

## Friday, December 30

Cold, tired and grouchy, Jack Pipov turned the RV south onto the interstate, “Free Bird” cranked up on the stereo and partially blocking the ambient noise of bad-weather driving. His Bluetooth headset chirped; Jack took his hand off the wheel, muted the volume and answered.

“Pipov,” he said tiredly.

“Jack, I wanted to tell you that we just wired your bonus to your bank. The council didn’t want to pay, but I pointed out that you’d kept your end of the agreement, so they finally gave in. I’m sorry that things turned out this way. It would have been a really great project.”

“Thanks, Dan. I really enjoyed working with you. And, yes, I would have loved building that project with you, but the tribal council just was not going to be reasonable. It wasn’t your fault. They spec’d a multi billion-dollar development project. You told them there was no way Washington was going to fund the project, even in this day of handouts. We both knew this was going to be a train wreck last month when we got the news from the congresscritter.” Jack changed lanes to avoid a slow driver in the right lane.

“So what are you going to do now? Vacation? Or maybe that South Seas project you mentioned?”

“Frankly, I just want to get warm. I’m driving through this storm and I can’t remember when I was last dry and comfortable. The economy tanking has delayed the resort project; too bad, because I could really use a year in the tropics about now. I think I’ll take my time heading back to Tucson and then go on vacation somewhere balmy. Then when I get tired of that, there’s this little restaurant in Prague I plan on visiting.”

“Sounds like a plan. So what should I do with your design?”

“The tribe owns my work product. If they know of anyone who needs a huge industrial complex design in northern New England with special snow abatement and foul weather features, they might be able to make them a real deal.

“I still think it may be possible to cut the plan back enough to fund the construction. But your tribe doesn’t have the political muscle to get \$2.5 billion out of Congress in the near future. Ten percent of that on a really good day.”

“How can you take this so well? I saw you bleed on this project.”

“It’s what I do,” Jack said with the resignation of long experience. “For a long time, I’ve designed only the biggest projects—and more than half of my designs are gathering dust for one reason or another. Sometimes the clients change their minds or lose their nerve. Sometimes things change.

“This time was special—the council believed they could get a big chunk of development money, but they were wrong. They asked us to design on faith that they’d be able to get the money. If I wasn’t so tired and frustrated, I’d be angry. Right now, the driving is therapeutic.”

“You’ve had this problem before?”

“Oh yes. You know of some of the projects I’ve done, but not the ones that were never built. When I was in the Air Force, we called them exercises. I learned to design and lay out an entire air base in days, then go in and help the troops make it work. I got good enough at it that they started giving me the wild assignments like container shipping ports and Arctic Circle radar installations, and loaning me to NATO and SAC and such. After I left the military, I even did some national infrastructure revamps on the QT. At that point I realized this was what I should do—early stage design of big projects.

“The good news is that I get paid even when the project isn’t built. The bad news is that the projects don’t get built. It eats at you just a bit.”

“I know what you mean,” Dan agreed. “Well, then I’ll let you get back to driving. How far west have you gotten since you pulled out this morning?”

“I’m just turning onto I-81 outside Watertown. I’ll be in Syracuse soon if the weather doesn’t get worse. I’m hoping to make Binghamton tonight.” Jack pressed the accelerator. The big turbo diesel in the back of his long RV spooled up to what Jack liked to call “ramming speed.” Snow was blowing in from Lake Ontario to the west and the quickly darkening late-afternoon sky showed little sign of mercy. Turning on the RV’s headlights, he instinctively checked his watch, scratched an old scar visible under his graying crew cut,

and turned up the heat a bit. “You’ll probably get this storm in a few hours. At least you’ll have a white New Year’s,” Jack added wryly as he ended the conversation.

It looked cold outside. The temperature was really barely 20 degrees, but the fog seemed to make it much colder. As the wind picked up, the snow began to travel in a busy diagonal across the windshield. Jack felt the impact of each gust against the forty-foot-long diesel pusher. He could smell the salt on the road. Glancing in the mirror, he could barely see his utility trailer’s lights behind the RV.

Glancing at his speedometer and back at the highway, Jack saw the other cars slow as the road iced. Already the gray fog closed around him tighter than before. The traffic formed a single file of widely spaced vehicles traveling about 45 miles per hour, even though his side of the interstate had three wide, well-marked lanes with paved shoulders. He let the pickup in front of him slip a bit farther ahead until its red taillights were wispy at the edges—about an eighth of a mile. The car behind him did the same over the next few miles. Fresh, white snow was collecting on top of the dirty brown slush at the road’s edges.

The road became dangerously slippery and the wind blustered directly off the lake to his right. The weather was treacherous and getting worse. Maybe Binghamton—another seventy-five miles, or two more hours of crawling along if the weather held—was too ambitious. Maybe Jack would only make it half that far, to Cortland, tonight. Then he could park, level, have a warm meal and sleep. The GPS slowly ticked off the miles as he plodded onward into the storm, daydreaming of warm places to go.

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A sudden chirp from his cell phone broke his concentration. Muting the RV’s sound system again, Jack pulled the phone’s Bluetooth ear piece from his pocket and answered.

A gravelly, aggressively cheerful Scottish voice shouted, “Is this a Dr. Pipov?” Wincing, Jack lowered the volume with his thumb.

“Yeah. I’m Jack Pipov. Who is this?” Jack answered, not hiding his fatigue.

“Well, I’m Lloyd Williams,” announced the jovial caller.

“I didn’t realize they let Welshmen into Scotland.”

“Aye. We keep it a secret, but we dug a tunnel from Cardiff to Auld Reekie. We Welshmen like tall, red-headed women.”

“Oh, really.” Everyone’s a comedian, Jack thought. “And to what do I owe the honor of this call?”

“I’m with OSEC—the Oil Sands Energy Consortium. You’ve been communicating with my people over the past few months concerning our planned experimental oil sands facility. If you have time, I’d like to discuss your RFP.”

“Sure thing.” Jack scratched the scar behind his left ear as he tried to remember the details of the project and his proposal, which he had dashed off and submitted some weeks earlier. Starting in the summer of 2008 when the President dropped the executive order banning development, the oil companies had been researching ways to start large-scale domestic oil sand and oil shale production. The final result was OSEC, a pilot project funded by the major oil companies—shared risk and shared reward. Jack had not wanted the project, so he had sent back a “non-responsive” proposal.

In his field, one never declined business. Standard procedure was to make the proposal unattractive, ensuring that the customer would go somewhere else. In this case, Jack had doubled the amount of time he estimated the job would require, then doubled his billing rate to make his response unaffordable.

Maybe this was an official kiss-off phone call, he thought. They were unusual. Normally he would get a terse but polite letter declining his proposal.

“Well, the boffins here have reviewed your proposal and they like it. In fact, they like it a lot.”

“Really? Are you sure?” Oops. Let it slip. Can’t show any surprise to a customer.

“Quite sure, Dr. Pipov. Clearly, you have a far better view of the whys and wherefores than they expected. You have the logistics of building and operating such a facility in the rugged Colorado and Wyoming territory figured out from A to Zed. The other bampots couldn’t figure out an experimental facility would need added space and power to allow us to try different things at some point. We liked your suggestions to support those future projects. Frankly, we binned the bumfs, then sent our propeller-heads back to the drawing board. Our backing companies are in the process of filing a number of patents as a result.”

“Gee. I’m surprised. I just built in some wiggle room for you to experiment—more power, variations on the same processes, higher temperatures, and things like that. Anyway, I’m glad you like the proposal. Does this mean I’ve got the contract?”

“Aye. That it does, but we have some concerns.”

Oh great. Here comes the squeeze. They probably wanted a lower rate. His padded reply gave him lots of room for negotiation, but the project was not his favorite. However, for enough money, Pipov could be persuaded to pursue even this turkey. And, after all, he was available.

“Is it true you operate out of your own caravan?”

“Yes, in fact, I’m driving it right now. I’ve just finished up a project and am headed home from New England. By the way, I’m in a nasty storm. Don’t be surprised if I lose you.”

“Oh really? Well, I thought I was a chancer, but does this mean you are available now?”

“Well, I’ve planned a vacation. However, I could delay it a few days if it would help the project. But really, you won’t need me for months; not until first thaw in the mountains anyway.”

“We need you to start ASAP. Ideally in the next thirty days.”

“If I recall,” said Jack, startled, “your project involves a colossal amount of building spread through the mountains in rough territory. Most of those areas will be under many feet of snow by now—and the problem will only get worse as the winter progresses.”

“Aye. But there has to be a way for you to pull the schedule in a bit. Your proposal was to work from thaw to freeze for two years and then construction could begin. We need construction to begin as soon as possible.”

“Why?”

“Well, you’ve seen how the big oil companies have been getting pelters on the telly the last few months.”

“Yes. . . .”

“And the the Middle East problems are worse and worse. . . .”

“Of course. . . .”

“And when the price of petrol goes up we get derision and when it goes down we get scorn. . . .”

“So. . . .”

“Well, our backers are those same such publicly bruised and battered oil companies. And they want something to wave to the consumers as being good news. The decision is to make a big public production out of this project. Something that will help them to be more popular with the public, keep Washington off their backs and maybe boost the stock price a wee bit.”

“Oh. They’re willing to waste lots of money to have a big PR stunt?”

“Not likely. They want to be able to show meaningful progress to the world as quickly as possible. That’s where you come in.”

“How?”

“You start work ASAP. Figure out what you can as quickly as possible and we will let a contract for it. While that is underway, you figure out more. You know—streamline the process. This gives us visible progress early on, which makes the backers happy. You have an easier job because you don’t have to spec the entire project, only pieces as you go along.”

“That’s a very tall order. I could see spending more money on subcontractors and maybe pulling in the schedule to begin construction at the thaw year after next.” Jack knew he could pull in the schedule that far without any real risk due to his padding, but negotiation has a lot in common with bluff poker.

“That won’t do. The backers need something they can point to before the elections next November. They will be lobbying for bailout money, special tax breaks and other goodies. They need to go crack on during the spring and summer to show visible progress in front of the politicos.”

“Well, how much would they need?”

“As much as you can give them. And we understand how nasty difficult this will be. We’re willing to pay your fee plus a 50 percent bonus if you can finish by November and another 50 percent bonus up front if you can start before February 1. Plus we’ll be expecting a major increase in expenses because of the time of year and the extra people you will need.”

Jack whistled and almost swerved off the road. His share of the bid had been two million dollars plus expenses. They were offering him a cool million dollars if he’d agree to work through the winter and another million if he could hit a date he had already decided he could hit. This was beginning to sound interesting. Four million dollars. Uncle Sam’s slice would still leave him with nearly three million when he was done. Not bad for ten months of very hard work. And if he missed his date, he’d still have a cool three million pre-tax, which beat his previous best year’s pay by two million dollars.

Some quick thinking showed Jack how he could get roads laid out and started early. The same with power lines and some of the cross-country pipelines. The size and general placement of the various facilities was already known, and most of the land was already purchased or leased. Could he simply work outside on good days and inside on bad days? He’d need an army of quality help, but he knew he could make enough progress during the winter to meet OSEC’s needs.

His tropical vacation plans were now completely forgotten.

“Dr. Pipov? Are you there?”

“Sorry, Mr. Williams. Call me Jack. I was trying to think about how to achieve your goals. I appreciate money as a motivator, but there are only so many days of good weather in the area to do the work. In principle, I don’t have a problem providing early deliverables to construction and engineering firms so they can start work designing over the winter. I can double up on survey teams and things, but the fieldwork won’t be done by first snow next fall. The bottom line is, however, that construction can’t begin until the following thaw anyway. This is the way things are built. No reputable construction firms will want to bid the process piecemeal.”

“Well, Jack, that is where we are hoping your experience can help us and earn that big bonus. We want to start building in the winter. In fact, we’d like to start building as quickly as you can spec early parts of the project. We want an assembly-line style project. Furthermore, we are willing to pay a premium to the construction companies to build in the winter. We’ll be using many of the same contractors who work in our backers’ fields in northern Canada and Alaska. We are confident they can operate in the toughest weather conditions. They are briefed and on board.”

“You’re talking serious money and major schedule risk here. Anyway, I’m not sure that even with an army of monkeys I could get everything done before November. It would mean your people would have to provide me with generous amounts of support and cooperation. Who would be coordinating it from your end?”

“Yours truly. I have both spending authority and contracting authority. The OSEC board has to review any really large non-budget expenses. They are on call 24/7. We have the cash already committed to complete the project, plus operate for two years. We are serious.

“Furthermore, we’ve selected quality firms we’ve worked with in the past and asked for priority on their people. They are already on board and ready to work with you. All we need is you and your crew.”

“Well, doing things in this order is likely to result in some mistakes. We might end up with some serious money wasted because of your hurry. What happens then?”

“Jack, we have a 25 percent reserve for contingencies. That should cover losses due to weather, construction errors, bad luck and hordes of tree-huggers. We expect there will be mistakes and inefficiencies. But the hope is that we will eventually be able to get the government to put up enough matching money to cover any construction indiscretions we might create.

After all, this qualifies as alternate energy production to reduce foreign oil dependence.”

A 25 percent contingency fund was unprecedented. It was five times what Jack normally asked for and then never received. These people are serious, he concluded.

Well, if he just got the million-dollar up-front bonus and nothing else it would pay him for all of next year. This was really not a hard decision to make. Jack just needed to make sure there were no hidden loopholes that could leave him out in the cold.

“How do I know you will follow through with the project? There are lots of issues that could hold things up—a new endangered species or permitting problems.”

“Well, we believe we have the support of the necessary government organizations. We’ve been promised extremely favorable treatment and alacrity. The local governments are very excited at the prospect of the economic boom our project could bring on. They see high-paying jobs, lots of new industry, increased tax base and rejuvenation for otherwise relatively poor regions. The locals have been very supportive and helpful. We’re heroes to them.

“But to answer the underlying question, we are 100 percent committed to this project.”

“Well, I’ll want it in the agreement that if you cancel or suspend the project within the first nine months I get my complete package, because I’ll have had to cancel other projects to take this one,” Jack replied.

After a pause, Lloyd replied, “I think we can live with that, since we have no plans but to go forward at full speed.”

“OK. You’ve run me out of objections. I may be crazy but I’ll do it. Have your people draw up the statement of work and send it to my lawyer and I’ll be back in touch.”

“Great! When can you start?”

“Well, today is December 30. I figure you can’t get basic infrastructure in and people on site for thirty days. I can be ready to go before you can.”

“We’re ahead of you. I’m setting up offices in Denver starting this week. We recently leased a floor of a building with an option on two more. The major contractors have been queued up and told to be ready for you by the fifth of January in northern Colorado. I have the ability to spend money and hire a staff to manage logistics for us. We are almost ready to start hiring. When can you be here?”

“You really *are* serious, aren’t you?”

“Aye, we are. In fact, the board of directors authorized me to forward the bonus to your account in Tucson today if you give me your word.”

“Hold on. Send it next week. Then I won’t have to pay taxes on it this year. As to when I can be there, I’m in upstate New York right now.” Jack did some quick mental arithmetic. “I figure I can be there early next week, weather permitting. By the time I get there, the paperwork should be done and we can start.”

“Excellent. Do you need any special logistics between now and then? Shall I arrange lodging for you and your crew?”

“Well, I don’t really have a ‘crew,’ but I’ll do some checking for the people you should hire. I’ll try to draw up a shopping list for you. However, I’ll live in my RV on site once construction starts. That speeds things up. I’ll live in it in town until then, so I’ll need an RV pad in town. I’ll also want at least a couple of office trailers on site—say rigged for a total of eight engineers. I may want more, but this should get us started. They’ll need the full setup of desks, computers, etc.”

Jack paused and thought about working through the winter in the mountains. “Also, we’ll need some good snow vehicles. Let’s see—at least two army surplus 6x6s—an M35A2, M36A2 or similar, a couple of Jeeps and some high-end four-wheelers. Also, we’ll need some way to move people and equipment around—a couple of serious SUVs, Land Rover or Hummer. Everything needs cold weather kits, winches, GPS units, lights, snow tires, survival gear, etc. Don’t want to be caught without what we’ll need when we’re away from civilization.”

“I see where you’re going. Fight the weather at every turn.”

“Yep. And we’ll need at least one big nasty snowplow. Also, we’ll want to be prepared in case we’re snowed in—generators, lights, provisions, etc. Make sure there are cell towers in place so we can talk. And a place to land a chopper right there. I figure we’re going to do a lot of traveling by chopper until we can build some roads. I suggest you set everything up in the area I labeled ‘motor pool’ on the proposal.”

“I get the picture. Let me see what we can cobble up while you’re heading this way. Is this a good number to reach you?”

“Yeah. I keep this with me all of the time.”

“No worries then. I’ll send you the latest documents on everything via email so that you can start looking at everything.”

“Fine. Call me on Monday at this number and I’ll be able to tell you a better ETA and feed you more info.”

“Consider it done. Well, I’ll let you get back to driving. I’m looking forward to meeting you here in Denver as soon as you can make it. And I’ll get on the problem of providing you with a winter home plate here in town.”

“Great, thanks. Goodbye.” Click.

With a long exhale, Jack put the ear piece back into his pocket.

Well, now he’d done it. He’d let his greed get ahead of his better judgment. But while the original project had been less interesting, this new turn of events made Jack salivate. Who did he know who was available on short notice? He’d need civil engineers, geologists, surveyors, mechanical engineers, plus field people. He needed quality people and he needed them now. The good news was he could pay top dollar plus bonus out of OSEC’s wallet. It was also good news that the job would last them for two years or more, until most or all of the construction was complete—long after Jack would be history.

Sample

## Chapter 2

### Friday, December 30

Even the country station crackled feebly on the vintage AM radio, which didn't seem to like the weather either.

A few miles behind Jack on the interstate, Ann Stuart was coming to the desperate realization that her ancient VW bus was no match for this storm. The wind was pushing it all over the road, and the engine sounded quite sickly.

Ann was on her way to the Promised Land of Silicon Valley, where good technical jobs grew on trees, every project was exciting and every nerd was rich. She had just graduated from tiny Maine Polytechnic with a master's degree in engineering physics. That morning she'd packed her meager belongings in her lovingly maintained bus, collected her precious life savings—mostly from tutoring and tech support work—and hit the road for Northern California before dawn.

Now, with evening coming on, she was finding it harder to ignore the fact that the heater wasn't working too well either. Thanks to a gift card from the grateful English department whose computers she'd kept running for the last few years, she'd hit the L.L. Bean outlet on her way out of town. The down vest she'd picked up had been keeping her from freezing for the last few hours, but as it grew dark she knew she needed to think about pulling off the road, getting gas and maybe finding a place to stay for the night. She hated the idea of spending the money, but this was probably the emergency she'd been saving it for.

On her own since she was 19, Ann had marshaled her scant resources and untold hours of hard study into a first-class education from a no-name

school. Since she was graduating in December, interview opportunities were few on campus, and the placement office had told her bluntly that she'd have to relocate to find a job unless she wanted to take a glamor position with a government contractor.

Ann knew how that worked. She'd interned with one of the firms one summer, and the on-staff recruiter had laid it all out for her after a few too many beers at the Fourth of July party. Government quotas, both official and unofficial, gave major contracting firms incentives to hire minorities and women engineers. She could expect regular promotions and a generous salary. She would never have to worry about overtime or hard work. Her career path would be golden.

The only problem was that she would merely be window dressing. She'd never get a chance to work on anything interesting or even to use her brain. She would be hired and cultivated simply as overhead to meet a business need.

That was not for Ann. Instead, she was almost broke and heading out to Palo Alto, ready to land a job in some exciting startup and maybe, if she was lucky, work on her Ph.D. at Cal or Stanford. At the age of 23, Ann was off to conquer the world.

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On a nearby side road, John Troy was behind the wheel of a huge county snowplow and dump truck for the fourteenth continuous hour, accompanied by his good friend Jack Daniel's. In anticipation of the overtime he'd decided to treat himself to the good stuff.

It wasn't a fun job in the best of times, but today he'd spent the endless hours clearing narrow, crooked back roads, often encumbered with people and objects that required him to leave the warm cab and face the elements. He'd been out since 3 a.m. and was cold, wet, exhausted, and ill-tempered. I'm getting too old to do this, he thought, sloshing down the almost invisible road in the gloom.

Still, between the weather and the holiday making his colleagues unreachable, he'd have all of the double time he could take tonight and tomorrow, and with two months to go till he retired, he needed it. Maybe he'd be able to buy that new fishing boat. Maybe he'd move to Florida and never see snow again except on TV. John took another swig of whiskey as he considered how to spend his future wealth.

As his shift progressed, the snowplow's curves became a little lazier. The sides of its blade bumped into more obstructions. With darkness coming on, John decided to take a break and have a warm meal at the truck stop near the interstate. They had pretty waitresses there and plenty of room to park his plow. After dinner, he would make one last pass on his way in for the night. He took another swig of whiskey from the nearly empty bottle.

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It was only 5 o'clock, but Jack could already see that getting to Cortland wasn't going to happen. The weather had become steadily worse, and now that the sun had set the temperature would drop and black ice would cover the roadway.

Spotting a sign for a truck stop just off the interstate, he exited carefully and cautiously made his way through sleet and sludge to the nearly empty parking lot. Finding a mostly flat spot, he stopped the RV, and took care of the various nightly rituals of leveling, plugging in, and starting the heat.

Fifteen minutes later, it was time for dinner. Grabbing his cell phone and laptop, Jack dashed across the parking lot. Inside the nearly deserted café, he settled into a booth next to a window where he could see his RV. Just in case. Old habits die hard.

A rotund waitress in a pink uniform appeared, her name tag announcing that she was Betty. Presenting Jack with a menu with her left hand, she filled his cup from the coffee pot that appeared permanently attached to her right. Encouraged by this display of competence, Jack inquired hopefully, "I'm hungry and cold. What do you recommend?"

"Well, the fish is to die from," she replied genially but firmly. "They do know how to make a decent steak, and the apple pie is pretty good."

"Fine," he said, in the mood to celebrate. "I'll take the biggest steak you've got—medium rare, potato with everything, and some pie."

As Betty disappeared into the kitchen to turn in his order, Jack fired up his laptop. Pleasantly surprised to find an open WiFi network with the name of the truck stop, he spent the next few minutes downloading and reading his email. He sent email to Manuel Garza, his lawyer in Tucson, to give him a heads up on the oil deal with OSEC, along with a list of important details for inclusion. Another email went to his accountant, Consuelo Winters, informing her that his plans had changed, that she should start preparing his taxes, since he'd received his last pay for the year, and she should continue to hold his mail until he knew his new address. Finally, he logged into his Tucson

bank account and found that \$750,000 from the tribe was already there, along with his monthly Air Force retirement check of roughly \$4,000.

After some rough mental calculations on how much money he would need, he transferred the remaining money to his bank in Nevis, emailing investment instructions to his account manager there. Jack had been managing his funds out of Nevis since he'd been first deployed to Europe in the Air Force two decades earlier. He liked the privacy; too bad he had to pay U.S. taxes on every penny of income there, too. It was the price of being an honest man. But if the oil project really paid off he would be set for life—not bad at 47.

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Ann pulled off the exit and headed for the truck stop's gas pumps. Five freezing minutes later the VW was filled with the cheapest gas and Ann had tightened a loose ignition wire, which she suspected was the cause of her engine complaints. Starting the VW up, she carefully listened to the now lusty purr of the engine, wiped the grease from her fingers, put the bus in gear and drove over toward the café in search of a place to park. She realized with a smile that only a certified VW lover could call that popping cacophony a purr.

She found a convenient spot on the extreme end between a snow-covered, floodlit bush and a white county sheriff's prowler. Parked in front of her was an ancient and rusty heating-oil truck.

Ann carefully checked to make sure the doors were locked, that her valuables were out of sight and that her cigar box full of cash was carefully hidden under the driver's seat. She reasoned no one would try to break into her VW when a law officer could walk up at any moment, but she wanted to make doubly sure.

Ann hurried the fifteen yards through the bluster toward the entrance, carefully stepping around puddles to avoid soaking her sneakers. Once inside, she had barely breathed a sigh of relief and shaken off the accumulated snow when there was a sudden barrage of air horns.

With his destination in sight, John Troy had picked up a bit too much speed and was in no state to notice the warning honks as the snowplow fish-tailed wildly. Fourteen tons of heavy equipment skidded out of control and slammed into the VW bus, propelling it into the heating-oil truck. A shower of sparks landed in the free-flowing mix of gasoline and diesel oil.

As dozens of bystanders looked on, the bus was engulfed in orange and purple translucent flames, and destroyed within seconds. With the fire moving on to the plow, John Troy tumbled out the driver's door onto the pavement, still clutching the depleted whiskey bottle and reeking of alcohol. A passer-by assisted his stagger toward safety.

Deputy Ronald Moore, who had been looking at the menu inside the truck stop, headed out the front door at a dead run, quickly sized up the situation, and drove his prowler a safe distance away. He called for assistance over the radio; ironically, the ambulance and fire department from the nearby village were able to make good time because Troy had just plowed the road.

By the time help arrived, the drama was already drawing to a close. The burning trucks and bus were quickly extinguished. Deputy Moore started to question Troy, quickly deduced what had happened, and administered a Breathalyzer test. Found to be well past the legal limit, the bloody but not seriously injured Troy was arrested and placed in the ambulance. Moore dealt professionally with the disconsolate owner of the heating oil truck, and took names and statements of the various witnesses.

At the edge of the crowd, Ann Stuart looked numbly at the charred wreckage of her entire world—her clothes, books, computer, mementos, life savings and even her newly minted diploma, all destroyed. All she had now was either in her purse or on her back. She had never felt this alone or helpless in her life.

When Deputy Moore called to the crowd for the owner of the VW, Ann broke from her reverie to acknowledge him. He didn't recognize her, and noted that she wasn't dressed warmly enough for the weather. "You aren't from around here, are you?"

"No. I'm just passing through on my way to California. Or I should say 'was.'"

"Well, it looks as if you aren't going to be traveling in this vehicle anytime soon."

"I can't argue with that." She managed a shaky chuckle.

"Are you traveling with someone?"

"No. I'm alone."

"What was in the VW?"

"Everything," she replied, fighting back tears. "Everything I own. I just graduated from college. I packed up and headed west until I got here."

"Do you have any money?" Moore asked.

“My life savings, \$3,000, was under the seat. I probably have \$50 in my purse.”

“Do you have anyone you can call? A relative, husband, employer or friend?”

“Not really. . .” she began, but Moore’s radio barked to him and he turned away to speak into his shoulder mounted microphone. Suddenly overwhelmed, she felt weak and then dizzy; the world turned gray and her legs crumpled beneath her.

Moore was still distracted, but Jack Pipov, who had hurried from the café with the rest of the crowd, happened to be standing nearby. Noticing her impending collapse, he caught her in the nick of time. The deputy quickly agreed with his suggestion that they all go back inside, where Jack lost no time propping the inert Ann in his booth and wrapping his coat around her. He proffered a glass of water as she revived; the astute Betty quickly brought mugs of hot coffee to Ann and the deputy, who’d pulled up a chair to the end of the booth.

Shifting back into professional mode, Moore pulled out his notebook. “Could I please get your name and address, ma’am?”

“My name is Ann Stuart. I guess I don’t really have an address. I used to live in Maine and I’m moving to California, but I’m currently between addresses.”

“Could I please see some identification?”

“Sure.” Ann dug through her purse and produced her driver’s license. She automatically continued to pull things out of her purse—her proof of insurance, student ID, library card and Social Security card—until Moore stopped her.

No plastic, no ATM card, Jack noticed. This kid had survived on cash alone.

Moore scribbled for a few minutes and then returned her belongings, stalling for time while he figured out what to do. On the Friday night before New Year’s in the middle of a growing storm, he didn’t have a lot of housing options for stranded travelers.

As Jack sat feeling awkward—he couldn’t leave, because this newly homeless young woman was still wearing his coat, but he felt he was intruding by staying—Betty solved the problem by reappearing with his steak on one large platter and a gigantic baked potato on a plate. She made a small production of bringing the cutlery, a salad, a basket of bread and a carousel

of salad dressings. Somewhat embarrassed by the sizable meal, Jack noticed Ann Stuart eying the steaming hot food longingly.

“Would you care for something to eat, miss?”

“Well. . .”

“What would you like? Would you like one of these steaks?”

Ann nodded slightly but then shook her head as practicality overrode hunger. Turning to Betty, Jack said, “She’ll have one just like this.” And, as Ann shook her head, “This is my treat.”

At that, Ann said, “Thanks.” And, to Betty, “Medium, please.”

Betty caused more rolls and another salad to appear, and Ann suddenly realized that she hadn’t eaten since her pre-dawn send-off breakfast. Deputy Moore, meanwhile, ordered the spaghetti dinner he had originally been considering.

Her outlook improving with sustenance, Ann forced herself to realize that things could have been a lot worse. She wasn’t going to starve and she was currently warm; all she had lost were transportation and money. She was thankful to be alive.

Still, she was afraid of the next few days and the loss of momentum toward her goals.

“What do I do now, officer?” she asked Moore, expecting no really good answer.

“Well,” the deputy replied, “this isn’t as uncommon a situation as you might think. All manner of things happen to put people in your position.

“It isn’t talked about much, but every city or county has provision to handle the few people who need this type of short-term support. Until the motel burned down last year, the county had an arrangement to put people up there. Now we have a small apartment downtown in the central firehouse set aside as an emergency shelter. It can even handle small families.

“It isn’t luxurious but it’s warm, dry and safe. It can get a bit noisy and the crew can be a little uncouth. The food isn’t great. But I’ve taken the liberty of reserving it for you; it’s better than the jail.

“The problem is, the firehouse is about ten miles from here. The dispatcher will be watching out for the next vehicle going past here to there to give you a lift. I’m supposed to head back out to handle other people in the storm. Any way it goes, we’ll all have a busy night. We’re all on overtime. You’ll have to wait here until you can get a lift with the department. It will probably be near the end of shift, around 10:30. Can you hold out here until then?”

Ann nodded weakly. The firehouse sounded warm, dry and very safe. Glancing at her watch, she saw that it was already well past seven; she'd just have to wait about three hours.

"Longer term," the deputy continued, "you need to contact your insurance company and have them deal with your claim." He tore a sheet out of his notebook and quickly copied down the applicable case number and other facts. "Here's everything you'll need to tell them. It's a safe bet they'll 'total' your VW. I don't know what will happen about the contents of your van. Your insurance people can tell you how best to handle that.

"In reality, the biggest problem is that this is the Friday night before New Year's in the middle of a storm, and miles from anywhere. Given a few business days, most of the issues can be addressed," Moore said, getting up to pay his check and brave the storm. "Here's my card, with the dispatcher's number on the back. If you have problems or need anything, just give the dispatcher a call and she can get a message through to me."

Feeling fed and increasingly reassured, Ann thanked the deputy and mentally started to plot her recovery from the current situation, realizing that in a year, she'd look back at this as an unfortunate adventure, not a disastrous turning point in her life. But the short-term obstacles to her California trip were still formidable.

Looking up from her reverie she found herself studying Jack Pipov, now sipping his coffee and unobtrusively clicking away on his laptop. Obviously he was in the military or had been; it wasn't just the graying blond crew cut, it was the air of quiet authority and purpose. She wondered about the old, jagged scar on the left side of his neck that extended from below his collar into the hairline behind his ear—what could have caused such a scar without being fatal? His hands, also scarred, were lean, with neatly trimmed nails on stubby fingers. His face was weathered, his height and build average; he wore a thick, warm shirt—carefully ironed—under a down vest. In his shirt pocket, a small notebook and two pens sat neatly side by side. His only visible jewelry was a very expensive looking watch and a class ring.

Betty, busy with coffee-replenishing ministrations, broke into her thoughts. "Are you ready for your pie yet, dear?"

"Pie?"

"Sure," she said, indicating Jack. "He ordered pie, so I figured you'd have some, too. We've got some great apple pie. I can even put some ice cream on it and heat it up if you want."

Grasping at conversational straws, Jack piped up, “My pie sure is good with this coffee.” Ann nodded politely and Betty headed away, topping off every cup she encountered with her hot liquid.

Looking at the exhausted Ann, Jack saw a tiny woman engulfed in his jacket—she couldn’t be more than an inch over five feet, with broad shoulders, blue eyes and very short, dirty-blond hair. She looked intelligent, tired and a bit underfed. Her fingernails were trimmed short and there was a bit of engine grime left over from her VW on one hand—clearly she didn’t mind getting her hands dirty. She wore no obvious jewelry except a cheap plastic watch.

Excluding a brand-new down vest he suspected she’d just bought for the trip, her clothing was all quite utilitarian, worn and not quite up to the weather conditions. Her entire appearance screamed eternally poor college student pinching pennies to get by.

Jack ventured, “We haven’t been introduced. I know your name is Ann Stuart. My name is Jack. Jack Pipov.”

“Hi, Jack Pipov,” she smiled over her coffee cup. “And thank you for that feast. It certainly has helped me to cope with this latest turn of events. I hadn’t eaten since sunup.”

“Well, I couldn’t help overhearing everything you told the deputy,” Jack acknowledged. “It sounds as if you’ve had a rough turn of luck. Do you have a position lined up in California already?”

“No. But the school placement office said that I wouldn’t have much trouble finding one once I got to Silicon Valley.”

“Really? What do you do? Software? Hardware?”

“Well, not really. I just got my MS in engineering physics. That makes me a generalist. I can do lots of different things, but I’m not deeply trained in any field. I guess I’ll need a bit of on-the-job training for whatever I do. This will be my first real job. I know I have to start at the bottom wherever I land.”

Ann rapidly morphed before Jack’s eyes from damsel in distress to colleague in a bind.

“Interesting. I’m a consulting civil engineer myself.”

“Really? What do you do?”

“Mostly early stages of big projects. Factories, airports, things like that.”

“Wait,” she said, eyes widening. “Are you the Pipov who created the airfield in the middle of Iraq behind enemy lines in Desert Storm? They used that as a case study in my project management course!”

“I worked on the project,” Jack conceded diffidently.

“That must have been an amazing experience.”

“Well, western Iraq is mostly empty. There are areas that have no roads for 30 miles in any direction. It was just an exercise in using satellite imagery to pick out an unreachable location and then executing the standard Air Force forward base strategy, plus or minus a few details.

“The original plans were worked out during the Cold War for use in Europe. Mostly we just ignored the cold weather contingencies. In fact, I remember how much we wished for cold weather when it was 120 in the shade.”

“How long did it take before you were operational?”

“Well, we had the first real runway up in seventy-two hours. It’s hard to say exactly when we were ‘operational,’ since we had almost nothing working at first and it took months to complete the facility. We had an emergency landing after about 12 hours, but that was little more than a ditching in the desert with friends nearby. However, we handled a C-130 bleed air emergency at 24 hours and flew the repaired Hercules out at 72 hours.”

Talk about unintended consequences, Ann thought. Since her misadventure had landed her at a truck stop listening to stories from one of the legendary figures of her classes, she decided she ought to make the most of the opportunity. She noted that while Pipov was clearly proud of his work, he wasn’t one to seek the spotlight.

“I hate to be blunt,” she said, “but this is not a normal situation. I’ve got three hours to kill and no place to go. Would you mind keeping me company for a while? Maybe tell me your life story?”

“Well, there isn’t that much to tell,” Jack said, clearly unaccustomed to such requests.

“Honestly,” said Ann. “It would be a real kindness. I’m stuck here with nothing to do, and I’d really like to hear your story.”

“All right then,” Jack agreed politely as Betty passed by to refill their coffee cups. “I was born Jaroslav Pipov in a little village outside of Prague in what is now the Czech Republic. I was a babe in arms when we escaped the Iron Curtain just before the Berlin Wall went up.

“My folks and I settled in Tucson. My father worked as an aircraft mechanic at the Bone Yard and my mother worked as a caterer to make ends meet. I wanted to fly the big planes my dad worked on all day, and I was lucky enough to get an appointment to the Air Force Academy.”

Ann suspected there was more to this, but let it pass.

“At the time, during the Carter administration, the military had been beaten down and under-funded after Vietnam. But by the time I’d graduated, the Reagan military buildup was on the horizon. That was a fun time to be in the Air Force—even if I didn’t get to fly.

“No one had bothered to tell me that just a small fraction of the people in the Air Force get to fly planes. But I learned that there was much more to the Air Force than simply boring holes in the sky.

“The fact that I had grown up speaking Czech made me more valuable to the intelligence groups; I could converse with a Ukrainian with a little effort and a Pole pretty easily. I was able to learn spoken Russian very quickly, though I still have a hard time with the Cyrillic alphabet. On the other hand, I had always been interested in engineering and building things. There came a point when I had to make a decision between engineering and intelligence, and I chose engineering.

“I quickly found myself in Europe working with NATO. During those years we had lots of exercises or war games; some of them went on for weeks and brought in troops all the way from the U.S. Some were very large scale and covered several countries; others were much smaller.”

“What was the purpose of these exercises?” Ann asked.

“You’re too young to remember the Cold War,” Jack said. Ann nodded. “At the time, the Soviet Union was a mammoth and dangerous menace poised to conquer Europe. Reagan called them ‘The Evil Empire,’ and he had it right.

“The NATO alliance was created to protect Western Europe from just such an attack. We had to stay ready to defend against an attack at any moment.

“In practice, it would take three weeks to get the bulk of the U.S. forces to Europe and ready to go. The forward bases were intended to defend against a numerically superior force by slowly giving ground while waiting for reinforcements. The best way to slow the progress of a force like that is to use battlefield or tactical nuclear weapons. In essence, Germany would have been turned into a moonscape to save the rest of Europe.”

“Horrible,” said Ann. “How close did we come to this?”

“On several occasions in the ’60s we came very close. In the early ’80s there was evidence that the Soviets were thinking that they could win such a war. Reagan adopted a more aggressive position and forced them to back off. It wasn’t until after the fall of the Soviet empire that we learned how close we’d come several times.”

“And you were there?”

“Yep. I remember the day he called for the Berlin Wall to be torn down. Tensions were pretty high, and I was a bit scared. I was a young captain in charge of an engineering group. Our job was to build emergency runways and support facilities after the Soviets nuked our regular bases.”

“Did you get into any fighting there?”

“No, but we had some fun with some big war games. The military always prefers exercises to the real thing. People die in the real thing.”

“Did you end up doing anything distinguished while you were there?”

“Well, I was able to get my doctorate and publish some papers. Just before I retired, I was promoted to full colonel.”

“How did you arrange that? I thought it was tough to get a Ph.D. in the military.”

“Yes, but I had a very indulgent commanding general named Sumner Wayne with lots of stars who let me bend some rules and get away with stuff.”

“Now that has to be a good story.”

“Well, it’s kind of a long one. Let’s just say I made him look very good,” Jack said.

“I’ve got at least two hours. Will that cover it?”

“OK. I was a captain in this construction group when we came to what was supposed to be a two-week-long exercise in late October in southern Germany, with a simulated opfor, or opposing force, and lots of movement, but mostly limited to our wing. We were supposed to be part of a division-strength deployment to construct an emergency air base, because the main base was bombed out of commission, and then the wing was expected to operate from the base.

“Or at least that was the original goal of the exercise. My company was first on site—and due to a traffic snarl we were separated from everyone else when a simulated air raid took out the main body. Suddenly, the referee tells me I’m the senior officer in charge and to continue with the mission for the entire air wing. I collected the surviving resources—about a thousand men and a few green lieutenants in A-10 Thunderbolt ‘warthogs’—the ugliest, nastiest-looking airplanes you’ve ever seen, but they sure could kill tanks.

“Anyway, I realized that my career in the Air Force was now over. Anything I did would make me look bad. The wing’s job was to slow or stop a simulated Soviet force of more than 50,000 with heavy armor, supposedly 100 miles away and heading straight for us. It was a classic no-win scenario.

“The right thing to do would have been to surrender to keep loss of life down and to slow the enemy down processing the POWs. However, you aren’t supposed to surrender in exercises.

“I called a meeting of the senior people—the lieutenants and the senior non-commissioned officers—in the field where we had assembled. We figured out what resources we had; I was preparing a report to headquarters to ask for instructions when I received another message: simulated loss of communications due to having our headquarters bombed. I couldn’t even call for help or advice. I was 100 percent on my own.

“I realized that I had nothing to lose. If I was going to be ruined, I wanted to do my best job and get into the spirit of the exercise. Maybe the write-up of my stupidity would help someone down the line. I had a duty to give it my best shot; without communications I was able to think outside the box without anyone second-guessing me.”

“This sounds as if you did something really strange.”

“You might say that,” Jack grinned.

“Some of the old noncoms had been on these exercises in the ’60s or earlier. They’d picked up knowledge from the noncoms going back to the ’50s, even the Berlin airlift in the ’40s. Never underestimate the information a senior NCO can find or the job that they can accomplish if they want to badly enough. In my case, I think they took pity on me.

“One of them used the old soldiers’ network to find an abandoned World War II Luftwaffe training base not far away. It was now being used as a dairy farm; the runway needed some help, but it was long, straight and big enough to handle anything we had left, which wasn’t much.

“To the amazement of the farmer, I took the place over. That gave us a minimally operational base in four hours instead of the two days it would have taken to build one from scratch. We set up an intelligence group, and started getting simulated intelligence showing the Soviets were on the other side of this broad valley about seventy-five miles away, preparing to cross the valley.

“Everything I knew about military tactics, which was minimal at best, I’d learned in class. I was an engineer, not a soldier—so I approached the problem like an engineer. In the next meeting, held in an old hangar converted to a dairy barn, we went over every map we had of the area and saw the same weakness the Brits had found in World War II—you can’t take armor through high water.

“We found there were countless bridges, thirteen big dams and dozens of smaller ones on the rivers and lakes around the valley. We did some quick calculations and came up with a plan.”

“Did you blow all the bridges?”

“No. There were too many interlinked roads—I would have had to take out almost every bridge to stop them. Plus, the Soviet force had bridging equipment, so it wouldn’t really slow them down. Instead, I sent the A-10s, which have almost nonexistent bombing capability, to blow two dams at the end of the valley, using the biggest ‘bunker buster’ bombs they could carry.

“On paper, I knew they’d bring the dams down instantly. Since this was an exercise, the pilots simulated the runs. To this day, I don’t know for sure what would have really happened. But the referees noted the bombings.

“Obviously, we’d deviated from what was expected and had forced the refs to think on their feet. It took them a while to come up with the ‘updated intelligence’ that indicated the results of the mission.

“They gave us credit for the complete destruction of two dams and indicated that the Soviets were now in the middle of the valley heading toward us at ten miles per hour. We would be overrun in a few hours.

“I protested. I showed the referee the amount of water released and the topographic map. Since it was the end of October, the dams were full, the rivers were high, and the ground was saturated with water already—and muddy to the point where the Soviets would have been forced to stick to the roads most of the time anyway. I argued that the Soviets were under about six feet of fast-moving water and that it would take several hours for the water to recede. Also that several of the key bridges were likely out of commission.”

“That must have surprised them.”

“Yes. They thought I’d done something completely dim-witted. After some phone calls and whispers, they declared that the middle of the Soviet column had been destroyed or drowned.

“At this point, I dispatched the A-10s to plink the surviving enemy armor on the near side of the valley. When that was done, I sent them to destroy another dam. That completely confused the referees until I explained that it would keep the water level too high in the lowest areas to cross.

“I finally sat the senior referee down and explained to him that I had enough dams to blow to keep the water level high for about a week, and that the Soviets were in no position to defend all of the dams. I could destroy them at will. The Soviets couldn’t cross the water and there was no practical way for them to go around. Furthermore, even if my entire force were destroyed,

any of a dozen associated forces could have stepped in and continued the now obvious plan.

“At that point, they stopped the exercise and ordered me back to headquarters for my spanking.

“The refs were really angry. I’d messed everything up. This was a two-week exercise stopped after 48 hours. Not only was the dairy farmer raising Cain, I’d succeeded in neutralizing 50,000 Soviet troops with a tiny force using a long-discarded tactic. I had no casualties under my command, either; they couldn’t argue with the numbers. But the exercise had deviated too far away from the planned scenario. There was no practical way to continue. When the main body of the force was wiped out, everyone had rightly expected the exercise to come unglued quickly. It should have. But I was lucky to have the right people and be in the right place.”

“What happened?”

“I was called on the carpet at headquarters. The evaluators started by questioning every single order that I issued, my motivation, my reasoning, whether I had the authority to make the order, and whether I had taken leave of my senses at each turn.

“General Wayne sat back and smiled, because his organization got credit for the victory and he could already see how things would come out. I was young and naïve—it was very unpleasant for me because I didn’t realize what was really happening. I had made him look very good, which he liked, and had done it without any outside help, which made it even better, and had done it at the expense of the exercise planners and referees, which made it exquisite. I think it helped him get another star.

“General Wayne took good care of me the rest of the time I was under his command. He gave me other important assignments and learned to trust me as an expert in my field. He sat his replacement down and saw to it that I was protected, and ultimately promoted early. That’s how I was able to get my time in at Cambridge and work on some interesting projects.”

“You did other things over there?”

“I did lots of other things. We put a temporary air base on an ice floe. We put another one up in the top of Greenland, north of the Arctic Circle, in the middle of winter, just to see if it could be done. I helped to design and build King Khalid Military City, along with the reserve air bases in Saudi Arabia that were later used during Desert Storm. And you already know some of what I did during Desert Storm.

“As the Soviet Union died, I was sent into the various countries to help ‘westernize’ their infrastructure. Speaking Czech stood me in good stead. Some of the projects we did behind the Iron Curtain after it fell were big and important, even though they weren’t publicized for obvious reasons. Anyway, by this point it was the ’90s, and the Air Force didn’t hold a lot of future for me.”

“Why not?”

“They called it the ‘peace dividend.’ The military was shrinking and we didn’t have good prospects. To continue to move up, I would have had to stop being an engineer, go to War College and eventually become a general officer.

“But I really liked building things and meeting the technical challenges. I’d also worked with enough civilian contractors at this point to realize that I had knowledge and a type of experience that was scarce in the real world. I quit and hung out my shingle when I hit my twenty-year mark.

“I’m officially retired. They almost recalled me after 9/11 for Iraq and Afghanistan, but my clients let it be known that it would hurt projects important to the government. Uncle Sam has left me alone. I’ve been on my own ever since.”

“What have you done since you’ve been out?”

“Mostly big projects, several of which may or may not ever happen. I just finished up an industrial complex near the Saint Lawrence Seaway for an Indian tribe wanting to make money from something other than gambling. I did a number of quickie projects to clean up from Katrina and Rita in late 2005 and 2006 and later Ike, but they don’t really count. I did some fun infrastructure work in the South Seas and in Europe. I’m about to start a really big rush project in Colorado, which will keep me busy for the next year or two.”

“Where is your family? Still in Tucson?”

“My folks lived there until they died a few years ago. I use Tucson as a base of operations, but I don’t really have a home, except for the RV out in the parking lot. I move around a lot.”

“No brothers or sisters?”

“None living. My folks had a couple of kids in Czech before I was born; polio got one, and a simple infection got the other. In the U.S. they would be alive today, but in the ‘workers’ paradise’ there was very limited medical care and no penicillin for those not in power.

“But I’ve got lots of cousins and some aunts and uncles. After the Velvet Revolution, I linked up with my family in Bohemia, and I’ve helped several to immigrate to the U.S.”

“Hobbies?”

“Well, I love reading and traveling. I collect old books—mostly about science or engineering. Wherever I take a job, I try to get to know the locals and learn what they like to do. And it goes without saying that I love gadgets and toys.”

“Of course. No self-respecting engineer can avoid a shiny new toy.”

“So, you’ve heard about me. Tell me about you,” said Jack, who had just said more about himself than he had for the last several years.

“There isn’t that much to tell. As I mentioned, I’ve just graduated with my Master’s. Most of my life has been school.

“I’ve been on my own for a few years. My folks and my grandfather died in a car crash when I was an infant. My grandmother raised me. She was a retired librarian, a preacher’s wife and a really neat lady. It was just the two of us—there wasn’t much to go around, but she stretched the money enough to get me well into college before it ran out. I had just started college when she died.

“About all I had as a keepsake was that old VW. My grandfather had bought it in the ’60s as a church van and my father had rebuilt it in the early ’80s. My grandmother had kept it in the garage. I discovered it one day and found that it had all of the Chilton’s manuals with it, along with a good collection of tools and parts.

“I learned how to work on it as a way to get to know my grandfather and father. I’d go tinker on it whenever I was feeling down, which happens a lot with teenage girls. With some help from family friends, I was able to drive it to school when I earned my license.

“I’ve done all of the work on it for ten years now and I know every nut and bolt. In fact, I rebuilt the engine over Thanksgiving in anticipation of this trip. I can tune it up in thirty minutes from start to finish. I’ve rebuilt the brakes several times. I rewired it and then had to go back and rewire it properly. That taught me a lot about electronics. In fact, it’s probably the reason I went into engineering. That VW was nearly 40 years old, but it was rock solid.”

She paused as the realization hit her anew. “Until tonight,” she quavered.

Ann began to tear up again at the thought of losing not only her transportation but a rare link to her family. Jack eyed her with new respect; clearly

she had done a substantial amount with very little. She was tough and smart and her future would be bright, with just a little luck.

Suddenly he recalled his urgent need to staff up quickly for his own project, and thought he saw a potential win-win.

“Are you dead set on going straight to California?”

“Pretty much, though I don’t know how I’m going to get there right now.”

“Well, as I said, I’m about to start a rush project in Colorado...” Ann nodded. “Which I’ve got to staff up for NLTY.”

“NLTY?”

“No later than yesterday—an Air Force term. Sorry. Think of it as ASAP on steroids.

“Anyway, I need a cross section of engineering talent plus field people. I can hire some from contracting firms but will want at least a small staff. We’re going to work through the winter to plan and design a big facility in northern Colorado and southern Wyoming. Before we’re through, there will be electrical, mechanical and civil engineering plus geology and industrial engineering components. If you’re interested, I’m pretty sure I could get you a position. The pay would be OK; the job would end when the project is over in a couple of years. Long hours and nasty work in tough conditions—a perfect first job. Sound interesting?”

“Definitely. But until I know what’s going to happen with regard to the accident, I don’t really know what to do next.”

“I might be able to help with that,” Jack said, reopening his laptop and searching his phone database. Then he checked his watch and saw that it was 9:00—not too late to make a phone call.

“What you need is a lawyer to handle your claim. That plow driver was plainly intoxicated and he hit your parked vehicle with no help from you. That almost certainly makes him and his employer liable for all of your damages. Your insurance company isn’t going to do very much because you have the minimal policy, right? There is little or no coverage for damage to your vehicle or contents. Just to people you might hit or damage. What you need is a quick settlement from the county covering your loss and inconvenience. No one can get you back your sentimental items—all they can do is compensate you with money.

“An old friend from my Air Force days in Saudi Arabia practices law in Rochester a hundred miles west of here. With your permission, I’ll just give him a ring and see if he can recommend someone around here who could take your case on contingency. OK?”

This seemed reasonable. Ann nodded. Jack pulled out his cell phone and dialed.

“Hi, Alia. This is Jack Pipov. Is Ibrahim available?”

“Hi, Jack, good to hear from you! Hang on just a moment.”

A well-spoken though slightly accented male voice came on the line. “Hello, Jack?”

“Ibrahim! I hope I’m not calling at a bad time.”

“Not at all, my friend. How can I be of service to you?”

“Well, I need a professional favor.”

“It would be an honor and my pleasure. What is the problem?”

“It’s something pretty mundane. Let me set this phone to speaker mode so that both of us can talk.” Jack set the phone down on the table between the two of them. “Ann, meet Ibrahim bin Omar bin Al Qadi Sulman, Esquire, of Rochester, New York. I’ve known Ibrahim for many years.”

Jack introduced Ann, then the pair filled Sulman in on the evening’s events. “Miss Stuart needs representation,” he concluded. “Someone to prosecute her claim and get her going again as quickly and painlessly as possible. Could you please either handle this or refer her to someone closer?”

“My dear young lady! I’m so sorry for your trouble,” Ibrahim exclaimed. Then, to Jack, “This should be no problem. How much money did Ms. Stuart lose as a result of this *ibn haram*’s drunken driving?” There was more than a touch of anger in his voice.

Ann reached over and punched the mute button on Jack’s phone. “What’s an *ibn haram*?” she whispered.

“It literally means son of sin—illegitimate son or bastard, though by cultural meaning it more closely matches our term SOB. In his culture drunkenness is punishable by death, and endangering innocent women is evil in the extreme. The driver’s acts are extremely offensive to Ibrahim. As they say in Tucson, *ibn haram* is fightin’ words.” Jack replied.

He unmuted the phone. “Ibrahim, she’s working on a number. Hang on.”

Thinking quickly, Ann began scribbling notes on a paper napkin. “\$3,000 for my savings; the van was worth say \$2,000; my books were worth another couple of thousand; tools and spare parts—hard to tell—maybe \$2,500; my clothes weren’t much—maybe \$1,000; I had my grandmother’s jewelry, which meant a lot to me but wasn’t the crown jewels, and finally my computer equipment plus software, which would easily be four or five thousand dollars. Call it around \$15,000, more or less ignoring my grandmother’s things.”

“Right, \$35,000,” Sulman replied.

“Isn’t that a bit much?” Ann asked, startled.

“Not at all. Consider the situation they have put you in, with no home, no transportation and no money. They are responsible for letting a drunkard operate the snowplow. It is a miracle people did not die because of their negligence.

“I will gladly take this case, Ms. Stuart,” he added. “I will speak with the county attorney; he’s a reasonable fellow and I know he’ll want to clear this up quickly. Then we can have you on your way again.”

They spent a few more minutes exchanging contact information. Ann suddenly realized that her cell phone charger had gone up in flames along with everything else. “I’ll try to find a way to charge this phone,” she said, “but otherwise, I’ll just check messages and return the call to conserve batteries. OK?”

“That’s fine. I can’t do anything right away because the county offices are closed for the holiday until Tuesday.”

“And how much will all this cost me?” Ann worried. “You realize that I can’t pay you any money up front, don’t you?”

Sulman laughed. “It would be usual to take a case such as this on contingency, that is, take a percentage of the settlement instead of charging you money. But Jack has done me many favors and I owe him a great deal, and this is a very small amount of work, so this will cost you nothing.”

“Thanks, Ibrahim,” said Jack as a stunned Ann assimilated this information. “Now I’ll owe you one. I’ll be in touch.” He ended the call.

“I think I’ve got an old charger that might fit your cell phone,” he said to Ann. “I’ll go check; be back in a minute.” Handing Betty his credit card and saying he’d return in a few minutes, he put on his coat, retrieved from the now-thawed Ann, and headed for the RV, where the propane heater was fighting a losing battle against the cold and the wind.

Opening a well-hidden safe he retrieved a stack of uncirculated \$20 bills. He carefully counted out twenty-five bills and put them into an envelope, returning the remainder to the safe. Next, he turned on the electric blanket on his bed. Maybe that would help with the cold.

Finding a plastic grocery bag in the galley, he put in first a jumbo chocolate bar, then still shrink-wrapped socks and T-shirts, then a brand-new wool sweater. A new toothbrush and toothpaste were next. From the office area he added a small notebook and a couple of colored pens. Trudging through the snow, he found the cell phone charger in the utility trailer behind the RV.

When he returned to the café, Ann was still sitting at the booth chatting with Betty. On the table lay the check and his credit card with the slips ready to be signed. Jack quickly added a generous tip and handed Betty her slip. He meticulously dated and noted his slip, folded it and put it into the small notebook in his shirt pocket. After all, dinner is deductible on a business trip, and he had offered Ann a job, which made this a business dinner.

Jack reached into his pocket and brought out the charger. “Try this.”

Ann tried plugging the charger into her phone and it mated. Then she tried plugging the charger into the wall socket next to the booth and her phone showed that it was charging. “It works! Thanks. Now I can use my phone at least. That will make things much easier.”

Handing her the plastic grocery bag and its miscellaneous contents, Jack said, “I’m not really set up to assist, but here are some things I had in my RV that might be of some use to you.”

Ann pulled out the plastic-wrapped T-shirts, socks and sweater—all bigger than her usual size, but warm and comfortable. The notebook and pens would certainly come in handy for keeping track of her notes. But the chocolate?

“Well,” Jack explained, “some women tell me when the going gets tough, chocolate sometimes helps. If you don’t want it, give it to the firemen. They’ll eat it.”

Finally Ann pulled out the envelope and opened it. She carefully counted the money and then wrote “Loan: \$500 from Jack Pipov” on the outside of the envelope. “Thank you, Jack. This will make a large difference in my life over the next few days. However, it may be some time before I can pay you back.”

“Well, I figure that you may need to buy some necessities, a book or two, get food, go to the movies or somewhere. That won’t get you to California but it will get you through the next couple of days. At least this way you won’t be completely at the mercy of the system. Pay me back when you can, if you can.”

Ann’s phone chirped. It was the dispatcher announcing that a sheriff’s department car would be pulling up in a couple of minutes to take her to the fire station. Thanking the dispatcher, she began to gather her things. “Thank you for everything, Jack. You’ve been very kind to a stranger.”

“Well, don’t forget the job offer. Just call me if you’re interested. Otherwise, have a good life. I’m sure things will be getting much better for you

from here on out.” Jack handed her his card, said his goodbyes and retreated to his frigid RV.

Once there, Jack made sure that the block heater was engaged. He plugged his laptop back into the docking station to allow it to charge. Ten minutes later, he was asleep in his bed, warm in a duvet his grandmother had made on another continent before he was born.

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The sheriff himself arrived in a massive 4x4 SUV and took Ann to the fire station. The ten-mile drive took almost a half hour because of the storm. At the station, one of the firemen showed her to a small apartment originally intended to allow the fire chief to live at the station.

She plugged in her cell phone to charge overnight. Then she quickly brushed her teeth, changed into one of her new oversized T-shirts, said her prayers, climbed into bed and was asleep very quickly. Tomorrow had to be a better day, she thought.