side door in seconds, grabbed his cell phone out of his pocket and pushed him into the backseat of a black car with dark-tinted windows.

"What's happening?" Tim finally shouted. "I'm a tourist. You have the wrong person!"

The man with the gun, now in the passenger seat, provided a chilling response. "There is no mistake Mr. Ross."

"What? Who are you? What's going on?"

Neither man answered this time. Tim noticed there were no door handles and apparently no way to get out of the backseat from the inside. He sat quietly and tried to collect his thoughts as the driver sped around a couple of turns. The men sounded American. Could this be some kind of joke? Some oddball anniversary surprise. Maybe they're taking him to a party. Was Karen faking sleep? Maybe Henry set it up. The thoughts became more unpleasant as the car raced down a few more streets before entering an underground garage.

The gun was again pointed at him as he was ordered out of the car and when the men placed a black hood over his head, he nearly passed out. The hood blinded him completely and he stumbled along as the men rushed him into an elevator, never uttering a word. Tim was convinced this was no joke. No one would do this. He trembled as he thought about Karen and the kids.

He had no idea how many floors the elevator rose before it stopped. As the doors opened, the men dragged him out, made a right, walked a little ways and then made another right and sat him in a chair. Tim couldn't believe his eyes when they removed the hood. The scar on the left cheek was unmistakable. Seated directly across from him was the man he crashed into during the snowstorm before Christmas.

"Welcome to London, Mr. Ross. It's nice to see you again," the man said with a smile.

"What's happening here? What the hell is going on? Who are you?"

"All good questions," the man said. "Some I will answer, some I will not. You are here because I need your assistance. For your cooperation, no harm will come to you or your family. If you

choose not to cooperate . . .” The man paused and glanced at Tim’s abductors who were standing on each side of him. “Let’s just say it would be in your best interest to accept our arrangement. Understood?”

Tim tried his best to look un-intimidated.

After a moment of silence, the man with the scar continued, “From here on out, you will answer me. You can make this easy, or you can make it difficult. It’s your choice. But you will answer me. Understood?”

After another moment of silence, the man with the scar glanced at the abductors. In the blink of an eye, they had grabbed Tim’s arms and yanked him out of the chair.

“OK, OK,” Tim said hastily as the man on his left formed a fist.

The man with the scar nodded and the abductors rudely shoved Tim back into his chair.

After another short pause, he folded his arms across his chest and resumed. “Henry Kessler just offered you a job for \$100,000 a year and you have accepted his offer, correct?”

The question launched a thousand thoughts. Tim couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Could Henry be testing him?

“I’m waiting Mr. Ross,” the man with the scar said.

“Sure,” Tim replied.

The answer apparently was not good enough. Within seconds the abductors snatched him out of the chair and the one on the left landed a solid punch to his abdomen. Tim screamed in agony and

struggled to catch his breath.

“I don’t like your attitude, Mr. Ross. May I call you Tim?”

“Whatever,” Tim said between breaths. The second punch landed just as hard and Tim crashed to the floor as the abductors let him go. He curled up in a ball and tried to catch his breath; the water from his eyes ran down his cheek and puddled on the floor.

“I will call you Tim,” the man with the scar said, still sitting comfortably at the table.. “Now Tim, does your wife know where you are?”

“No,” Tim managed to say.

“That’s better. Have a seat.” The abductors picked Tim up and dropped him back in his chair. His stomach still burned and he couldn’t help crossing his arms over it and leaning toward the table. His eyes continued to water.

“Don’t you think she will get a bit concerned if you do not return to the room soon?”

“Yes,” he said, a little stronger this time.

“If you cooperate, this will go a lot faster and you can get back to her. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“You should be more careful who you choose to work for. I realize \$100,000 a year sounds pretty good compared to what you were getting from that rag, but believe me, money isn’t everything. How much do you know about Dr. Kessler?”

Tim took a deep breath and tried straightening up a bit. He was now ready to answer any question asked of him. “I’ve known him for a few years. We met playing in a men’s soccer league. I have written a couple stories about his inventions, had a picnic at his house once. That’s it.”

“Dr. Kessler's achievements are numerous and impressive. I am fully aware of his credentials. But I can assure you that his list of enemies is just as impressive. You should consider yourself lucky I got to you first. The others aren't as patient as I.”

The man paused for a moment as Tim rubbed his eyes and tried sitting more upright.

“I know what Dr. Kessler is working on. I know it will be his most significant work. He’s not kidding when he tells you it will make history. I also know there is no amount of money that will sway him to negotiate with me. So listen closely, this is where you come in. As I have proven, Dr. Kessler is a little careless about some of his business dealings, but he is to be commended for the way he protects his research. I need his documentation and you are going to get it for me. Understood?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I think that’s enough for today. We will be meeting again and you will get more instructions at that time. My associates will take you back to the hotel.”

“What guarantee do I have that my family won’t be harmed if I go along?”

“I’m a man of my word,” Tim. “You’ll just have to trust me,” the man said with a grin. “If I were you, I wouldn’t play any games. My patience doesn’t last long. You are replaceable.”

With another nod, the abductors again put the hood over Tim's head.

“Oh, I almost forgot. Happy anniversary, Tim,” the man with the scar said. He did not need to see him to recognize the voice.