

# Cliffhanger

by

Russell Atkinson

## The Cliff Knowles Mysteries

Held for Ransom

Cached Out

Fatal Dose

Death Row

Gut Shot

Behead Me

A Will to Die

Also by Russell Atkinson

The Cryptic Crossword Caper

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## Foreword

In February 1978 the U.S. government launched the first Global Positioning Satellite (GPS). By 1995 the U.S. military had the capability to determine a location accurately anywhere around the world using GPS technology. A feature called “selective availability” designed into the system made it accessible only by the military. In May 2000 President Bill Clinton signed into law a bill that discontinued the use of selective availability, thus making the technology usable by anyone in the world. With the stroke of that pen, President Clinton unknowingly gave birth to a new sport: geocaching.

Civilian GPS devices came onto the market and initial recreational users were often those who ventured into places without roads or signposts – boaters, hikers, hunters and other outdoorsmen. Soon some of these began to hide containers or caches containing logbooks. They would record the coordinates of these locations and post these online, challenging others to find them. When someone found the cache, he or she would sign in the logbook, replace the cache, and later record the find online. Often there would be small treasures or trinkets placed in the cache as a reward for the finders; in turn, finders would bring similar items to trade or leave in the cache. Thus geocaching came into being, centered at first in the Pacific Northwest – Oregon and Washington.

There are now millions of active geocachers worldwide hiding, hunting, and finding (or not) the hidden geocaches. Geocaches are no longer limited to the countryside. They exist in major cities across the globe. Caches vary in size from nanos the size of a pea to giant structures one can enter, although most range in size from a small pill bottle to a surplus army ammo can. Geocaches are rated by the hider, called the cache owner, on a scale of 1 to 5 stars for difficulty and 1 to 5 for terrain, referred to as the D/T rating. Half steps are included, so a cache rated 1.5/4 would be easy to find, but probably involve a difficult hike. They can be ingeniously camouflaged. Some have multiple stages; others require the solving of a puzzle to get the coordinates. Some contain items like Travel Bugs or geocoins with tracking numbers that are designed to go from cache to cache. The variations are endless. In this novel you will encounter a small sample of the types of geocaches that exist in the real world as the characters engage in what at times becomes a life and death struggle.

You don't have to be a geocacher to enjoy the story, but some familiarity with geocaching terms is helpful. I have included a list of some of them below. Geocachers use code names similar to online screen names. The characters in the book use both real names and geonames so I am including both below.

FTF: First to find

STF: Second to find

TB: Travel Bug (metal piece like a dog tag with a tracking number and usually trinket attached)

Pathtag: a small numbered trackable item similar to a Travel Bug

GPSr: GPS receiver, a handheld device used by a geocacher, although many now use GPS enabled smart phones

Multi: a cache involving multiple stages

TFTC: Thanks for the cache

DNF: Did Not Find

Log: may refer to a physical book or sheet of paper inside a geocache or the online message on the website claiming a find or noting a DNF.

Checksum: a way of verifying coordinates by adding together the digits. The checksum of N40 20.000 W122 30.000 would be  $4+2+1+2+2+3 = 14$ .

Bison tube: a small metallic cylinder with a screw top and O-ring to make it watertight. They were originally designed to hold pills but are often used as geocaches.

#### Character list: Real name (geoname)

##### Team Cliff

Cliff Knowles (CliffNotes)

Deborah (Doily)

Lynne (Lynne14)

“Tex” Emerson (Tex Murphy) – not on any team

##### Team Roy

Roy (Roy\_All\_T)

Lars (Brannfugl)

##### Team Fluke

Flo (Florican)

Lucas or Luke (Gemsbuck)

##### Team Beth

Beth (Bethtie)

Masanori or Masa (Mossbug)

Note: Beth and Lars are often together though on different teams

Simon Sprague (Signal) – the owner of the geocaching website

Javier – Sprague’s assistant, not a geocacher

Tomas – Sprague’s boat pilot, not a geocacher

# **Columbus Day**

Transcript of interview of Clifford Knowles (CK)

Interviewing officer: Nick Biondi (NB), Detective First Class, San Juan County Sheriff's Office

NB: All right, all right, we're now recording. Satisfied?

CK: Yes, thanks. I just didn't want to be misquoted. You obviously don't believe me, but everything I've told you has been the truth. It was an accident. Why don't you just accept that?

NB: Everybody's been too hinky, too rehearsed. Something's going on you're not telling me. They all say I should talk to you. You were first on the scene.

CK: One of the first. Look, we've been over this. I didn't see it happen. I just went down the stairs to give first aid. We both did, but the body washed out to sea before we could.

NB: What was the condition of the body?

CK: What do you mean? It was a two hundred foot fall. It was in bad shape. It was dark and the waves had been washing over the body, so it was hard to tell more. Lots of broken bones, probably, bashed in skull.

NB: I mean, did you see any wounds?

CK: Wounds? What kind of wounds? A gunshot wound? I think I would have heard a gunshot, at least if it was anything bigger than a .22. I was only about two hundred feet south when I heard the scream.

NB: Any kind of wound. Something inconsistent with a fall from a cliff.

CK: Falling that far from a cliff can do a lot of damage. I'm no doctor.

NB: Look. You're ex-FBI and you've been through this before, so I'm going to level with you. The others are hiding something. So are you. I've been a detective for eight years. We're a small department and don't get many death cases, but I can tell something's not right. What really happened out there?

CK: Yeah, and I was an FBI agent for twenty-five years and I'm convinced it was an accident. Did anyone else say otherwise?

NB: I'm asking the questions here. Frankly, I think you know exactly what happened and you're concealing it from me. That's obstruction of justice. I think you saw the wound and you know that it didn't come from a fall. You should know that if it really was an accident, the best thing is to just tell the whole story.

CK: You just accused me of a crime, of obstructing justice. Everything I told you is the absolute truth. You got it recorded and you can check every word however you want. Is this a homicide investigation? Am I a suspect?

NB: Until we can rule out homicide, everyone's a potential suspect. There were thirteen people who left for the island and only twelve returned. One of them turned up dead. If it wasn't an accident or suicide, then it was a homicide.

CK: In that case, I won't answer any more questions without my lawyer present. Am I under arrest?

NB: No, Mr. Knowles.

CK: I'm sorry you had to spend your Columbus Day holiday on this wild goose chase. It was an accident, I'm sure.

NB: We're on the left coast. It's not Columbus Day here anymore. It's Indigenous People Day. We Italians are politically incorrect now.

CK: I hear you. Here's a ten to cover the coffee. Thanks for meeting me here at the coffee shop; now I have a plane to catch.

[End of recording]

**Friday, three days earlier**



## Day 1

### Roy\_All\_T, Brannfugl

The two men sat at the bar watching the bartender. She was worth watching, too, if you weren't put off by the tattoos and neon hair colors. Her halter top must have been sprayed on, the shorter man decided, not that she could have hidden those boobs with anything less than a burka, if then. She probably was required to dress that way by the hotel, or maybe it was her way of increasing her tips, but he didn't much care why. He was too old and too married to stand a chance with her, but he could still enjoy the view.

The hotel, situated in downtown Anacortes, went top end all the way, aiming for the Seattle area millenials. The bar was all chrome and glass with a view over Fidalgo Bay. A ferry could be seen in the distance traversing the waters if he'd been looking that direction. It wasn't Silicon Valley, but there were plenty of young stock option geeks and geekettes oozing from the pores of Amazon, Microsoft, Boeing and the dozens of startups to the south. There weren't many in evidence at the moment, it being two thirty in the afternoon and past the vacation season, but he bet the place would be jumping around happy hour.

"Say that again," he mumbled to the taller man, who was now looking at him, apparently expecting a response.

"Brannfugl. It means Firebird. I drove a Pontiac Firebird when I was at UCLA. I tried to get Firebird when I joined the geocaching, but it was taken."

"Brannfugl. I can't pronounce that. Not like you do." The bartender had gone around the corner of the L-shaped bar, so he could make eye contact with the tall Norwegian now.

"Just call me Lars. That's my real name." He took a long draught of his beer.

"I'm Roy of Roy\_All\_T." He tapped the red nametag pinned to his shirt.

"Ja, royalty. I see. We have a king in Norway."

"We live in New York. My wife, Tina, she picked the name, but she doesn't even geocache anymore."

The Norwegian watched as Roy drained the shot glass. "So what do you do – besides geocaching, I mean?"

"There's something besides geocaching?" he grinned and got a wan smile and nod in acknowledgment of the addictive character of their shared hobby. "I'm retired, mostly. I do some consulting. Business management. You know."

Lars looked at Roy's ratty cargo pants, safari shirt, and sandals and wondered what business would hire Roy as a consultant looking like that. Still, it wasn't the clothes that raised his doubts, he realized, since they were both here for a geocaching weekend and the clothes, except for the sandals, were appropriate for that. Roy hadn't shaved for several days and needed a haircut. There was a dirty-looking band-aid peeking out of his shirt collar where his left

trapezius emerged, and the spider-veined nose attested to his penchant for whatever had been in that shot glass.

“How about you?”

“Software. I have my own business back in Oslo.” He lifted the stein to his lips again, hoping he wouldn’t have to explain further. His app was now the best-selling geocaching app, dominating over seventy percent of the world market. Whenever a geocacher found out who he was, he’d be inundated with suggestions for improvement or, more often, complaints. As he drank, a movement on his left caught his eye. The bartender was back and she was looking his direction, smiling. He knew he could have her tonight if he wanted. He wasn’t vain, but his easy success with women had taught him he was good-looking and American women in particular thought his accent was “charming” or “cool.” He wasn’t very dark, but the tall and handsome parts he had covered.

“She’s hot for your bod,” Roy stated matter-of-factly, accepting without resentment that the smile wasn’t intended for him. “I have to take a leak. Hold my seat.”

Lars nodded and pulled out his phone as Roy vanished into the hallway. He quickly pulled up the profile page on the geocaching site for Roy\_All\_T. Roy had over 100,000 finds. That put him in the top ten finders in the world. That probably explained why Roy had been selected. Lars assumed he had himself been selected because of his app. The mysterious invitation had said that all the invitees were “significant contributors to geocaching” but beyond that gave no clue why the recipient was chosen. He sensed this weekend was going to be a competition of some sort, although the invitation didn’t say so, and he felt being forewarned about your opponents was forearmed.

He looked around the bar area. There was only one other person sitting at the bar, a man drinking alone just around the corner, but he wasn’t wearing a name tag and his suit suggested he was a traveling businessman, not a geocacher. At one of the tables he saw a man and a woman talking. Something about their body language and fast chatter made him think they knew each other. The man was in his late fifties, he guessed, and the woman about thirty-five. She had on the telltale red nametag, but he wore none. Her flattering blouse and skirt combination and skillfully applied makeup were clearly intended for the dinner they had been told to expect, not for geocaching. She had a nice figure and fine features, but was no match for the bartender. A tad old for him, but she might do in a pinch.

Roy returned and, as he sat, signaled the bartender to refill his glass. “You think they’re invitees, too?” he asked, noticing Lars looking at the couple.

“She is for sure. She’s got the name tag. I can’t tell if he is, too, or maybe he’s just her husband accompanying her, although he looks too old for her.”

“He looks familiar to me, but I can’t place him. We’ll find out at dinner.” The bartender reappeared and filled the shot glass with an expensive scotch.

The man and woman at the table rose and gave each other a hug, then headed toward the elevators. He was tall while she was rather petite. Despite her narrow hips, she walked with a

sexy swing. The man could be overheard saying, "Great to see you here. Let's sit together at dinner if we can."

"That answers that," Lars said. "But why isn't he wearing his nametag?"

## **Tex Murphy**

The desk clerk watched the man approach, duffel bag in hand and thought he looked an awful lot like Harrison Ford in *The Raiders of the Lost Ark*. You didn't see many fedoras these days, although they're actually quite practical in the Seattle area's rainy weather. The man wasn't as handsome as Ford, of course, and he was a lot bigger, but he had the same crooked grin. His skin had that rugged corrugated perma-tan that spoke of an outdoor life.

"Can I help you?" she said.

"Checking in. Emerson."

"First name?"

"William."

She entered the name in the computer. "Oh, you're with the group, I see. Just a minute. I have an envelope for you." She reached down below the desk, rummaging through a drawer. She pulled something up labeled with a room number and the name Tex Murphy printed in bold letters. "Oh, wait, there's a mistake. This is for a Mr. Murphy, but it has your room number."

"That's mine."

The young woman looked confused.

"That's my geocaching name. Emerson is my real name." He looked at her name tag. "Annette, you probably have a different name, a screen name, for Facebook or Twitter, don't you? It's like that."

"Oh sure." She double-checked the room number on the envelope with the one on the computer screen anyway. "I'm sorry. It's just that it sounded like a real name, not, like, based on your name."

"No problem. The name is a character in a computer game and I'm from Texas, so I use it online. Do you need a credit card?"

"No. Everything's being paid for by the organizer, a Mr. Sprague." She handed him the large manila envelope. "Do you need two keys?"

"No, just one."

She punched something into her computer and ran a blank key card through a device attached to it. Then she slipped the key card into a small open-ended envelope and handed it to him.

"What is this group anyway? I've heard of geocaching, but I don't really know what it is. They just told us it's some kind of a convention."

"Not really. This weekend is an invitation-only event, not a convention." He picked up his duffel and started to head to the elevators, but then he paused. He looked around and saw

that there was no one in line behind him. He usually didn't like explaining geocaching to people who knew nothing about it. They just didn't "get it" and it wasn't easy to convey the complexities and nuances. But the girl was cute and he didn't have anything to do until dinner-time. He put the duffel down and turned back to her.

"Geocaching is ... well, it's awesome. It's whatever you want it to be. A game. A sport. A hobby. Call it what you want. It's run by the geocachers themselves. That's what makes it special. A geocacher hides something, a cache, somewhere and posts the GPS coordinates on a website run by the geocaching company. People who have signed up for notifications get an email right away of a new cache. The ones who are into that will run right out and try to be the first to find it. That's called an FTF. Others care about other things, like finding as many as they can, or keeping a long streak of finding one every day going."

"If the hider tells where it is, then what's the big deal about finding it? Do you get a prize or something?"

"No, not money if that's what you mean. There are usually small trinkets and things inside, and of course a log book you sign to prove you were there. You get status, bragging rights. Pride. Did you play sports in high school?"

"No, I was in drama. But I won best actress." She beamed with false modesty.

"And you felt really good about it, too, I bet. That's what it's like to be the first to find, or to find the most in your circle of friends or just to find that one that was really well-camouflaged and took you three times to find. Geocachers who hide them get a kick out of that part, too. Some caches are really cleverly hidden and hard to find. Finders log notes on the web page about the fun they had when they find the cache and can give favorite points if they really like it a lot."

"So there are finders and hiders?"

"No, it's not like that. Any geocacher can do either one, but there are a lot more people who just find them. The hiders – we call them cache owners – contribute to the fun for everyone else, really."

"So what do you like to do – the FTF thing?"

"No, at least not most of them. I go for the high terrain ones. I'm also into mountaineering, so I like a really tough physical challenge. Caches are rated on difficulty and terrain. I like to be the first to find high difficulty/high terrain caches. Last year I found a cache that had never been found in the six years since it had been hidden. It was in Alaska on a land spit that's only accessible about two weeks a year and then only if the weather is right. The area is frozen solid the rest of the time, and bears roam the area all year. Wolves, too, sometimes. You can only get to it by crossing the bay in a kayak or small boat. There were orcas spotted there the day before I left."

"Omigod! And what was in it?"

"Just a log book, pen, and an Alaska Fishing Guide booklet. There was a travel bug, too."

"Like an invasive species of insect?"

"No, it's a geocaching thing. A metal tag with a number on it and a mission to travel around in a particular way. This one was started eight years ago and the owner requested that it

only be put in difficulty/terrain 5/5 caches – those are the hardest. I was only the third person to have logged it. I moved it to another 5/5 cache a few months later.”

“So are you here to get an award or something?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll find out tonight. We’re supposed to meet for dinner. Do you know where?”

“It’s all in the packet, I’m sure. I believe it’s the Chinook Room. So I guess geocaching is a lot like Pokemon Go?”

Emerson’s face darkened. The rudiments of a sneer softened into a slight grimace before he spoke. “Don’t ever compare geocaching to Pokemon Go, not to a geocacher anyway. Geocaching is real. Real people have hidden real things in the real world. People who don’t get paid anything other than the reward from the enjoyment that other geocachers get from the search and the finding. Pokemon Go is a commercial product designed by engineers who have created fake things to ‘find’ and have manipulated the system to induce enough addiction to get users to buy more and more in-app purchases while also maximizing ad revenue from businesses where the characters ‘appear.’ Geocaching is the wedding night of two lovers. Pokemon Go is a sordid hump in a dirty alley with a prostitute.”

Annette’s face turned the color of a well-boiled Dungeness crab. “Oh,” she muttered weakly. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean ...”

But Emerson was already gone, hurrying to the elevator bank with his duffel.

## **CliffNotes**

Cliff Knowles had nearly refused the invitation. He’d been a passionate geocacher eight years ago when he’d first retired from the FBI and needed a hobby, a distraction to save his sanity after a drunk driver had killed his wife. But geocaching had become something of an albatross after he’d found a skeleton while on a cache search and become a suspect in a serial killing spree that had become known as the Geocache Murders. His picture had appeared in the news media connected with the case. Eventually he was cleared and in fact led the police and FBI to the real killer, but his picture and geocaching name were still associated with the murders. Most geocachers who had heard of him, the more senior ones at least, knew he’d been cleared, but he still ran into geocachers who thought he’d been the Geocache Killer and looked at him with shock and even fear upon reading his geoname. He seldom wore nametags at geocaching events for this reason.

He had since opened a successful private investigation and legal practice in Silicon Valley and remarried. Now, late in life, he had two young kids and a working wife. His passion for geocaching had lessened, but he still enjoyed it, especially solving the puzzle caches, and his wife, an FBI agent herself, still had that zest for the sport. She had been the one to convince him to go. The invitation had seemed too good to pass up. Now that they had a live-in nanny to watch

the kids, there was no need for Cliff to be home over the Columbus Day weekend, she'd told him.

The invite had certainly piqued his interest. A mysterious email from Signal had landed in his inbox two months earlier asking if he wanted to participate in an all-expense paid geocaching adventure that was being offered to an exclusive set of geocachers who had contributed in significant ways to the sport. The dates were given and a general description of the location, "the American Northwest," but nothing other than a link to click if interested. Intrigued, he'd clicked it.

That had brought him to a website with a few more details. It had told him that if he accepted the invitation he would be sent airplane tickets and a confirmed reservation at a first-class hotel. The "adventure" would last for the three-day holiday weekend. The invitees would be in the company of a very limited number of "especially distinguished geocachers" from around the world. The invitees would have the chance to find newly-published caches of exceptional interest. Prizes would be given.

"You have to go, Cliff," his wife Ellen (geoname Ellenwheels) had urged. "I mean it. If not for yourself, do it for me. I'm dying to find out what that's all about." In the end he had relented and hadn't needed much arm-twisting.

Signal was famous, or infamous in the eyes of many, throughout the geocaching world. Some things were known about him, but it was difficult to separate fact from rumor. He'd been a Microsoft manager of some sort and an early angel investor in Amazon.com when Bezos founded it. This had eventually netted him somewhere in the hundreds of millions, although estimates of his worth varied widely among sources. He'd retired to a life of adventuring – sailing yachts, climbing mountains, and when geocaching appeared in 2000, was an early adopter and avid finder. He'd been content to find and hide geocaches much like many other zealous geocachers until a year ago when he'd bought the entire website that listed the geocaches. There were other geocaching websites, but he now owned the biggest of them all and ran it with an imperiousness that shocked many. Several of the original founders had quit – after taking the money from the purchase, of course. But the changes he wrought were mostly beneficial to geocachers in general. He'd lowered membership dues and prices of branded geocaching supplies. For the most part he returned it to the outdoor-adventure vibe it had had in the early days. No one liked the idea of the sport being in the hands of one person, but so far he'd been a benevolent dictator, at least in the eyes of the old-timers.

The packet that arrived at Cliff's house two weeks later contained a pair of airline tickets, first class, and a set of instructions. He was to bring his full geocaching gear. He was supposed to take the hotel shuttle from the airport and check in immediately upon arrival, then put on the red nametag that would be contained in the packet at the front desk. This he did not do.

Cliff's career in the FBI, and the misadventures he'd had since, gave him a naturally suspicious nature. Or perhaps it wasn't suspicion so much as curiosity. He liked to check things out secretly before committing himself to anything. He'd rented a car and driven himself to the hotel, then entered the lobby and headed directly to the restaurant bar without the nametag.

He'd spotted the two men at the bar and pegged them as fellow invitees since they were wearing the red nametags. He didn't get close enough to read the names, but he could tell the tall one was Scandinavian from his accent. He couldn't tell whether he was from Norway, Sweden, Denmark or Finland. The accents in English were probably a bit different from those countries, but he'd never had enough exposure to them to distinguish among them.

The shorter man was American. It took him a few minutes before he placed him. Roy\_All\_T. He was well-known in the U.S. as a supercacher, someone who amasses a huge number of finds. Cliff had seen his picture in various Facebook posts or geocaching forums with his team. His four children and their spouses and even two of his grandchildren were all part of Roy\_All\_T and they all logged finds under the same account. Cliff sat down at a table and pulled up Roy\_All\_T's profile on his phone. He'd already logged seven caches in the Seattle area and four in New Jersey today. So he was a legitimate finder, at least for the Seattle ones, but the New Jersey ones were logged after the Seattle ones, which meant his teammates were out finding and logging them while papa sat here in the bar drinking. He was getting statistical credit for caches he didn't personally find, which only served to prove to Cliff that the stats were meaningless, something he'd known for years. Yet they were enough to garner Roy\_All\_T the invitation to this gathering, apparently.

There was no server for the bar tables this time of day, but the bartender called over to him to ask if he wanted anything. He ordered a beer. She put the filled stein on the bar and once he came over to get it, was told it would be twelve dollars. He somehow managed not to choke on his first swig when he heard the price. It was probably some artisanal brew although it just tasted like a beer to him. He hadn't checked in yet and couldn't put it on his room tab, so he reached for his wallet. Before he had extracted his credit card, the bartender asked if he was with the group, nodding toward the two men at the end of the bar. He said yes and apologized for not yet being checked in so he couldn't give her a room number. She told him not to worry then, it was covered.

He sat back down at his table and nursed the beer. Not long after, a familiar face appeared.

"Cliff!" the woman exclaimed. "It's good to see someone I know here. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised you got an invitation. May I join you?"

"Please do. How have you been, Deborah? If anyone else from the Bay Area would be invited, I would have expected it to be you – at least I would if the criteria really was contribution to geocaching as stated on the invitation."

"Oh, you flatterer. Why no nametag?" She asked, pointing to the 'Doily' tag on her chest.

"I haven't checked in yet."

"Have you met those two guys at the bar? They have name tags. I said hi to the tall one."

"Not yet. I just got here. Can I get you something?" He rose and stepped toward the bar as he looked back for her answer.

"Iced tea, please. With lemon."

Cliff returned moments later with the tea. “So that’s Brannfugl. He’s the brains behind NeoGeo, isn’t he?”

“Really? He just told me he was in software. I didn’t realize that was his app. No wonder he’s here. Handsome, rich, and modest, too. My, my. The bargirl is certainly interested.”

“I found your Junco Bunk cache last month. Superb as always. An ordinary birdhouse on the outside, a work of art on the inside. The way the log was delivered by the bird when you open the door was incredible.”

“Well, that’s my wife for you. She does all the circuitry and mechanical design. I just decorate it and prettify it all. We both have fun with it.”

“I’ve never met her. Does she have a geocaching name?”

“No, she doesn’t cache. She just helps me make them. I get the credit but she does the really hard stuff. She even goes out and changes the batteries sometimes.”

“The furniture, you must have made all of it by hand.”

“No, not at all. Most of it’s standard dollhouse stuff. I just made the cover for the sofa and the wall hanging. I did some painting on that one.”

“Well, I knew you must have done it. The geocaching logo and colors looked exactly like the official ones. Are they crocheted?”

“The sofa cover was tatting and the wall hanging was needlepoint.”

“The birdhouse within a birdhouse, the chimes and flashing lights with the emerging junco. That’s just amazing. Like I said, superb.”

“Thank you. Your log was very kind. You always write nice logs.”

The conversation lasted several more minutes. When they’d finished their drinks Cliff walked her to the elevators. “Great to see you here. Let’s sit together at dinner if we can.” Doily agreed and headed up to her room. Cliff headed to the front desk to check in.

## **Signal**

The ten geocachers mingled around the side table. That’s where the trackables were laid out. An array of Travel Bugs, geocoins, pathtags, patches, and gear was spread over the blue granite slab. Some of the spectators were logging the numbers into their phones as “discovered” trackables. Others were commenting on the variety and unique qualities of the collection or looking up the stories of the items on the geocaching website.

There was one geocoin made of real gold inlaid with a ruby. Another one, resting on the floor but propped against the wall, was an ordinary five dollar metal Travel Bug welded to an anchor salvaged from a British three-master from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

The murmuring stopped when the older man walked in. He was short, a bit on the stout side, and dressed casually – slacks and a polo shirt. Despite his girth, he looked fit and vigorous, sporting a deep tan. He had a tuft of gray hair islanded in a sea of skin on the top of his head. Thick glasses perched on a bulbous, deformed nose. He strode purposefully to the head of the dining table and stood. A dark-complected man in his forties followed closely behind.



“Welcome, everyone,” the gray-haired man said. “I’m Siggнал. I hope you’re enjoying yourself. This is my assistant Javier.” The darker man nodded to the group.

“Excuse the late start to dinner, but I hope you all found plenty to nosh on.” He looked over to the other side table where the hors d’oeuvres were set out in plentiful and elegant displays. Bottles of fine wines stood uncorked. They looked barely touched. “I might have known. Geocachers would be more interested in the trackables than the food. I’m sorry you can’t log an event cache for this dinner, but as you know, those must be open to any geocacher and we’re exclusive tonight. Please take your seats. I’m sure you’re all curious as to what this is all about. I’ll get to that after the meal. First, let’s enjoy the food. It’s excellent here.”

Siggнал sat down and whispered something to Javier who left the room. The others began finding seats around the main dining table. Place settings were laid out, but there were no name tags at the plates, so Cliff and Doily sat together at the far end of the table.

Moments later two waiters came in with trays of soup. As advertised, the soup was delicious. It was followed by a Waldorf salad. The main course turned out to be a choice of roast beef, carted in right from the oven and carved to order (end pieces well done, center medium rare), fresh barbecued salmon, and an eggplant ragout for the one vegetarian in the crowd. The wine from the side table made its way to the main table and proved to be quite compatible with the food. It was not until the dessert (choice of chocolate mousse or blueberry cheesecake) and coffee were wheeled out that Siggнал rose to speak.

“As you probably all know by now, I purchased the geocaching website several months ago. I’ve loved the sport since its inception and I wanted to reward those who have made it special, who continue to make it uniquely rewarding. I have selected the ten of you for your individual contributions, each of you for something different.”

“I hope to make this weekend a special experience for all of you, something you’ll enjoy not only while here, but something you’ll remember for many years to come, something unforgettable. It’s my way of thanking you all for what you’ve done and an incentive for all of you to keep doing it.”

“Tomorrow you’ll be traveling by boat to an island I own. That’s the ‘secret location’ mentioned in your packet. It takes about an hour so we’ll be leaving early. Please be in the lobby by 7:00 a.m. Breakfast will be served on the boat. The channel is expected to be choppy tomorrow, so if you get seasick easily, take your medicine early. The boat has top-notch stabilizing technology to minimize that problem. Once there, you’ll be given descriptions of five very special caches along with instructions. Once we are on the island I will telephone the reviewer and the caches will be published. You will then be free to go find them. Sunday the same thing will happen, five caches published in the morning. This will be a competition. I’ll explain the rules tomorrow morning on the boat. Monday we’ll travel back here and you can return home full of good stories. There is no ferry service or other public transportation to the island, so you will be dependent on me, but I assure you I will not hold you hostage. The boat will be ready at anchor to take you back if necessary. If any of this sounds like something you

don't want to do, you are free to leave tomorrow morning and return home with the ticket I provided, no hard feelings."

He looked around the room. The invitees were all doing the same, but it was obvious from all the head shakes and grins that no one would be backing out.

"Excellent. For now I'd like to share with you the reasons why each of you were selected and to share your contribution with your fellow contestants. Selecting attendees was a difficult process. Although you all have made very special contributions, there are many others who have excelled in the same ways you have, in some cases even more. There were others I invited who declined the invitation and some I would have invited but passed over because they did not speak English well enough or for many other reasons."

"So let me begin by going around the table. On my left is Roy\_All\_T." Siggnal placed his hand on the man's shoulder. "Roy\_All\_T has found over one hundred thousand geocaches. You heard right, six figures. He is currently fourth in the world in the number of cache finds. Not only that, but he has hidden over three hundred caches, many of which have dozens of favorite points. He has finds in all fifty states, eighteen foreign countries and has completed more challenge caches than anyone else in the English-speaking world. He represents the numbers hounds admirably."

Chuckles arose around the table as Roy\_All\_T grinned and raised his hand. "That's me. The more the better. Call me Roy," he said. A smattering of applause followed, led by Siggnal.

"Next to Roy we have Florican. She has the longest unbroken streak of cache finds in the entire world at the moment. Over four thousand two hundred days straight with a find. More than eleven years without a miss. Don't worry, I guarantee you that you'll keep your streak going over the weekend."

More applause. Florican nodded deferentially. She was a Latina pushing forty. Despite having no children she could easily pass for a soccer mom. She looked youthful in her jeans and Florida State sweatshirt, the only one dressed that casually.

"Next we have Mossbug. I love that name, by the way. Your real name, Masanori, means virtue, if I understand correctly."

"That's right," Mossbug replied unabashedly, although his accent was strong and it came out "that's light." He was tall for a Japanese, about six feet, and wore black-framed glasses. He looked about twenty-five. "My friends call me Masa and I like Travel Bugs, so Mossbug."

"He's logged retrievals of thousands of trackables, but his most notable achievement is the number of trackables he has set forth in the wild. He has hundreds of active Travel Bugs including two that have been to five continents. Many of his TBs have entertaining stories associated with them. If favorite points could be awarded for TBs, I have no doubt he would be among world leaders."

The applause was more perfunctory this time.

"Gemsbug over here," Siggnal said, pointing to a slightly overweight middle-aged man in a sport coat and open dress shirt, "has logged more miles between caches than anyone in the southern hemisphere. He has also made finds in forty-two African countries, every South

American country, and of course New Zealand and Australia. That's not counting the two dozen or so countries in the northern hemisphere. I understand from your logs that you travel a lot for your company. What is it they do?"

"Minerals. We provide many rare earths as well as standard metals or other elements for manufacturing. We have mines in many other countries, too. I'm in sales. If you have a category for frequent flyer miles, I'd like to enter that one."

This remark brought a laugh from several of the others. His South African accent made clear his country of origin. His dark coloration provided no definitive clue to his ethnic heritage. Indian, African, and European features all appeared in his countenance.

"Did you bring us any diamonds?" Roy asked.

"That's one thing we don't sell."

"All right," Signal said. "Let's give him a hand." After the applause he continued, "Next to Gemsbuck is Doily. She's no numbers hound, at least by the standards of this crowd, but she has impressive numbers of a different kind. Her geocaches, almost one hundred of them now, combined have over seventeen hundred favorite points. Not only is that an amazing number, but the ratio of favorite points to finds is over ninety-six percent. Almost everyone who makes a find on one of her caches gives it a fav. The few who don't are mostly newbies or others who don't have any points to give. If you filtered those out, it would probably be one hundred percent. These caches get points because they are tremendously creative, absolutely marvelous. I've found several of them myself."

The applause this time was more vigorous. Signal himself kept it going for an extra twenty seconds. Doily smiled modestly.

"Next to her is CliffNotes. Cliff's contribution is unique. Among the general public he's probably the best known person here. As most of you probably know, he was at one time suspected of being the notorious Geocache Killer. The publicity around that horrible series of events was the first time many members of the public had heard of geocaching and at first put us in such a bad light it was close to being banned in many places. Then the killer was caught. There was an explosion in the number of new cachers during the period this was in the news. As you should all know by now, Cliff was not only cleared of any wrongdoing, he solved the case using his geocaching knowledge and FBI agent experience. He served not only as an ambassador of the sport, unwitting though it may have been, but more importantly, he made geocachers feel safe again. By the way, he's a wicked smart puzzle cache solver, too, getting several FTFs on some very difficult puzzles. Thank you for your service, CliffNotes."

The applause rivaled that given to Doily. Cliff waved. He noticed Javier filming the presentation. He didn't like being on camera after all the unfair exposure he'd experienced, but he remembered the invitation containing some clause about a geocaching film being made. He had consented.

"Speaking of puzzle mavens, after Cliff we have Lynne14, the top finder in the U.K. of unknown or puzzle caches and she has the most FTF's of puzzles there. For those of you who work puzzle caches, you know that they always have a link to a verification site where the

solution to the puzzle can be entered to verify the solution and confirm the true coordinates. The identity of any geocacher who correctly solves the puzzle may be shown, and those names appear in the order of solution. You also know if you've solved any hard puzzles in your area, that Lynne's name is probably first or close to it on those verification lists. Even if she doesn't travel to other countries very often, she's solved thousands of puzzles all over the world."

Cliff looked at her and clapped especially hard, recognizing the accomplishment. He knew of at least a dozen puzzles in his area that had Lynne14 at the top of the verification list. He was sure there would be many more were it not for the fact most caches in California are published in the middle of the night in the U.K. He had often wondered who this mysterious Lynne14 was and now he finally laid eyes on her. She was perhaps in her early sixties, short, and looked like she was part Indian or Pakistani. Her blazer covered her whippet-thin figure and proclaimed her university affiliation with a patch resembling a family crest. She had an unfortunately weak chin and a prominent mole over her heavy, dark eyebrows.

"Bethtie sits next to her," Signal resumed. The woman he was talking about was young and attractive. She had panther-black hair worn long. She was wearing a "little black dress" that left little to the imagination and was the only woman wearing stiletto heels. She wore earrings and a matching necklace, but her makeup was understated. Despite her youth she hadn't bought into the body art trend. To Cliff at least she looked classy if a bit overdressed.

"Now here's another unique contribution. Bethtie writes the best logs of anyone I've seen. This is not easily measured, but I've had our software people gin up some algorithms to try to capture this important part of geocaching. Most of you have hidden many caches. You know what it feels like to get a nice, long complimentary log instead of the default 'TFTC' or similar laziness.

"Her logs are much longer than the average finder's and they're unique. She doesn't repeat the same thing with every cache as so many of us do. The algorithm is good at measuring this. She points out what was especially good about every cache, at least where she can, and tactfully points out some of the things a cache owner might want to fix on some of those, shall we say, less-than-optimal caches. In addition, her logs are nearly always free of typos, spelling, and grammar errors. When there is something other finders need to know, like a danger spot or construction blocking the way or a good parking spot nearby, she points that out. She's expert at giving hints that aren't spoilers. I personally read hundreds of logs from the top people the algorithm identified, and in my opinion Bethtie's logs were clearly the best. In short, she writes well and writes good. Her sincerity not only provides a deserved pat on the back for the owners, but helps us all by giving the best owners an incentive to keep hiding good quality caches. She's also representing Canada here."

Signal started the applause but it rose to a new level as the others stood and began to clap, then to cheer. Bethtie covered her face with her hands in embarrassment. One of the other cachers yelled "Speech!" The others took up the chant. Bethtie finally stood.

"Oh please. Be quiet. You people are so accomplished. I've only found about a thousand caches. I've hidden seven caches. That's all. They don't even have that many favorite points. But

I learned early on how much fun it was to get a nice log. I wanted to give others that good feeling. I also enjoy writing. I was a creative writing and drama major in college. The cache pages for my own caches are lengthy and, I hope, interesting, giving the history of the location with plenty of pictures. I guess I'm just a frustrated novelist. Or short storyteller at least. I get to write one every time I find a cache. It's fun for me."

"Is your name a play on 'bestie'?" Doily asked.

"Guilty as charged. My little brother used to have a lisp. He called me his bethtie once in a moment of affection – when he wasn't terrorizing me with his pranks."

The applause started again and she sat down.

"Well deserved, indeed," Signal said. He moved faster after that, introducing Tex Murphy and describing his formidable physical feats, and, finally, Brannfugl and his NeoGeo app.

"Now it's getting late. We have to start early, so let's all hit the sack. If you have questions, hold them for the morning. I'll be able to answer them while we're on the boat. If you want to log any of the trackables, go ahead and do that now. They won't be coming to the island. Javier will be gathering them up in twenty minutes or so."

Signal rose and left the room, smiling. The others watched him go in a smattering of applause. The group began to talk among themselves. Some of them got up and walked around to introduce themselves to the other participants they hadn't yet met or had a chance to talk to.

"I have no chance at the contest," Doily said to Lynne14. "But I don't care about that. I just hope I get some good ideas for quality caches."

"I might be competitive on any puzzle caches," the other replied, "although CliffNotes should give me a run for my money. I'm not sure most of those here care about the competition. Maybe some of the men. Roy, Tex, maybe Gemsbuck."

"It's an all-expense paid holiday doing my favorite activity. I'm not complaining." They both laughed.

On the other side of the room Tex Murphy was talking to Cliff. "I figure you're my biggest competition."

"Me? I'm not into the numbers." Even as he said this, Cliff knew he would be trying his best to win the contest. He couldn't deny his competitive streak.

Bethtie and Mossbug joined them. "So are you two heavyweights a team now?" Bethtie joked.

"I'm not really a team kind of guy," Tex replied.

"We're going to team up," the Japanese man said. "Caching is more fun with others."

"True enough," Cliff said. "Those two seem to have formed a team, too." He looked over to the doorway. Lars and Roy were walking out together discussing something in an animated manner.

"Call me Beth, by the way," Bethtie said and shook hands with Tex and Cliff.

"And I'm Masa," Mossbug added. More handshakes.

Cliff spotted Gemsbuck and Florican talking. "Excuse me, will you? I want to meet everybody." He left the group and walked over to the South African and Floridian.

"Ah, the famous CliffNotes," Florican remarked as he approached.

"Cliff. I think the word you were looking for is infamous. Believe me, I wish no one had ever heard of me." He extended his hand.

"Flo," she said, shaking his hand "and this is Lucas."

"If it makes you feel any better, I've never heard of you," Gemsbuck said. "I know a couple of people who have killed real lions, though. Not those spindly little California kind Flo says you once killed. Call me Luke." He held both hands out in a vaguely helpless fashion, unable to shake since he held a wine glass in one and a large cookie in the other.

"That makes us even. I've never heard of you either." They both laughed. At that moment Cliff felt a tap on his shoulder. It was Doily.

"Cliff, can I talk to you for a second?"

"Sure. What's up?" He nodded to Flo and Luke as he stepped away since it was obvious Deborah wanted to talk privately.

"Lynne and I are planning to team up. I see most of the others are, too. But I think there's going to be some pretty rugged stuff on that island, and I think we need a man."

"Coming from you, that's funny."

"Don't be an ass." She punched him on the shoulder.

"Are you asking me to join your team?"

"I am."

"I'd be honored. One of the others said it's more fun caching with other people and I couldn't agree more. I think we'll be the only three-man, uh, three-person, team."

"Come over and meet her." She led Cliff by the elbow over to meet Lynne<sup>14</sup>. "Lynne, Cliff."

"Hi, Lynne. So I finally get to meet the geocacher who beats me solving all the hard puzzles."

"Hardly. I've seen your name near the top of the solvers list plenty of times, way above mine. Nice to meet you." Her British accent was of the posh variety.

Deborah spoke up. "So it looks like we're a team now. Shall we follow Signal's lead and get to bed? It's an early start tomorrow."

Cliff looked around. Tex, Beth, and Masa were already gone. Javier was packing up the trackables. "It's breaking up. We might as well. We'll meet up again in the morning." They walked out together toward the elevators.

## Day 2

### Florican

Siggnal was calling the group to order. Flo looked around the lobby nervously. The others were all there, gathered in teams, except for Luke, her partner. Then she saw him at the elevators lugging a suitcase and wearing a backpack. She rushed over to help him.

“Come on, he’s starting,” she urged.

Siggnal, seeing Luke, announced, “We’re all here now. It’s dark outside, so be careful. I have a bus to take us to the boat. Javier will be serving breakfast on board. I’ll be giving instructions once we’re under way.” He picked up his bag and headed for the front door. A small bus was idling just outside. The group began to follow.

Flo was dressed for the nippy weather: hiking boots, heavy cargo pants, a long-sleeved shirt, sweater, and windbreaker. She didn’t wear a hat. Her luxuriant hair was more than adequate for warmth and she wanted to look good. She’d taken care with her hair and makeup this morning. She was still kicking herself for arriving so grubby for dinner last night. She hadn’t figured on there being an eligible man there.

Her husband had been a philandering jerk. She’d dumped him after a year. She’d had a series of boyfriends since then. Her current one was going nowhere fast. He was a cable TV installer and had been reprimanded twice in the last three months. She figured he’d be fired the next time. His drinking had gotten out of hand, and worst of all, he didn’t geocache.

Luke wasn’t bad looking for a man over forty, but not so handsome that she stood no chance. The noticeable paunch didn’t bother her. It sounded like he made good money and, of course, he understood the importance of keeping her geocaching streak alive. He wasn’t *just* a geocacher, he was a *serious* geocacher. He didn’t wear a ring. She spoke Spanish and English. She could live in Australia, South Africa, or South America. She was already wondering what it took to get resident status wherever he lived. Plus, wherever it was, it would be virgin territory. It would be easy for her to find new caches for years to come. In Florida she’d pretty much cached out the entire area around where she lived. It was getting so she had to drive seventy or eighty miles some days to find another cache. Now she just had to let Luke know she was interested. Her first step, making him her caching partner, had been accomplished.

When they arrived at the harbor, dawn was breaking, although the sun was still behind the Cascades. The sky was elephant-skin gray and there was a brisk breeze roiling the surface of the water. Her hair was whipping across her face and she already regretted not wearing a hat.

The “boat” turned out to be yacht. At least it seemed like one to her. It wasn’t a super yacht, like those seventy-meter three-level jobs she’d seen around Miami from time to time, but it was certainly going to be the biggest boat she’d ever been on other than the cruise ship she’d taken through Greece and Italy twelve years ago. She hustled on board and descended gratefully to the main cabin, out of the wind. Luke was right behind her. There was plush seating against

the walls – or whatever you called them on a boat. She sat and patted the seat next to her for Luke. He sat dutifully. Most of the others chose to stand. The cabin was surprisingly roomy.

“Everybody come on in. We’ll have to squeeze, but we can all fit. First of all, life jackets are mandatory.” Javier began handing down life jackets through the companionway. Most of the group put them on. Tex and Roy held them in their hands. “I’ll be taking her out of the harbor then Tomas will take over the helm. Don’t worry, we’re both certified.”

“We should all be certified,” she whispered to Luke. When he returned a quizzical look, she added, “certified as crazy. It’s an American express....oh, never mind.”

“No, I get it,” he whispered back. “That’s good. We are nuts. You can’t be an extreme geocacher and be sane.” He smiled. He had warm eyes.

Signal continued. “When he takes over I’ll explain all the rules for today. It’s rather chilly on deck right now, but the sun should be up in a few minutes. We’ll meet up there if it’s warm enough. For now, you can stay down here or come up to the sun deck if you’re hardy enough.” He disappeared topside.

Lars and Tex immediately followed. Up top Tex finally donned the life jackets. It’d been too tight below. Lars strolled around the small deck. A Seattle fall was a Norwegian summer for him. Roy, Bethtie, and Masa soon emerged. The sun deck was too small for everyone but the five of them could all fit snugly. It was open and as nippy as Signal had suggested.

Signal climbed into the wheelhouse. The engines roared to life. A Hispanic man, apparently the Tomas Signal had mentioned, cast off the mooring lines and they were moving.

Flo looked at her companions. Cliff and Deborah were from California. Lynne from England. Luke was from somewhere warm, although she wasn’t sure yet exactly where. Everyone who’d gone up top was from a cold climate. She wondered if that augured ill for the weekend. She wasn’t yet acclimated, that was for sure.

“So you’re from South Africa?”

“I was born there, yes. And my company is headquartered there.”

“That sounds like maybe you don’t live there.”

“I have a place there, yes, but I also have a place in Rio de Janeiro and another in Australia. I spend at least half my time in South America.”

*Damn!* She didn’t speak Portuguese. “I’ve always wanted to visit South Africa. South America, too. I’m Cuban – my parents, I mean. I grew up speaking Spanish and English.”

“Good for you. Have you been geocaching in Africa or South America?”

“No. Mostly just Florida and the neighboring states. I took a cruise in Europe once and picked up some countries there. Canada, too.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“Oh, I’m in sales, too. Foodstuffs.” This was technically true, but euphemistically phrased. She processed phone orders for a citrus distributor.

“You single?”

*Yes! He’s interested!* “Yes. You, too?”

“I am. I’ll send you a friend request. What’s your Facebook name?”



“Oh, not now. I’ll send you one later. Let’s talk about our strategy for today.” She didn’t want him to see her Facebook profile until she changed her status from “in a relationship.”

Javier came down with his video camera and began filming as the geocachers talked. The light was low on the main deck. There were windows on three sides but the aft section was open. He encouraged the group to move back as the sunlight was getting brighter quickly, but they were reluctant to leave the shelter.

“Javier,” Cliff asked him. “How many decks does this yacht have?”

“Mr. Sprague doesn’t call it a yacht. It’s only thirty meters. You’re on the main deck. The lower deck, underneath us, has the crew and guest sleeping quarters, TVs and such, but we won’t be using those. Above us is the pilothouse and at the very top is the sun deck. You should go on up. The light’s better for filming. You can go in the pilothouse if you don’t disturb Mr. Sprague.”

“That’s all right. I am getting hungry, though. He told us we’d be getting breakfast.” He could smell bacon sizzling.

“The cook is preparing that now. It will be ready in a few minutes.”

“I thought you were the cook.”

“I will be on the island. Tomas is staying on board while we’re at anchor. But I’ll be serving you breakfast. I’ll check now.” He disappeared through a forward hatchway and quickly returned. “It is time to get people seated. The dining room and galley are straight ahead. Why don’t you go on in.”

Cliff needed no urging. His stomach was growling. He motioned for Deborah to go first and she stepped daintily through the hatchway, followed by Lynne.

Luke realized it was breakfast time. He rose and offered his hand to Flo. She took it as she stood. The boat’s movement was a bit tricky to get used to so she leaned on him. He didn’t pull away. Things were going well, she thought. Luke was a gentleman, and he was interested.

Soon they were all eating a spread of bacon, eggs, pancakes, fresh fruit, juice, coffee and tea. Most of them cleaned their plates with gusto. As the coffee made its way around the table for the second or third time, Signal entered.

## **Signal**

“All right,” he began. “We have a busy day ahead, so let’s get right to it. We are headed to my island. It’s a private island in the San Juans called Center Island. I tried to change the name after I bought it, but it turns out not to be so easy to do that. We’ll anchor in the harbor because this boat is too big to get to the dock. We’ll shuttle you over in the skiff and proceed to the lodge.

“There will be five caches on the island published today. These will all be perfectly legal official caches that meet all the guidelines. Although they are on private property – mine – I grant permission to any geocacher to enter onto the island to search for them. I don’t expect anyone else to try for them today, though. There’s an airstrip there, but it’s too small for a plane

that will hold all of us. This boat will block the harbor entrance to anything larger than a kayak and there really isn't another good place to make land.

"At the lodge you will each be given a packet with a printout of the cache pages. There is cell phone coverage at the island, but you won't have your phones there. That's because Javier will be collecting your phones. The competition will feature substantial cash prizes and I want it to be equal for everyone. You will not be able to contact anyone else, so if you want to text or call family or anyone, I suggest you do it as soon as I'm done with this talk. You will all be issued Garmin 60Cx GPS receivers pre-loaded with the basic cache information. The printouts in your packets will supply the full descriptions and information you need. For those of you who haven't used a Garmin 60 series in a few years, Javier will give you a crash refresher course in a few minutes, but I know from your logs and forum posts you have all used them. That was one of the criteria I used in selecting who would come.

"I will be scoring the competition on a point system. Twenty points for the First To Find, fifteen for the STF, then eight, seven, six, etc. Tomorrow will be another set of five caches with the same rules. The scoring won't be done until the end of the second day. There will be prizes for everyone, such as the right to hide a virtual cache, a special geocoin, and so on, but only the top three get actual cash prizes.

"I notice that many of you have teamed up with others. That's fine, but be advised the scoring will be on a strict individual basis and will be done based on the order of signatures on the logs. Even though you may both find it together, whoever signs first will get the higher points. You also must each personally sign the log sheet. You can't have your partner sign for you. You will be issued a small pad soaked with clear fluid. Rub your right thumb on it and press it on the log paper in the box indicated next to your signature line. The ink reacts with the special paper to show your fingerprint. If you don't find all of the caches today, you can still find them tomorrow, but, as I said, there will be five new ones tomorrow."

He'd been standing at the head of the table, but now he sat down. The boat was out in the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the water was choppy. He'd been lurching back and forth with the boat's motion. He poured himself a cup of coffee and took a sip before continuing.

"Are there any questions?"

"Will there be a map of the island in the packet?" Roy asked.

"Yes. Anything else?"

Beth blurted out, "I'm not feeling well. Where's the bathroom?"

"Are you seasick? You gonna lose your breakfast?"

"I think so."

"Go topside and heave over the side if you have to. That's better than closeting yourself in the head. Look at the horizon."

Beth needed no further prompting and quickly scurried up the stairs. Masa called out to her that he'd brief her on anything else of importance.

"What if there's a tie on points?" Roy asked.

“I don’t know yet. Maybe I’ll choose a tiebreaker like who wrote the best log in the logbook or who moved a Travel Bug. I’ll use my best judgment as to who has entered into the proper spirit of geocaching. If you cheat any of your opponents, you’ll be disqualified, but I’m sure none of you would do anything like that. Anyone else?” There was no response. “All right, then. Have fun and play fair. I’m sorry the weather isn’t better for this. October is usually beautiful but I had to plan this months ago. It’s a bit nippy and windy, but at least there’s no rain and no blazing hot spell today. I can’t make that promise for tomorrow. There’s a storm front moving in. Make your calls and texts, and I’ll send Javier back down for anyone who wants to reorient themselves on the Garmin.”

Siggнал went topside and saw Beth hanging over the lee rail. The spittle on her chin made clear she’d been throwing up. He went over to her and offered her a cloth handkerchief. She took it gratefully and wiped her mouth and chin. Then she leaned over the rail again and dry heaved.

“Sorry,” she croaked.

“Don’t apologize. I’m just sorry it’s rough. Only about another twenty minutes to the island. We can normally make the trip faster with this boat, but the chop is too strong. We’d all be doing what you’re doing.”

This brought a groan. To Beth twenty minutes sounded like an eternity.

“I have to relieve Tomas at the helm. Hang in there.” He patted her fanny as he left, evoking a grunt of objection, but Beth was too far gone to say anything.

## **Cliff**

Cliff was on the phone with his wife Ellen when he saw Javier come down the companionway and into the dining area. Cliff didn’t need an orientation with the Garmin since he still used his often. He stepped out to the main deck to allow the others to hear Javier. Several others followed him as they texted on their phones. Cliff wondered how far out they could get cell phone coverage, but they were traveling northwest, almost parallel with the eastern side of the shoreline, and not moving away from civilization all that quickly.

He was able to reach Ellen. She was home with the kids and catching up with paying bills. He gave her the short version of what had gone on. She was more excited than he was. “I don’t care about the money,” she told him, “but I want you to show ‘em who’s got it. You’re a great geocacher, Cliff. This is your chance to prove it.”

“I’m partnering with Doily and a British woman. It’s going to be more fun that way.”

“Doily? The woman who owns all those supercreative caches in south San Jose? Deborah something?”

“She’s the one. I don’t know any of the others here. She’s more of a hider than a finder. We’re not as young as some of the others, so I don’t know how fast we’ll be.”

“That’s okay. They’ve got a good partner in you. And you aren’t that good at spotting caches. Another set of eyes will help. Just give it your best shot.”

“How are the kids?”

“Being good today. Knock on wood. Wow. I wish I was there, but I want to hear every detail. Call me when you find your first cache.”

“I can’t. They’re taking the phones. We’re going to be caching using Garmin GPSr’s.”

“Really. That’s a twist. Which model?”

“The 60Cx.”

“Oh, that’ll help you. You know all the buttons and menus and screens already.”

“Yeah, but Siggнал said the others have all used them, too, so maybe not much difference there. Maybe they’ll give us the phones back tonight when we’re done with these five. I’ll call you then if I can. If not, it’ll have to wait until the weekend is over.”

“Okay. Knock ‘em dead. Love you.”

“Love you.”

## **Beth**

The boat lay at anchor just offshore, sheltered from the worst of the wind. Tomas and Javier had set two anchors, one at each end. The motion of the boat was even worse now, bobbing up and down, and Beth was given the privilege of being in the first trip ashore in the skiff. Masa was with her along with Flo and Luke.

She hustled up to the nearby lodge, not waiting for the others to be ferried over. The lodge door was locked, so she huddled on the porch. Masa was soon beside her. He carried her backpack as well as wearing his own.

“You okay?” he asked.

“I’m still pretty rocky.”

“Lucky?” The R-L thing still got him in English.

“Rocky, not lucky, for Christ sake. I’m feeling bad, okay? I’m sure I’ll be fine after a while, but I’m still seasick.”

“Okay. Walk around. That will help.”

She ignored him.

Three more of the group joined them along with Javier, who unlocked the lodge. She rushed in and headed right for the women’s restroom, which was well-marked, fortunately.

When she emerged, feeling a little better, everyone was gathered around the long, polished pine dining table. Manila envelopes were lying atop the table with a GPSr sitting on each. The other geocachers were gathered around the table, each person standing in front of an envelope. She realized that they were all waiting for her. She walked over to the one empty spot. Masa had saved the one next to him.

“Please hand your phone to Javier,” Siggнал directed. Meekly, she complied. “Okay, everyone,” he went on. “Javier will have lunch available here starting at noon, but that’s strictly voluntary. Dinner will be at six. That’s mandatory. Open your packets. You’re on your own. May the best geocacher win.”

Ten hands reached for the ten packets. There was a ripping of paper and a rumble of murmurs and cheers. Game time!

Beth still had a splitting headache from the seasickness. She asked herself why hadn't she taken seasickness medicine first thing like Signal had warned, but she knew the answer. She'd been boating several times in Canadian lakes without trouble, but never on an arm of an ocean, or even on any of the Great Lakes. It was a lot rougher than she'd expected. She'd heard that those seasickness pills had side effects like sleepiness and she'd wanted to stay sharp, but now with the headache she was even less sharp. The room still swayed a little bit. She'd never gotten her sea legs and now she couldn't get her land legs back.

"I say let's do this one." It was Masa. He was pointing to a spot on the island map. A small treasure chest icon appeared there. It was about 300 feet south-southeast of the lodge, the closest of all the marked caches. It was labeled Swagville.

She realized she had spaced out, thinking about her seasickness and bad decision instead of reading the materials. She forced herself to focus.

## The Caches

Each packet contained five sheets with cache descriptions, an island map, and the special inepad Signal had mentioned. According to the icons, the first three caches were standard caches; the last two were a multicache and an unknown.

### **Precarious** N48° 29.584 W122° 50.160

A cache by Signal

Difficulty \*\*\*\*\* Size: small

Terrain \*\*\*\*\*

All the caches on this island are 5-star terrain because you need a boat or plane to get here. It is a private island, but the cache owner is the property owner and grants permission to any geocacher to enter the island to search for this cache. This cache would be a five star difficulty and five star terrain even if it was on the mainland. It is in a very challenging and dangerous location. Do not attempt unless you are confident in your ability to retrieve it. If you do attempt it, it is entirely at your own risk. Special equipment is recommended, but not required.

### **Rapunzel** N48° 29.366 W122° 49.810

A cache by Signal

Difficulty \*\* Size: large

Terrain \*\*\*\*\*

All the caches on this island are 5-star terrain because you need a boat or plane to get here. It is a private island, but the cache owner is the property owner and grants permission to

any geocacher to enter the island to search for this cache. If this was on the mainland it would be a three-star terrain. Hint: be patient.

**Swagville** N48° 29.419 W122° 49.473

A cache by Signal

Difficulty       \*       Size: regular

Terrain         \*\*\*\*\*

All the caches on this island are 5-star terrain because you need a boat or plane to get here. It is a private island, but the cache owner is the property owner and grants permission to any geocacher to enter the island to search for this cache. If this was on the mainland it would be a two-star terrain. This is a TB Hotel full of many of the most interesting travel bugs and other trackables from the headquarters collection. Finders are encouraged to take these and move them along promptly. They are NOT collectibles. Please move them to another cache.

**Upon Reflection** N48° 29.253 W122° 49.972

A cache by Signal

Difficulty       \*\*\*\*   Size: micro

Terrain         \*\*\*\*\*

All the caches on this island are 5-star terrain because you need a boat or plane to get here. It is a private island, but the cache owner is the property owner and grants permission to any geocacher to enter the island to search for this cache. If this was on the mainland it would be a three-star terrain. It's a three-stage multi. Every stage is either N48° 29.XXX W122° 49.YYY or N48° 29.XXX W122° 50.YYY. You are looking for a set of six numbers to fill the XXXYYY.

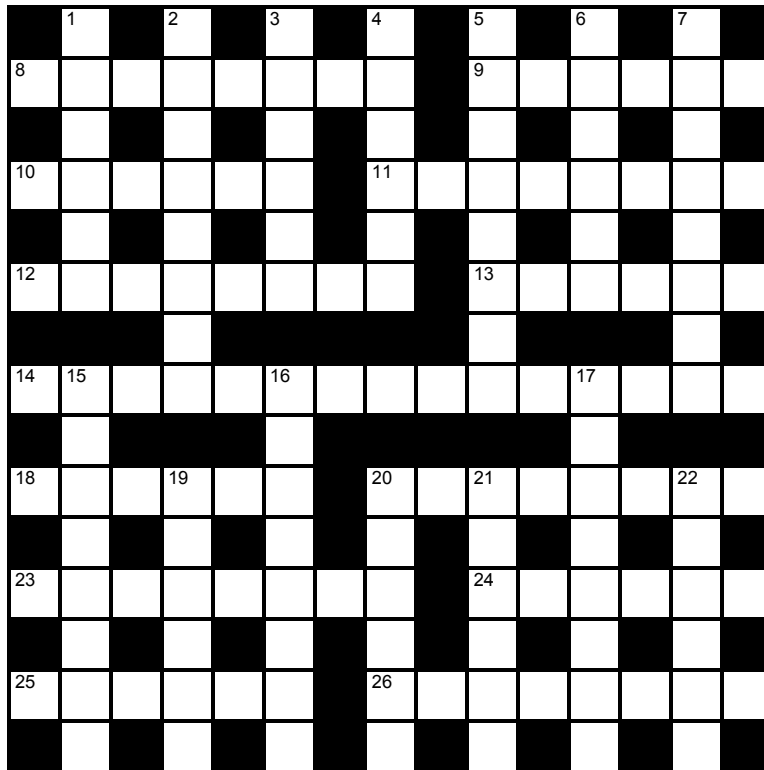
**15 Letters** N48° 29.000 W122° 49.000

A cache by Signal

Difficulty       \*\*\*\*\*   Size: Regular

Terrain         \*\*\*\*\*

All the caches on this island are 5-star terrain because you need a boat or plane to get here. It is a private island, but the cache owner is the property owner and grants permission to any geocacher to enter the island to search for this cache. If this was on the mainland it would be a two-star terrain. It is a cryptic crossword. Every clue has a real definition at the beginning or end, but the wording is intentionally misleading. Look for anagrams, hidden words, alternate meanings. This puzzle can be printed out to work on paper. Use this link: <http://crosswords.ackgame.com/15Letters.pdf>



### Across

- 8 Watch her broil chopped chicken - disgusting! (8)
- 9 Former Congressman disturbed by a dog (6)
- 10 Not a single man soon will experience non-finance (6)
- 11 Angry color switched to humanitarians (3,5)
- 12 Bad pet odors on the front porch? (8)
- 13 Santa Barbara, initially within a prideful king's grasp, lost for lack of capital. (6)
- 14 What is required to solve this puzzle: you must need IQ; thick, doltish brains won't work. (3,8,4)
- 18 Plato's 15th letter, written before wretched isle exile of Socrates with nothing to eat but oats, seeds and nuts (6)
- 20 Watching over tea, truly awful (8)
- 23 There is *Suerte* by Shakira, re-released by that label that puts out second releases (8)
- 24 Up-to-date manner of caregiver (6)
- 25 Although he reached his goal, be it fast or slow, he still failed (6)
- 26 If you get a T.R.O., City Power can't continue this horrific practice (8)

## Down

- 1 A dominion without India is like chess without a game piece (6)
- 2 Qatari ring lost top general during 1980s Mideast conflict (4,4)
- 3 Protest target (6)
- 4 What women may do when they are put cruelly down (4,2)
- 5 Santa walks clumsily - keep it under wraps (8)
- 6 Brides tossed bouquets and other useless things (6)
- 7 Implement a policy of an afternoon snack and a cuddle (8)
- 15 A tiny creature may give you flesh wound (8)
- 16 I quit N.Y. I couldn't take the unfairness (8)
- 17 Newspaper media col. about a musical instrument (8)
- 19 A woman who likes being chaste? (6)
- 20 Two old sailors hitting the sauce (6)
- 21 Mortimer Snerd held kitchen gadgets (6)
- 22 If I tarry, it's unusual (6)

Hint: Your initial idea is probably right. Checksum 55.

## Mossbug

Masa was practically frothing at the mouth, he was so excited. "This is the closest one and the easiest. Look! Most of the others are going out the front to the north. Probably some of the others will go for this one first. But I was looking around and noticed there's a back exit on the south side. I bet we can beat everyone to this one if we run right now."

Beth knew Masa probably had an ulterior motive. He wanted to get to that Travel Bug Hotel before the others so he could discover or take all those trackables. But he was probably right. She didn't have time to think about it if she was going to say yes. "Okay, go for it. But I'm still too weak and shaky. You run and grab the logbook. Hold it for me."

Masa turned on his GPSr as he tore out the back door. He realized he should have turned on his unit earlier. It often took several minutes for it to get a satellite lock. He headed in the direction he thought was right and hoped that as he got close the unit would have locked in to give him a good set of coordinates.

The back had a nice patio area, easy footing for the first eighty feet or so, and then he had to make a decision. There was a small path leading to the southeast toward the water, but the cache was in the forest. He didn't know if the path wound around toward the cache or not. The map didn't show the paths. The path would be faster going, but maybe in the wrong direction. On the other hand, if he bushwhacked into the forest in a straight line, he couldn't be sure he was going in the right direction either, since his unit was still trying to lock in on the satellite signal.



He decided to take the path. Running at a full sprint, he was pleased to see the path bending around close to where he thought the cache was. When he had gone about as far as he thought was the distance to the cache, he stopped. His Garmin was locking into its fourth and fifth satellites. The current coordinates popped up. He set the cache as his “go to” waypoint and changed the screen to the arrow. No one else was around. The arrow pointed into the trees. He was ecstatic when saw the number that showed in the upper right hand corner: 42 feet. He was almost right on top of the cache.

He rushed into the forest and spotted the cache before he was halfway there. It was hard to miss. This was a first-class geocache. The treasure chest was gold, or at least, gold-looking, and chained to a tree. He suspected it had been made to order from bronze or brass. It looked very much like the classic geocache icon Garmin used, only about the size of a Kleenex box, maybe a bit bigger. He lifted the heavy lid and right on top was the log book, fashioned from an expensive girl’s diary, probably, with gold braid around the edges. The first page was blank other than having a space for the FTF to sign and the box for the fingerprint. He pulled his pen from his pocket and signed Mossbug in the book, then extracted the inkpad from his kit. He rolled his thumb on the pad and then into the square in the logbook. Sure enough, his thumbprint appeared there although his thumb appeared normal. Since there was only one fingerprint box per page, it was obvious that each finder was expected to use the remainder of the page to write a log. He scribbled “Great cache!” in huge letters to fill the page.

A rush of adrenaline hit him as he realized he’d gotten the FTF. He finally took the time to look at the swag in the chest. There had to be at least thirty Travel Bugs or geocoins, fancy ones. He suddenly realized he had a problem. He was used to caching with his smart phone. The NeoGeo app allowed him to snap a picture of each trackable and it would read the number on the TB or coin and automatically log it as discovered if there was a data connection. If there wasn’t, he could still take a photo and tag it with the cache ID and the date and time to log later. Now he didn’t even have a camera. His only option was to take the TBs with him and log them later, or write down all the numbers, which would take forever. They were too heavy and bulky to be running around with and it would be seen as unfair to take them all. He might be disqualified.

“How’d you beat us here?” It was Roy’s voice directly behind him. Lars was right beside Roy.

“Speedy Gonzalez.” Masa turned and grinned.

“Log book, please.” Roy held out his hand.

“My partner isn’t here yet. She’ll be here in a minute.”

“That’s fine, but we’re here now. You have to hand it to us,” Lars chimed in.

“I promised her.”

“Signal said to play fair. You want to be disqualified?” Lars stepped close and started to reach for the log book, but Masa stepped back and jerked it close to his body. The two were about evenly matched physically, but it was two against one.

Masa stood undecided for several seconds when suddenly Roy grabbed the entire contents of the treasure chest. Every TB and coin.

“Hey, wait. I haven’t logged those.”

“You’re going to log these?” Roy said. He turned to Lars and whispered something. Lars nodded. “Tell you what. Let us sign in slots three and four right now and I’ll leave these TBs for you, except for one for each of us. These could be tiebreakers. Otherwise we take the book from you and take slots two and three. And you have to stay to copy the tracking numbers on all these TB’s.”

Masa knew he was beat. It was actually a reasonable deal. “Okay. But leave slot two blank for Beth.” He handed Roy the book.

Roy snatched it like it might escape and quickly signed on page three, then inked his thumbprint. Lars did the same on page four. He handed it back. “Remember, you promised you’d copy all these.”

Beth came panting up toward the group at that moment. Roy and Lars took off westward.

“Sorry I was so slow,” she said. “But I think I’ve got my second wind now. Do you have the log book?”

He handed it to her. Immediately she noticed that she still had page two available. “They left me slot two? That was nice of them. They were here before me. They should have had two and three.”

“I wouldn’t let them have the log book until they agreed to leave it for you.”

“Really! Good work, partner. I’m sorry I was snippy earlier. I had a headache and wasn’t at my best.” She took the log book and signed her name on page two. Then she used the inkpad to complete the logging. “Okay, let’s go. I’ll write my long log online later. Rapunzel next? It’s the closest.”

“I have to write down these tracking numbers so I can log them later.”

“Wait. Seriously? There must be two dozen of them. We’ll fall way behind everyone else.” The truth of what Masa had agreed to hit her.

“I had to agree so you could get number two. Besides, if I don’t write these down now others will take them and I’ll never have a chance.”

“They’ll share back at the lodge tonight. You can write them down then.”

“I promised I’d copy these now. Roy and Lars wanted a head start.”

“That was a stupid promise.”

“Stupid promise – to get you more points? If you’d taken seasick medicine like Siggnal said, you would have been here before them. That was stupid.”

The truth of that remark stung. For a nanosecond she had a sharp retort on the tip of her tongue, but she pulled it back. “Okay, I’m sorry. I had to drink some water back at the lodge. I was dehydrated from the vomiting. I’m better now. Let’s just do this.” She flipped over the sheet of paper with the cache description on it and began writing down tracking numbers. Masa did the same. At least it would go twice as fast.

**Tex Murphy**

There had been no doubt where he would head first. The cache description was too enticing. Precarious was right up his alley. He barely skimmed the other cache descriptions. He exited onto the front porch. All the others were either still inside or clustered on the patio. He headed north at a jogging pace. Heading west through the forest would be the straight line, but too slow. There appeared to be a perimeter trail that would allow him to run, or at least jog.

The trail was barely a rough path in places and he had to slow down, but it took him no more than fifteen minutes to get to the cache location. It was a cliff edge. His GPS unit told him it wasn't right where he stood. The arrow pointed due west several feet out past the precipice. He looked down. The water was lapping against the rocks a hundred fifty feet below. It was a sheer drop. He didn't see anything that looked like it could be a geocache. Was he going to have to rappel down there to start looking in all the nooks and crannies?

He surveyed his surroundings one more time. Behind him was a huge tree. He didn't know what kind; that wasn't his skill set. What he saw, though, made him smile. The tree had a sturdy limb jutting out over the cliff edge and at the end was a white PVC tube dangling from it on a cord. The limb was about twelve feet off the ground. Now that was the kind of challenge he relished.

First he had to figure out how to get up onto the limb. There were no lower limbs or broken branches to use for free climbing. The trunk had some slant to it, but he didn't think he could shinny up the trunk. He took his backpack off and fetched a length of rope. This was something the other geocachers were unlikely to carry, he guessed, and that gave him some satisfaction. He might be the only one to retrieve this cache.

He tied a chunk of wood to one end of the rope for weight and tossed it over the limb. He fed slack into the rope to allow the wood piece's weight to pull the other end down to ground level. The rope was just long enough. He tied the two ends together and tugged. The limb moved a little but he was confident it would hold his weight.

He rifled through his backpack for the items he thought he would need: pen and inkpad of course, tongs, a smaller piece of cord. His survival knife was on his belt. He placed the loose items in a smaller pouch that strapped to his left upper arm, sealed it, and began the rope climb. It was trickier than usual because the rope formed a loop. He had to grab both strands and put equal weight on each as he ascended. Fortunately, this was something he'd done before.

He reached the limb and twisted his body up onto it. He sat up on the limb with one leg dangling over each side, like a kid riding a hobby horse. He began to scoot out farther onto the limb. It bent lower but showed no signs of breaking. Another scoot and he was out over the edge of the cliff. If he fell, he was dead. It had looked pretty far down before but from here it was terrifying. Another scoot and the limb bent farther. He had to be very, very careful. If it bent much farther, he was in danger of sliding forward and being tossed off.

The cache was still out of reach. He stretched forward, keeping one hand tightly grasped onto the limb. The branch was thin enough out here for his massive hand to encircle it. He stretched his legs backward to keep his center of mass back a bit more. He was now lying on top

of the limb. Balancing was more difficult now. Precarious was the right name for this cache, no doubt.

Gripping the limb with his left hand, he used his right to open the pouch. He pulled out the tongs and extended the handle. From this position he could just snag the cord that held the cache using his tongs. He slowly drew it toward him. He was surprised to find that the cord was stretchy, some sort of elastic. He pulled the cord to within a few inches of his face. The problem was he didn't have a free hand. His left hand kept him from falling and his right held the tongs.

For a moment he thought about letting go briefly with his left to grab the cord, but one glance down cured him of that foolishness. Finally he twisted his wrist to its limits to bring the end of the tongs, cord still gripped tightly, to his mouth. He bit the cord and held it between his teeth, allowing him to jam the tongs back into the pouch. This freed his right hand.

There was enough stretchiness in the cord that he could scoot back again and sit up safely, if it could ever be said that sitting on a limb over a fifteen-story drop was safe. Finally, he grabbed the cache container and unscrewed the lid. He signed the log book and placed his thumbprint in the designated box. He closed it up again as it had been and let it go. It snapped back into place dangling from the end of the limb. It was on some sort of spring mechanism.

He scooted back and slid down the rope. His heart was pumping like a Texas oil well and his hands were shaking like a Parkinson's victim. The adrenaline surge made him lean over and place his hands on his knees until he could recover some semblance of control. Could life get any better? This trip had already exceeded his wildest expectations. If the rest was anticlimax, it didn't matter. He'd be satisfied. He untied the rope, replaced it in his backpack, and pulled out the envelope to study all the other caches. Where to next?

#### **CliffNotes, Doily, Lynne14**

The instant Signal had given them the go-ahead to open the envelopes, Cliff grabbed the GPS unit and pressed the button on top to turn it on. He knew that it could take several minutes for the GPS lock and he wanted to be ready to go as soon as possible. He motioned to Deborah and Lynne to step outside so they could talk privately. The trio stepped into the October chill.

"Turn on your Garmins," Cliff instructed.

"Good idea," Lynne said and did as Cliff had suggested.

They all began reading the cache descriptions. Within a few seconds, Roy and Lars came out, too, and moved to the far end of the porch. Thirty seconds later Tex threw open the front and looked at the two groups, then made a beeline north onto the small path Cliff had seen there when they docked the skiff.

"He's heading for Precarious," Lynne said with assurance.

"Of course," Deborah agreed.

"I think we should do the multi," Lynne said. "Everyone else is probably going to go for the easy ones first, Swagville or Rapunzel. No one will want to be tied up on a three-stage multi."

We'll have a better shot at a first there. Look. I'm an old lady. We're not going to be able to compete with the others on speed."

"Why not the puzzle?" Cliff asked. "That's our strength."

"No one is going to do that early. See those cryptic clues? It's a toughie. None of these others are puzzlers. I'll bet we can do that at our leisure this afternoon and still get a first."

Deborah broke in. "I want to do that Rapunzel one. With a name like that, I'll bet it's a gadget cache. There's got to be a doll letting down her hair. These caches are supposed to be special. I'll want to inspect the mechanism and maybe take notes."

"I think you're right," Lynne said, "but that's all the more reason to leave it for the end, when we can take the time to enjoy it."

"I'm sold," Cliff said. "Upon Reflection it is. The first stage is at the end of the airstrip, I think." The paper map showed a long straight line down the middle of the island. It wasn't labeled, but an airstrip was the only thing that made sense to Cliff. The screen map in the GPS unit didn't have it, but the cache icon showed that it had to be located close to the southwestern end of the strip.

They watched Roy and Lars head out at a jog in a southerly direction. Cliff consulted his Garmin and pointed to the southwest. "There's a walkway to the airstrip. This way." They began hiking at a moderate pace. Cliff didn't know where the Masa Team or Flo-Luke Team was. Still inside strategizing, he surmised.

The path was not a direct route. It took them over a circuitous two-thirds of a mile. It was a pleasant stroll in the woods, with magnificent trees bordering the path like stoic sentinels. The deep shade kept a brisk edge to the morning until they broke into the open at the edge of the airstrip. The sun was peeking through the clouds and warming things as Cliff surveyed the area. He was no pilot, but that strip of pavement looked pretty short to him. Not for the faint of heart, he imagined.

"There's something down there at the end," Deborah announced. "A structure of some kind." Their GPS arrows were all pointed directly toward the shiny object.

It turned out to be an aluminum shed of some kind set back twenty yards or so from the runway. They gathered around it and noted the six reflective numerals bonded to the back side.

**420187**

They all began marking a new waypoint. "The west coordinates must be 50 minutes, not 49," Deborah declared needlessly. The others had already realized that N48° 29.420 W122° 49.187 would be well off the island.

Cliff was the fastest to program it in and bring it up on the screen. "Okay, so stage two's on the western edge north of here."

"I have a bad feeling about this. That was too easy," Deborah remarked. "This is supposed to be four-star difficulty."

"It's only the first stage," Lynne responded. "Give it time. I'm sure he has something up his sleeve for the next two stages."

"I don't see any other caches closer," Cliff added. "So there's nothing to pick up on the way. Let's just head to stage two. I think we're going to have to bushwhack. Everyone have their boots and poles?"

"Lead the way," Lynne and Deborah said almost in unison.

They headed northwest into the forest, using their hiking poles to push aside foliage that attacked their faces and arms. It was slow going, stepping over fallen branches and rocks covered in fallen leaves and needles, still damp from the morning dew. Lynne, especially, was slowing them down. Geocaching in England was apparently not often this rugged.

Eventually they straggled out of the forest onto the path that ran along the western edge of the island. The view was beautiful and they all agreed to take a breather and enjoy it. Vigorous backslapping ensued as they brushed the tree junk from each other's clothing. The next stage coordinates were a hundred feet or so further north. They walked single file in the narrow pathway until they reached the spot. There a sizable stream flowed, disappearing into Lopez Sound a few dozen yards further west. A small steel footbridge crossed over it, only a few inches above the waterline. Their GPS units put them right in the center of the bridge.

"It's here somewhere," Cliff announced without conviction. If it was there, it certainly wasn't the same large block numerals at the first stage. There were no large surfaces like at the airstrip, other than the bridge underfoot and there were no numerals on it.

"Do we know if this stage also has six numbers?" Lynne asked. "It might just be a conventional stage. The cache page said you're looking for six numbers, but it didn't say how many times."

"I guess we don't know for sure. We're probably supposed to 'reflect upon it' like the title suggested and figure it out."

"I still think that first stage was too easy," Deborah said. "Maybe we're not even at the right place."

"We just started," Cliff said. "Let's keep looking." Another fifteen minutes of scouring the bridge produced nothing useful.

"The title," Lynne said suddenly. "We've totally missed it. Don't you see? Upon *reflection*." She pulled a small mirror from her pack. Proceeding to lie down on the bridge and hold the mirror down, she grunted in disgust. "My arms aren't long enough. I can't get the mirror under the bridge."

"I knew we needed a man," Deborah joked.

"If it's down there, that's evil, but it makes sense. Give it to me." He reached for the mirror and took Lynne's spot prone out on the metal surface. "I can't reach it either. I only need another two inches."

“Here, you two. What’s the matter with you guys? Are you real geocachers or not?” She pulled out an extendable rod with a small mirror on the end.

“You let me lie down there with the other mirror when you had this?” Cliff objected.

Deborah giggled in response. “I wish I had my phone. A video of you wallowing could draw a million views on YouTube.”

Cliff harrumphed and took the extending mirror. Lying on his belly once more he extended the mirror under the steel support beam of the bridge. The flowing stream sent droplets onto the back of his hand.

“I don’t see anything,” he said after a minute. “Just a metal bridge. It’s dark on this side from the shade. Let me try the other side.” He was lying facing east, toward the interior of the island. He spun around on his belly like a circus seal and pulled himself forward enough to stick the mirror over the edge on the seaward side. The light was better. Instantly he saw it and let out a groan. On the underside of the steel beam was another set of reflective digits of the same style as the previous ones, but much smaller. “It’s 1-5-1-0-8-1 ... I think.”

“What are you groaning about,” Deborah asked.

“What do you mean ‘you think’?” Lynne asked simultaneously. “Can’t you see it clearly?”

“Oh, I can see it. Look for yourself.” He got up and handed the mirror to Lynne. With the extension she could reach far enough now. Then she saw it.

“Gorblimey,” she said, in a convincing lower-class British accent. Standing, she handed the mirror to Deborah.

Deborah got down and took her turn. “Oh, that’s evil. I should have known it when I saw that font at stage one. I think it’s 1-8-0-1-2-1.” What she saw looked like this:

**180121**

Lynne wrote the digits on the back of her cache printout. It could be 180121, 180151, 151081 or 121081 depending on whether she looked at it right-side up, upside down, or with the mirror held to the side or in either up-down orientation. Are you supposed to view it “reflected” in a mirror? With your head upside down as they had? Both? She showed the numbers to her companions and wrote out all four combinations.

Cliff nodded his agreement. “Okay, let’s check out these possibilities. It’s obvious these coordinates were chosen to be read different ways, so any of them could be it. Deborah, you take the first one, Lynne, you do number two and I’ll do the last two.” They began programming new waypoints into their GPS units.

“Mine’s about a hundred thirty feet offshore,” Lynne declared. “We can rule that one out.”

“You’re probably right, but we can’t be sure,” Deborah objected. “That’s close enough that maybe we’re supposed to take a canoe out there or something. Mine’s possible. It’s right at the water’s edge. It looks accessible. Any shoreline is a likely place. What do you have, Cliff?”

“I’ve got two possibles. One’s right on the shoreline like yours, and the other is inland but still close to shore. At least all four of these are in the same general area near the southern tip of the island.”

“That’ll take us farther away from all the other caches,” Deborah complained.

“Well, do you want have to come back for them? This is as close as we’re going to get.”

She shrugged. “No, we’ve got to do it. We should get the FTF at least.”

They began walking south along the shoreline. There was no path that went straight through, but the shoreline here wasn’t hard to traverse. At times they had to step in wet sand, but they were all prepared for the terrain.

Lynne’s coordinates were indeed offshore and inaccessible once they had a chance to scope them out. That left the other three. The set Deborah had marked were at the water’s edge due east of Lynne’s set. Plenty of nooks and crannies were in evidence.

“Remember, this one’s a micro,” Lynne said. “It could be anywhere.”

They’d searched for about twenty minutes when Cliff said, “You two keep on searching. I’m going to try the other two spots. The other cachers could show up at any minute. I’ll yell if I find anything.”

“Good idea,” Lynne replied. “Deborah, why don’t you go with him and do the last spot. We’ve searched this area pretty well. I’ll keep going here.”

Cliff headed for the spot inland. There was a cabin there. He was sure that was where the cache would be. Deborah went to the shoreline coordinates almost two hundred feet away. Ten minutes passed without a word from any of them, then fifteen, eighteen.

“It’s here! It’s here!” Deborah called out, a soprano with the volume of a basso profundo. The others came running.

She had discovered a triangular piece of broken mirror lying on the sand. She’d already picked it up twice and examined it without luck, finding it to be nothing other than a broken piece of mirror, but it nagged at her that it was consistent with the reflection theme of the cache. She eventually came back to it a third time and started digging at the edges of the mirror with her beautifully manicured nails. She found a crevice and worried it with her nail. It seemed to be a tiny slit, but it didn’t yield and she didn’t want to break her nail. She pulled out her pocket knife and stuck it into the slit and twisted. The mirror popped open. A very thin false back had been fitted on the mirror piece, obviously all custom-machined. In the shallow depression between the glass and the backing was a single sheet of thin paper – the log sheet – and a one hundred dollar bill. The bill had been marked “for FTF” in felt pen.

“Good job, Doily!” Cliff exclaimed, and Lynne echoed the sentiment when she arrived.

“It had this in it,” Deborah said, holding up the bill. “We haven’t talked about who gets to log first or any prizes. We’re a team. We should take turns signing first and split any winning



three ways. How about I sign this one as first to find and then Cliff, you or Lynne take the next one, no matter who finds it. Then we rotate.”

“No, we shouldn’t rotate,” Cliff replied. “That weakens the total for all of us. We should always have the same person sign first in order to get the highest total for the cash prizes he mentioned. One of us needs to get into the top three. You two can still split the winnings.”

Lynne nodded her agreement. “You’re right about the point totals. We should maximize one person. What about you, though? You don’t want to split the prize?”

“No, I don’t. I’m not here for the money. I know you guys aren’t either, but really, my business is doing great, I have my FBI pension, and my wife works. I’ve had some good luck financially, too, so I really don’t need it or want it. You two split it if you win.”

The two women looked at each other. Neither wanted to admit it, but both could use the money. Deborah had recently moved from Sunnyvale to Coyote, south of San Jose because she could no longer afford the rent farther north. Her commute was more than twice what it had been.

“Works for me,” she finally said. “Thank you.”

Lynne shrugged. “All right then. Doily, you found it. You go ahead and sign for the FTF. You sign first from now on like Cliff says. Keep the hundred for now. We’ll split that later, too.”

Deborah signed and inked, followed by Lynne and Cliff. There was no room on the log sheet to write anything else. They fitted the back onto the mirror piece and put it where it had been.

Cliff had the paper cache descriptions out and was examining them. “What’s next? We’re on the west side and the movement is pretty easy here. I say we head up to Precarious. There’s no rush on the others. We’ll probably be last on Swagville, no matter what we do, and we already agreed to do Rapunzel and the puzzle later. Precarious is the most intimidating so some of the others might not go for it right away. We have a shot at getting second.”

The others agreed, so they headed north along the shoreline. Cliff began to wonder about the “substantial cash prizes.” A hundred-dollar bill is a nice FTF prize, much nicer than any he’d ever found in a cache, but he didn’t consider it “substantial.” Sprague was a near billionaire according to rumor. It might be a thousand for first place, even five thousand. This whole excursion had to be running him around a hundred grand for everyone even without the prizes. Sure, he owned the business now and could write it off as promotion, but a write-off wasn’t the same as free. That reminded him, what about that movie? He hadn’t seen Javier lurking about with a camera. Were there cameras at the caching sites? That hadn’t occurred to him until now.

## **Roy\_All\_T and Brannfugl**

Roy and Lars had made a beeline for Rapunzel after leaving Masa at Swagville. They had been irked that they had missed the FTF at the first cache and could only hope no one had gone directly to Rapunzel. They’d seen Tex head off to Precarious, and Masa’s team was behind them writing down tracking numbers, but they didn’t know where the other teams were.

When they arrived no one else was there. The cache was marked as a “large” on the cache page and they could hardly argue. It was a building, a tower to be exact. A miniature tower, but impressive enough. It followed the classic fairy tale design: a tapering stone cylinder in a flowery Renaissance architectural style. There was a window near the top, about chest high on Lars, neck high on Roy. A bejeweled spire topped it off.

“I don’t see Rapunzel,” Lars commented. “Should we wait?”

“No, we need to try something.” Roy reached into the window but there was nothing there but an empty chamber. There was a solid-feeling floor right below the window. His fingers explored all the surfaces to no avail then he stuck a mirror inside to see if he had missed anything. He hadn’t.

Meanwhile Lars was exploring the exterior of the tower. They were in the middle of the forest and the ground was covered with leaves and pine needles. He dug around the base, scooping away everything against the tower wall. There was nothing there.

“Nothing inside. You see anything down there?”

“Not yet. The description did say we needed patience. Maybe we just wait and she comes out, or something happens. It could be on a timer.”

“There’s no reason to just sit and wait. If it’s on a timer, it will come whether we’re trying things or not. He couldn’t have it set to go every hour or whatever for eternity. Think of all the energy that would use. There must be a trigger of some kind.”

Lars began searching the low-hanging branches of the nearby trees. Roy poked the leaf litter with his stick, moving around the tower in a tight expanding spiral. After several minutes Lars started examining the spire. The jewels were within reach. He touched one and it seemed firmly affixed. He tugged on it anyway. Nothing. He twisted it hard. He heard a click but nothing happened.

“The plastic jewels. They move. Twist them.”

Roy came over to help. He could reach all but the highest ones. Lars could do those. “Let’s keep track. We need to do it methodically.” He drew a rough diagram of the jewel layout and labeled them with their colors. “Twist that one again.”

Another click, still nothing. Roy marked off one of the jewels on his chart. “Okay, now the one next to it.” Another click was heard but still nothing happened. Lars moved in a clockwise direction staying with the bottom row of jewels. When he clicked the next one, music started playing. The speaker was concealed near the top of the spire. The tune Mary Had a Little Lamb played on some sort of chimes.

It played three verses, much to Roy’s annoyance. “Enough already. Can you make it stop?” Before Lars could do anything it stopped playing. Still, there was no Rapunzel or anything else encouraging. Lars twisted the next jewel and the next without result, but when he twisted the last one on the bottom row, more music started playing. This time it was Alouette and again it was three full verses. They couldn’t get anything else to play or stop it by twisting other knobs, so they waited it out. Eventually they found that any combination of three would produce a song. If the same combination was used again, it played the same song, other combos, other

songs. It took them twenty minutes of experimentation to find the right combination but when they did the floor of the interior chamber flipped up and a mechanized doll with long blonde hair rose majestically to a fanfare. Her hair was still hanging inside the tower, so Roy reached in and lifted the braid out. At the end of the braid was a small log book clipped to a ring in her braid. He unclipped the book and opened it. The first page was blank.

“We got the first. I sign first on this one,” Lars said. “You signed before me on the last one.”

“Yeah, but I only got one point on you last time, the difference between third and fourth. You get five more points than me for the FTF.”

“Someone has to go first. I discovered the twisting jewels and anyway, you can have the next FTF then.” He took the book from Roy’s hand.

“Whatever. Just sign and let’s get going.”

They both signed and inked. Roy dropped the book back inside the tower and they left for Precarious, Rapunzel still bobbing merrily in the window.

#### **CliffNotes, Doily, Lynne14**

When they arrived at Precarious, everyone but Tex was there. No one was willing to crawl out on the limb. It was just too dangerous. They could see it but couldn’t reach it. The other teams were debating how to bring in the cache and the discussion was turning heated.

Lynne whispered something to Deborah and they moved off into the forest. Cliff stayed and asked them what they’d tried. Masa told him that Beth had actually managed to get up onto the limb with the help of some boosting from below and some impressive tree climbing skills, but when she tried to scoot closer, she chickened out. That still earned her the respect of the crowd. They’d inventoried their strings and cords, but no one had a rope long enough and the items they had were too weak or too short to be combined into a usable rope.

Lynne returned and whispered something to Cliff. He broke away and listened to her. She explained what she and Deborah had found and what she had in mind.

“You want to make the proposal?” he asked.

“It’s better coming from you. You come off as more authoritative than I do. I’m just a little old lady.”

Some little old lady. She’d figured out the mirror trick at the last cache and now this. He wished he’d had a few little old ladies like her on his squad back when he was an FBI supervisor. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

“All right listen up,” Cliff bellowed. “I know how to retrieve the cache.”

The bickering stopped for a few seconds. “How?” Roy said after a pause.

“First, I want to make a deal.”

“What kind of a deal?” Roy seemed to be spokesman for the rest, Cliff decided.

“It’s going to take cooperation. If I can show you the way to do it, I want our team to be able to select the first person to sign the log.”

“You just got here,” Beth objected.

“And you haven’t figured out how to do it. We have.” He waved back toward Lynne and Deborah.

“You want the first three slots?” Luke asked.

“No, just one. We choose one member who signs first. After that everyone else signs in the order they arrived here. The other two on our team will sign last.”

“Tex Murphy probably already got the FTF.”

“That’s okay. We’ll take the second slot.”

“I say let him do it.” It was Luke. “If he can do it, we can all get going to the next cache.” Flo nodded vigorously and took hold of Luke’s elbow with both hands as she beamed vapid adoration at him. Several others nodded.

“Okay, but only if your idea works.”

Cliff turned and nodded to Lynne. She and Deborah disappeared into the woods and came out a minute later. They each carried one end of a long metal pole with a hook on the end.

“A tool! We should have thought of that,” Lars mumbled. “Of course he would have hidden a tool nearby.”

“The cache description didn’t say anything about a tool,” Masa said.

The women handed the pole to Cliff, the largest man there. Its weight surprised him. It was probably twenty pounds with a hook welded on the end. Usually such things are aluminum, not steel. He could lift it easily enough, but he realized he wasn’t going to be able to extend it out horizontally holding it by one end. The torque would be tremendous.

“Lars, how about a hand here?”

“That’s not going to reach,” Flo said. “It’s only what, ten feet? The cache is at least fifteen.”

“She’s right,” Lars said, stepping forward.

“I realize that, but I still need your help.” With that Cliff hooked the branch and pulled down. Lars realized what he was doing and joined him. The combined weight of the two men bent the branch down. The cache was now only three or four feet above ground level, but it was still hanging out over the precipice beyond reach.

“It’s still too far away,” Flo said.

“Okay, let go. Let’s think this through. He wouldn’t have left a tool if it wasn’t useful.”

Lynne stepped forward and spoke. “That branch.” She pointed to a spot about two thirds of the length of the limb out from the trunk. A smaller branch forked out from the big limb at that point.

“Let’s try it.” Cliff and Lars had to extend the hook at a forty-five degree angle and lean out toward the cliff edge. As they got close to the edge, they stopped. They both realized that if they tried to reach the heavy pole out that far, they’d fall over the cliff. “Roy, Masa, grab our belts. We need someone to hold us back so we don’t fall.”

The other two men stepped forward and grabbed on as instructed. Cliff looked at Lars. “Ready?”

“Go for it.”

They each held the pole near the non-hook end and extended it toward the point Lynne had identified. The hook still fell short by a few inches.

“Okay, we’re going to lean farther out. Hang on tight.” Cliff leaned forward. His head and chest were now out over the edge. Lars was right next to him, helping take the torque. They managed to get the hook over the main limb and it caught on the far side of the smaller branch’s fork.

“Geez, you’re heavy,” Roy huffed. “I can’t hold you much longer.” Roy was holding onto Cliff’s belt. Cliff realized that if Roy, or the belt, failed, he’d plunge forward to his death.

He yelled at the top of his lungs. “Pull, everybody help. If we all pull, this’ll bend.” Flo and Luke grabbed Roy and Masa and heaved backward. Slowly all six people were upright at the edge of the cliff. The limb was much thinner at the spot Lynne had identified and the end portion now bent like a bow, drawing the cache closer to the edge, but it was still just out of reach, perhaps four feet out. Bent as it was, at least the limb was easier to manage, bent almost ninety degrees. Cliff and Lars could lean into it the inland direction like they were pulling a barge into shore.

Lynne stepped forward. She pulled a length of twine from her pack with a magnet on the end. She swung it around like a lariat and reached it out toward the cache. On her second try she got it to loop around the cord holding the cache. She yanked it toward her before the twine unwound. Deborah grabbed it as it was drawn in. Once in Deborah’s hand, everyone realized the cord holding the cache stretched. In fact, it wasn’t an elastic cord. It was on a spring reel that allowed it to be pulled out at least twenty feet, enough to reach safe ground.

“I got it,” she declared unnecessarily. “You can let go.”

“No, we can’t,” Cliff retorted. “If we let go the limb is going to spring back and jerk that out of your hand. The pole is going to go flying out into the ocean, too. Just sign it quick and then pass it around. We can’t hold this forever.”

Deborah did as Cliff had instructed, signing right after Tex Murphy’s name, inked her thumb, then handed it to Flo. People began arguing about who should sign next and who would take the place of whom helping Cliff and Lars hold the limb bent. It took more than five minutes for everyone to sign, and Cliff was exhausted by the end when it was his turn. Luke finally took his place on the hook while Cliff signed. Roy had already replaced Lars.

“What do we do now?” Luke asked, straining against the pull of the limb. “We can’t unhook the pole. The branch will just spring back and pull it from our hands. Signal’s not going to like us losing his tool. No one else will be able to find this one.”

“Not my problem,” Cliff replied and joined his team back from the edge.

Roy spit out a couple of curses before saying, “Okay this one’s done. Ten to one he’ll archive it by Monday. I can’t hold this much longer. We have to let go at the same time. On three. One, two, three.” Luke and Roy let go.

Cliff watched the limb spring back out over the precipice. The hook tool went flying, somersaulting into the water and sinking from sight. He heard Roy tell Lars the multi was next.

He noticed that Beth and Masa were already gone. They had been the first to sign after Deborah so had a head start on the rest of them. Luke and Flo headed south on the shoreline path right behind Roy and Lars. He assumed both teams had already completed the caches on the east side.

“Rapunzel’s next for us. Then Swagville,” Lynne said. They packed up and headed east.

### **Team Beth (Bethie and Mossbug)**

Beth and Masa found the right jewel combination early, with a lucky random guess. Rapunzel appeared in the window as expected, log book dangling from the clip on her braid. The fanfare blared as they signed and inked. Masa still had the log book in his hand when Cliff’s team, as it was now coming to be known, showed up.

“Is that the book?” Cliff asked.

“Yep,” Beth answered.

“You going to hand it over?” A long pause. “Please.”

“We should put it back so you can retrieve it the way it was designed,” Masa said and he clipped it onto the braid ring. The doll stayed there, immobile. The fanfare stopped playing.

“I want to see it work,” Deborah said. “That’s the main thing for me. I’m not into the numbers.”

“I don’t know how to close it.”

“How did you open it?”

Masa looked at Beth. “Go ahead, tell them,” she said. “We’ve signed already. They helped us all at the last cache.”

Masa showed them the three jewel combination that had brought Rapunzel to the window. He twisted them again, but nothing happened.

“It was closed when you arrived?”

“Yes.”

Cliff turned to his teammates. “Do you want to wait or just sign it?”

Deborah was adamant. “I want to see the whole thing work. I think if we just wait it will start over.”

“I want to get started on the puzzle,” Lynne said. “I tell you what. I’ll sign the book now, leaving a slot for you to help maximize your points, and I’ll go on to Swagville then back to the lodge where I can get some food and a good spot to work on the puzzle. I need a table and chair. If I’m right, we’ll be the last ones at Swagville, so I’ll sign in the last slot and leave eight and nine for you guys. You can tell me all about this one tonight.”

“Okay, well, we’re taking off,” Beth said. “We’re going to do the multi next. Did you do that already?”

“Yeah, we got the first three slots there,” Cliff answered.

“Cool. Okay well, see you later.” Beth and Masa headed off toward Upon Reflection.

Lynne reached into the tower and extracted the logbook. She skipped one page for Deborah, then signed the next one and put it back in the castle. “Okay, I’ll see you two back at the lodge. Get some lunch. You must be starved. I know I am.”

“Okay, see later. I hope you have the puzzle solved by the time we get there.” Cliff turned to Deborah and asked, “Should we keep twisting the jewels, you think?”

“No, it must close and reset automatically. Think about it. Most cachers are going to get impatient twisting all those knobs to get it open. Once they sign the book they’re going to want to just move on, not keep fiddling with it. More twisting could actually delay the closing. The hint says to be patient.”

“Makes sense. Let’s give it a few minutes. We’re in no rush. Like Lynne said, we’re going to end up last in Swagville anyway.” He retrieved the log book. “It looks like everyone but Team Fluke has already signed it.”

“Team Fluke?”

“Flo and Luke. Lynne and I have been calling them that. They’re practically conjoined twins now. They seem to have made a permanent connection.”

“I don’t want to write my log until I’ve seen the whole thing work. I can take my time to write a nice long log in the book now. You can hold onto the book in case Luke and Flo show up. We can sign then if we have to.”

Cliff sat on the forest floor, grateful for the rest. The effort at Precarious had taken a toll on him. He wasn’t as young as he used to be and he definitely wasn’t in as good shape as he’d been even four years ago, before the kids had been born. His children were a wonderful late-in-life blessing, but they sure cut into his personal workout and geocaching time. Deborah remained standing, peering into the chamber where Rapunzel stood.

“The tower is impressive,” she said. “The artwork on the walls of the chamber is cute, too, very well done, but I was expecting something a little bit more impressive. One pop-up doll isn’t that ...”

She didn’t finish the sentence because the tower suddenly opened up, the front half revealing itself as a door with hidden hinges. The whole tower looked like a butterfly fish splayed open. A celeste began playing children’s tunes. The interior was elaborately decorated with fairy tale themes. The door, half the tower, really, opened to the left. It held a tiny diorama of Hansel and Gretel. The roboticized Gretel chucked the witch into the oven, which was lit inside with electronically simulated flames. The oven door closed with the witch’s feet sticking out kicking. The right side, the fixed part of the tower, had two mechanisms. In the lower one Little Red Riding Hood was eating porridge and the three bears could be seen in the background coming home. Her arm continued to move up and down from the bowl, oblivious to the danger awaiting her. Above that was a golden pumpkin-coach pulled by beautifully painted horses. Cinderella, in her best finery, rode inside the coach. Every scene was elaborately decorated with scale model furniture, creatures, and buildings. The coach door opened downward as though to provide steps for the maiden, but as it did so a full-sized book identical to the one at Swagville protruded slowly from under Cinderella’s seat.

“Oh my,” Deborah gasped, trying to take it all in visually. “That’s incredible.”

“What’s that book?” He stood and pulled it out from the pumpkin then opened it. On the inside cover was a note printed in Gothic-looking calligraphy. “This is the log book. The real one. It says to log here first. If this book is full, then log on the overflow book clipped to Rapunzel’s braid. Order of finding will be based on this book first, then that one.”

Deborah bent over to see. The first two pages had the names of Luke and Flo. The rest of the book was empty. She went back to look at the one on the braid. “Holy cannoli. I can’t believe he did that. A dummy log book on the braid. They’re going to be so pissed. Now we know what he meant by the instruction on the cache page to be patient.”

“Luke and Flo were the only other team to wait it out. Anyway, that means everyone’s been here. Take your time and enjoy it. We’re the last ones here. We’ll have to tell Lynne to come back and sign here later and cross out her other signature. She can still get in ahead of everyone who signed in the other book.”

“She’s not going to be competitive anyway, though. Remember, I’m getting the first logging slot at all of these.”

“It doesn’t matter. It helps you if she comes back. She’ll get page five in this book. That’ll push everyone in book two down one notch. That boosts your score relative to everyone else. That helps both of you since you’re splitting any winnings.”

“Right, right. I get it. But Luke and Flo may already have told others about it. They could come back and log in the real book. We should hurry to meet her at the lodge then do Swagville after.”

“Okay. Are you ready to write your log?”

“I guess. I’d really like to study this more, but I can do that later. I’ll write something nice now.” She signed on page three of the new log book, inked her thumbprint and wrote for a few minutes complimenting the amazing workmanship. Cliff filled in page four.

The chiming celeste gave way to a beeping sound as Cliff was leaving his thumbprint. A red light on top of the pumpkin began to flash. A recorded voice came on and announced that the door would close in sixty seconds. He returned the log book to the pumpkin and they watched as the door slowly swung shut. Rapunzel withdrew and the whole surreal scene morphed into nothing but a silent tower in the forest.

“I’m hungry, too,” Cliff declared. “The lodge sounds real good right now.”

When they arrived, Lynne was sitting at the main table spooning a seafood chowder into her mouth with one hand and holding her pencil on the crossword with her other. Tex Murphy was sitting across the table from her with a bowl of the same soup and a thick meat sandwich on rye. He had a bottle of craft beer half gone in his left hand. Cliff and Deborah shot each other a glance.

“Hey, Tex, good job on Precarious getting the FTF,” Cliff said. “How’d you do it? It took the rest of us working together.”

“I just climbed out there. Well, it wasn’t that easy. I had to climb a rope to get on top. It got pretty hairy once I started scooting out past the lip, I’ll tell you that.”



“I’ll bet. So you never found the tool?”

“There was a tool?”

Cliff launched into the story of the joint operation to pull the limb down., speaking loud and fast to distract Tex. Deborah whispered in Lynne’s ear to follow her. They stepped into the hallway. After making sure no one else was within earshot, Deborah told Lynne about the fake log book at Rapunzel.

“Crap! I’ll have to go back. I was just getting started on the puzzle. And I’m still eating.”

“Finish your lunch. It’ll look suspicious if you dash out now. Tex might decide to follow you.”

“Is the tower closed now? I don’t have the sequence for the jewels to open it.”

“Here. I wrote them down when Team Beth used them to try to close the tower.” She handed Lynne a slip of paper torn from her cache page printout. Lynne tucked it into a pocket.

Lynne returned to her lunch while Deborah went off to the kitchen. As she passed behind Tex she made eye contact with Cliff and gave him a meaningful nod. He broke off his tale. “Anyway, awesome job, Tex. I gotta grab something to eat. We still haven’t been to Swagville.”

“Right. Good work on the multi, by the way. I saw your team got the first there.”

“Thanks.” Cliff raised one hand in a perfunctory wave of acknowledgment as he disappeared into the kitchen. Deborah was piling her plate with fresh fruit, exotic cheeses from all over the world, and some curious looking crackers. She’d poured a large glass of French wine. “Go easy on the wine,” Cliff intoned softly. “That puzzle is mental work. Gotta be sharp.”

She finished piling on the food and picked up the glass. “Are you kidding me? I’m not passing up a wine like this. Just smell it. Besides, I’d just be a fifth wheel, or is it a third wheel? There’s three of us. Anyway, you and Lynne are the puzzle geniuses. You don’t need me. After Swagville, I’m done for the day.”

“Did you tell her about the real log book?”

She gave him a harsh stare of the “just how dumb do you think I am?” variety. “I told her to finish her lunch first so Tex doesn’t get suspicious. And before you ask, I remembered to give her the jewel combination.”

“Okay, okay, just checking. That’s good. I think we’re looking good on points.” He began to construct a massive pastrami sandwich, heavy on the mustard and mayo. A large bowl of potato chips and one of those craft beers completed the picture.

“I thought you wanted to stay sharp?”

“One beer? That’s nothing. I weigh twice what you do and this has about half the alcohol you’ve got in that bucket.” It was an oversized wine glass she carried.

They moved out to the dining table and sat next to Lynne. She was just finishing the soup. “Hey, guys, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to the ladies room. Here’s my progress on the puzzle.” She slipped her sheet over to Cliff and stood.

“Okay,” they chorused.

Tex licked his fingers and belched. “Pardon me. That was damn good. So now the hard one for me. I don’t usually do puzzles. I don’t really get this cryptic thing. Can you get me

started, Cliff? Just a little push. You know I'm not going to go whipping past you and the English dame."

"English dame? You mean Lynne? What is this, South Pacific?"

"Huh?"

"There is Nothing Like a Dame," Cliff sang, after a fashion.

"Don't quit your day job," Deborah remarked and put her hands over her ears in mock agony.

Tex was too young to get the reference to the musical, but the light bulb went off anyway. "Oh, I didn't mean it like that. I just didn't remember her name. I meant she sounds all hoity-toity like Dame Margaret or, you know, like, royalty. That kind of dame. I meant it nice."

Cliff's umbrage melted away. He considered Tex's request and had to agree with his assessment that he wasn't going to beat them to the puzzle final. Better to keep him here at the table a bit longer to give Lynne time at Rapunzel. Lynne had already filled in 8 Across and 10 Across and left her puzzle with Cliff. If Tex could read it from across the table, he knew those words anyway.

"Sure, okay. I'll just explain a couple to get you started. Eight across is 'horrible.' That's an anagram of 'her broil.' The word chopped comes right after those two words. That's called an anagrind. Words like chopped, crazy, awful, odd, and so on often are placed right before or after an anagram to indicate the letters have been rearranged. See, it's an eight-letter word, so it helps to find a word or phrase with the same number of letters. Not all anagrams have an anagrind. The real definition, of course, is the final word, disgusting. The other words are just meaningless camouflage. You're a geocacher. You understand camouflage."

"What about ten across? Fiancé. That definition makes no sense. Not a single man? A fiancé is a single man, or woman."

"A woman is a fiancée with two e's. One e means the man. You're looking at it wrong. What's the next word in the definition?"

"Soon."

"Not a single man soon, someone who will soon not be a single man. That defines a fiancé."

"Oh, right. Man, that's tricky. But what about the non-finance at the end. Is that even a word? It's not an anagram. It has too many letters."

"Punctuation and spacing is usually distorted to make it harder to spot the clue. Read it as 'no N finance' – the word finance with the first N removed."

"I'm never going to get this."

"Well, that's a starter for you."

Deborah giggled and refilled her glass. "Tex, I'm with you. I'm smart enough to know I'm not smart enough, which is why I teamed up with the brainy bunch."

**Roy, Lars**

The Norwegian was beginning to wonder whether he'd teamed up with the right person. Roy was short-tempered and bossy and just assumed he would be the team leader. Roy was the older and more experienced geocacher, but was so driven that he could be called obsessed. He had tried to get Lars to go out on that limb. He might do other foolish things if Lars didn't keep him in check or refuse to go along.

Lars enjoyed the sport, but in reality was little more than a casual geocacher. It had mainly become a business for him. He made his living now from his NeoGeo app. It paid his bills, but it wasn't making him rich and all his eggs were in this one basket. He wouldn't have accepted the invitation if it had not been all-expense paid and a chance to strengthen business ties with Sprague. Sprague could cut him off at the knees at any time by denying him access to the API, the application programming interface of the geocaching site. The others here could be influential in the geocaching community, too, especially after this movie or video Sprague was making came out. They might all become stars of a sort. He needed to stay on their good side, but he didn't really consider them his friends. He'd probably never see any of them again after this weekend.

In the end, for him, it was about the money. He hadn't expected the weekend would involve a "substantial cash prize" but every chance to make some money was a plus. He was glad he got the first at Rapunzel, but disappointed he and Roy hadn't gotten to Swagville first. Roy was out of shape and not fleet afoot. Lars felt he might have beaten Masa to it if he hadn't stuck with Roy. He was still puzzled how Masa had managed to beat them. He must have taken another route.

His thoughts were interrupted by Roy calling his name. "Over here. I got it!"

Lars had been searching the inland site for the Upon Reflection cache while Roy was at the shore. When Lars arrived there, Roy was holding what looked like a piece of mirror. Beth was standing nearby, drawn by Roy's discovery. The four of them had been together since leaving Precarious.

Roy handed the log to Lars, who promptly signed and inked his thumbprint. He handed it to Beth next and the two men began walking back to the lodge. Beth was still calling to Masa, who had been searching one of the other possible final locations, when Roy whispered to him, "I want to stop by Swagville again. It's on the way."

"Why? We've done that one. The puzzle is the only thing left."

"I noticed something. I was wondering why Cliff had Doily sign the log first at Precarious. Then I saw she was the first to find on this one. So she has a first and a second already. That's thirty-five points right there. If she has the first slot for their team on Swagville, that means they've been putting all their highest points onto her to ensure she gets one of the top prizes."

"Ja. That's pretty smart, actually. I hadn't thought of that. They can still split the prize. Okay, let's check that. We should do that, too."

“Yeah, we should. Look, you already have more points than me because of Rapunzel. You got the FTF there. So we should give you the first slot from now on, then split the prize if we win later. You agree?”

“Ja, sure. No problem.”

“Good, so here’s a plan. Your English is very good, but I’ll bet you’ve never done a cryptic crossword in English. Am I right?”

“That’s true. I’d never heard of a cryptic one before, but I can still help.”

“No, listen. I can work the crossword. I’ve done my share of those. But I probably won’t be able to beat Team Cliff. What I want you to do is watch Deborah. She’s not the puzzle expert, but she’s the one they’ve got to give the points to. Everybody’s going to be working this puzzle at the same time. I can almost guarantee Cliff’ll slip the coordinates to Deborah while everyone else is working and she’ll go off by herself. That’s what I’d do in his place. You can play dumb, like you’re the foreigner who’s not that good at English and just hang out with her. If she leaves, follow her.”

“How do I find her? They could be anywhere.”

“It’s almost lunch time. They still hadn’t done Rapunzel. They’ll have to do that and then probably go back to the lodge for lunch. I’m guessing everyone’s going to end up there. It’s easier to work with a table and chair and I know I saw a dictionary on the shelf. Without the Internet, that could come in handy.”

“Good idea. Very good.” Lars was sincere. Perhaps he had misjudged Roy. “I’m in.”

They arrived at Swagville, and as Roy had predicted, saw Deborah’s signature before Cliff’s and Lynne’s. They continued on to the lodge. Cliff, Deborah, and Tex were eating lunch and working on the puzzle, although Deborah seemed mainly to be drinking wine and watching Cliff who had a protective arm around his puzzle blocking Tex’s view. Roy tapped Lars on the arm and nodded toward the trio. Lars gave him a thumbs up.

They went into the kitchen and ladled some food onto their plates, not much noticing or caring what it was. When they joined the others at the main table everyone greeted them cordially. Cliff laid his arm across the top half of his puzzle as they walked behind him. Roy could see that the bottom half was still blank.

“Where’s Lynne?” Roy asked.

“Oh, you’ll be surprised when you find out,” Deborah said, giggling. Cliff gave her a cold stare. She’d had too much wine already. Roy, Lars, and Tex still didn’t know about the real log book at Rapunzel. He didn’t want them running out trying to beat Lynne there, and even if Lynne had already been successful, Deborah’s gloating wasn’t going to win them any friends. He’d rather they all found out from Signal or from Luke and Flo, the first place team there.

“She just went out for a sec,” Cliff said. “She’ll be right back.”

Lynne’s absence puzzled Roy and Lars. She was supposed to be the best puzzler in the group. She should be working on it. Maybe she was, perhaps hiding in her room while Cliff was sent down here as a red herring, so the others wouldn’t realize how close they were to a solution.

Lars sat next to Deborah. Maybe his masculine charms would work on her as well as it had on the bartender back in Anacortes. She'd been as great in bed as her body had announced.

"Hey good lookin'."

Cliff almost spit out the bite of sandwich he'd been chewing. This was going to be good. Lars had apparently not picked up on Deborah's orientation. Cliff turned his attention from the puzzle to listen to how Deborah played it. Lars would have a surprise in store for him no matter what.

Deborah giggled some more. "Is that still a line in Norway?"

Undeterred, Lars soldiered on. "Good looking women are a thing everywhere." He made intense eye contact with her.

Deborah raised her left hand to scratch her forehead, placing her ring finger right between her eyes. When he didn't react, she wiggled the finger to make her wedding ring more prominent.

"Okay, I see it. A married woman can still be good-looking. You can't blame me for trying."

"And she can also be faithful. You're cute, Lars. You should hit on Beth. She's single and I heard her on the boat ask Signal if the Swedish guy was married."

"I'm Norwegian, not Swedish." He made a stabbing motion with his hand to his chest, as though plunging a dagger into his heart at the unbearable insult.

"She's American. You're lucky she got the continent right."

"Well, can I sit next to you anyway? I'm no good at these English word puzzles. Maybe I can learn something."

"Sit anywhere you want."

Lars and Roy ate their lunch while Cliff and Tex worked on the puzzle, both taking care to shield their work like high school kids taking the SAT. After a few minutes, Beth, Flo, Masa, and Luke all drifted in. They were directed to the kitchen and soon emerged with plates full of gourmet food.

While they were making noise with their bustling and greetings, Cliff whispered to Deborah "Show him the picture of you and your wife."

"I don't do that. No point in hurting his male ego."

The newcomers arranged themselves around the table. Beth took the chair next to Lars. "I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. I was hoping you would." He smiled his best dimple-wielding smile. She practically melted before grinning back.

Roy finished his food and pulled out his crossword puzzle sheet. He stood, walked behind Cliff, and saw that Cliff still hadn't made it into the bottom half of the puzzle. He moved into the main room, a sort of living room, in a spot where he could still see into the dining room. He wanted privacy to work the puzzle. He still had a chance to beat Team Cliff.

Lynne came back in through the main entrance and walked directly to Cliff and Deborah. The three of them got up and walked into the living room and took a corner, the corner farthest

away from Roy. There was a small coffee table where the three of them could gather and work together. Roy watched Cliff put the sheet he'd been working on down on the table and turn it toward Lynne. She pointed to a couple of entries and nodded approval, speaking softly. Interesting. She didn't pull out another sheet. She had not been working on the puzzle. Where had she gone?

## **Signal**

Sprague entered the living room, camera in hand. He moved around the room filming them all. "Are we having fun yet?" he boomed.

"It's been a blast so far," Cliff said.

"Top notch caches, Signal," Roy said.

Lynne stuck a thumb up without looking up or saying a word.

"You've got a hell a wine cellar," Deborah said, raising her glass. "Hey, that rhymes." She started another giggling fit.

"I'm glad to hear it. This has been a blast for me, too. I'm going to be putting together a few video clips for this evening's entertainment. I expect everyone will have finished all five caches in plenty of time for dinner. See you all at six." He moved on to the dining room where a similar conversation took place.

## **Team Cliff**

"Twenty-four is modern," Lynne said quietly. "Mode plus R.N."

Cliff marked it in. "I'm having trouble with twenty across."

Lynne look at it. "I don't know it, but it starts with a T. Twenty down is tartar. Two old sailors, tartar sauce."

"Right."

"There are still a couple of entries on the top half I haven't gotten yet," Cliff said.

"I'll take a look."

"Hold on. I've been thinking about something. Fourteen across. I think that's the key to the whole thing. Maybe we don't need to complete the puzzle. Look at the title."

"That's the only fifteen letter word, er, phrase," she agreed. "And the clue says it's what you need to solve the puzzle. But I don't know. Not complete the crossword? I find that hard to swallow. How would you get coordinates?"

"You're from England. Here in the western U.S. coordinates are always fifteen digits. One digit per letter is the usual way these things go."

"How do you do it here? A equals 1, B equals 2? There are plenty of British puzzles like that."

"Usually."

"What about the other letters, x, y, z? Just take the last digit – four, five, six?"

“Normally, yes.”

“We don’t have that one solved yet. And not many letters.”

“That Q in fourth place from two down is a big help, though.”

“How’d you get that?” Deborah said, mildly interested now. “Iran Iraq? I never heard of them fighting. It says Qatar in the clue.”

“Oh, they fought all right. You’re too young to remember. For, I don’t know, maybe six or seven years in the 1980s they had a war. ‘Qatari ring lost top general.’ Top general is TG. Take Qatari ring and lose the T and G and you have an anagram of Iran-Iraq.”

Lynne brightened. “I see what you mean. There’s a Q in the clue for fourteen across, too. There’s probably an anagram in there. Hold on, I think fifteen down is housefly. That puts an H as the second letter. It’s three words with length three for the first word. It must start with the word ‘the’.”

Cliff completed the idea. “‘must need IQ thick’ has the right number of letters, and the Q and H.” He and Lynne began jotting down the letters of that phrase on the backs of their sheets.

“The quick mindset,” Cliff said first.

“Fifteen letters, but the second word is eight letters. ‘The quickset mind’ or ‘the quickest mind.’ That’s what makes sense. It fits with swaddles and teaspoon going down, too.”

“The quickest mind. That’s what you need to solve the puzzle.”

“Keep your voice down, you two,” Deborah said. “Roy’s listening.”

Cliff looked up. “I don’t think he can hear us,” he said, barely at a whisper.

“How do we get digits then?” Lynne asked. “T is the twentieth letter. The coordinates can’t start with a zero. Or a two.”

“They have to start four-eight. Four, fourteen, or twenty four – look for D, N or Y.”

“It ends with ND. But if those represent four-four you can’t get an eight next to either one.”

“It must be something else.”

“What about the hint?” Deborah said.

Cliff and Lynne both looked at her the way a Nobel-Prize-winning physicist might look at a freshman suggesting he’d made a math error. Then they look at the hint at the bottom of the cache page again. “Hint: Your initial idea is probably right.”

“Initials! Of course,” Lynne said quietly. “This is a cryptic crossword. Using initials to represent words or vice versa is SOP.”

Cliff had to stifle his excitement with Roy watching. “Stay calm, but I think I see it. The posted coordinates end 29.000 and 49.000. What if we’re just supposed to fill in the zeros like with the multi? We only need six digits. T-Q-M is 20-17-13. So 29.201 and 49.713.”

“Is that on the island?” Lynne asked.

“I think so. What’s the checksum?”

Lynne quickly computed it. “Fifty-five. It matches. That has to be it.”

“It would have to be on the southern end. Don’t reach for your Garmin. Roy will know we have coordinates if he sees that. Just keep working calmly. Deborah, did you get those

numbers? 201 and 713. Memorize them. No, I'll write them down." Cliff was worried that in her tipsy state she wouldn't remember them correctly. He jotted the full coordinates down on the back of the Swagville cache page and folded it quietly, shifting slightly so that Roy couldn't see what he was doing.

"Roy's fixated on his puzzle," Lynne declared. "I don't think he's paying any attention."

"Good. Deborah, take these and slip outside without attracting attention, if you can. Check out the coordinates in your GPS. If they're on the island go see if you can find the cache there. Wait! First check to see if they're within a tenth of a mile of another cache. Signal says all the caches are legal, so we can eliminate those if they're too close to one of the others." He slipped the paper over to Deborah. She put it in her jeans pocket. "Lynne and I will keep working here, keeping the others distracted."

Deborah stood and walked as softly as she could out into the main entrance. No one seemed to notice. She opened and closed the front door silently and slipped out. She stepped around the corner of the lodge and programmed in the coordinates Cliff had written down. The map showed they were right on the southern shoreline, and not too close to another cache. This was it. She started walking south along the eastern shore. She realized she was a bit unsteady on her feet and wished she hadn't had that third glass of wine. Still, it wouldn't matter, she figured. No one knew she was on her way to her second FTF of the day.

Roy was almost finished with the top half of the puzzle when a clatter caused him to look up. Everyone in the dining room was still working away at the puzzle. The noise had been Javier clearing away the dishes. He looked over at Cliff's corner. Damn! Where was Deborah? He hadn't heard her leave. He looked back at the dining room. Lars was still there! He had his hand on Beth's thigh and his fingers were doing a little dance on the inner side. She was wearing jeans, but he was sure that if she'd been wearing a skirt ...

He hurried into that room just as Signal showed up with his camera running. "Everybody enjoy the food?" Signal asked the room. Roy hesitated. He couldn't tell Lars to get his ass going in front of everybody and on camera.

"Javier's a genius."

"Super."

"The price is right."

"That's great. Let me get a shot of everyone together. If I can just get you all to put your puzzles down for a minute. Cliff, can you guys come in here, too, please."

Cliff and Lynne joined them.

"Great. Now everyone gather on that side so I can get a group shot." The geocachers gathered on the opposite side of the table from Sprague and formed the obligatory forced smiles. "We're missing someone. Where's Doily?"

Lars suddenly looked around and realized his error. He'd let his pecker get in the way of business and was going to hear no end to it. He looked at Roy and received a steely glare in return.



“She had to go to the loo,” Lynne said. “She went upstairs. I think she was going to take a short nap after that. She had a bit too much wine.”

“No matter. We’ll get another one with her later. Now gather together.”

Roy gnashed his teeth for the next thirty or forty seconds as Sprague took more shots. It seemed like an hour. As soon as they were free to go, Lars disappeared. Roy watched in disgust.

## **Tex Murphy**

Tex watched Lars take off, too, but with curiosity, not disgust. Lars had not been working on the puzzle. He and Beth were playing footsie or more. He couldn’t have the solution to the puzzle. For a second he thought maybe Lars just had to hit the head, but he’d gone toward the entrance.

Tex had made no headway on the puzzle. His mind just didn’t work that way. But he knew geocaching and was a real competitor. It took him a minute to put it together, but it did sink in. Lars was going after Deborah. Cliff and Lynne must have solved the puzzle and sent her. But why weren’t they going with her? It didn’t matter. He wasn’t going to solve the puzzle on his own, so he had to team up with someone who did or tag along after someone else. Many geocachers won’t log a find on a puzzle cache unless they’ve solved the puzzle themselves, or at least contributed to the solve in a joint effort. Others have no problem logging a puzzle as long as they can find it and get their name on the log sheet. The official rule favored the latter view and that had always been Tex’s.

He jumped up and headed out the front of the lodge. Where was Lars? The entrance faced north. There was the north shore trail he’d used to get to Precarious and another one more westerly that led into the woods, probably ending in the air strip. He couldn’t be sure, but he thought he’d be able to see Lars if he’d taken either one of those.

He ran around the western side of the lodge until he was standing on the southern patio. He scanned the entire area. A speck of movement in the distance caught his eye. It was Lars running full tilt along the south shore trail. He could tell from his gait that Lars was a good runner and was making good time.

Tex took off after Lars. Although powerfully built, Tex wasn’t particularly fast as a runner. Within two minutes, Lars was out of sight around an outcropping of forest. Tex continued a steady jog along the shore. Five minutes later he was around that outcropping and came to a halt. Lars had slowed to a walk and was only a hundred yards ahead of him. The reason for this was immediately apparent. Two hundred yards in front of Lars was Deborah. Both appeared to be unaware they were being followed.

The three of them continued along the shoreline in that fashion, separated by a short distance. A few minutes later Deborah stopped and looked at her GPS unit. She began moving around on the rocky beach in the telltale movements of a geocacher trying to get the unit to settle on an exact spot. Then she moved inland a few yards and looked down at the rocks and scrub vegetation.

Tex watched as Lars moved forward, closing the distance to about forty yards, and hid behind a tree. Tex closed the distance himself and moved up slowly and quietly. Lars was transfixed on Deborah and totally unaware of Tex.

With a sudden excited movement, Deborah started kicking a large rock on the beach, then dropped to her knees and tugged at the edge buried in the sand. The two men watched as she flipped over what turned out to be a hollow plastic replica of a stone, revealing a heavy-duty plastic container underneath, decorated in a crossword puzzle pattern.

Tex began running toward her. He passed Lars, who was taken by surprise. Lars, however, realized the game was on and took off himself. In short order he passed Tex. Deborah popped the lid off the geocache container. Then she heard the noise of the two men running and looked up.

Reaching the astonished Deborah, Lars snatched the sealed plastic baggie lying on the top of the cache contents. He could see the log book through the plastic.

“Hey! I found that.” But she was too late. Lars had already pressed his thumb into the first-place box, staking his position. He then pulled his pen from his pocket and signed as Tex arrived on the scene.

“Give it back to her,” Tex demanded, glowering at Lars.

“Gladly.” Lars handed the logbook to Deborah.

She looked helplessly at Tex then at Lars. She was seething, but there was nothing she could do but sign in the second box and then hand the book to Tex.

“That was a rotten thing to do, Lars. I found the cache. I’m going to make sure Signal knows what you did. He said to play fair. I bet he takes those points away from you.”

“You should have grabbed the log book, then. You know the rule. First to sign is first to find. It’s always been that way. You didn’t even solve the puzzle.” He started to jog back to the lodge, not wanting to see how Tex’s ire manifested itself.

“Neither did you,” Tex called after him. “None of us did.”

She began rummaging through the cache contents. There was some nice swag – a T-shirt with the geocaching logo, a fancy geocoin, a four-pack of official bison tubes, several other things. A note on the inside cover of the log book said to take one, no need to trade. She took the four-pack.

When Tex finished signing, he followed her lead. The T-shirt was too small for him. He took an interlocked pair of carabiners. You could never have too many carabiners.

The crowd showed up just as Deborah was putting the log book back in the baggie. It had become obvious to Cliff when he saw that Tex and Lars had left soon after Deborah had, that they were onto his plan. He had delayed long enough to make sure they didn’t all catch up with Deborah, then signaled to Lynne that it was time to go. Everyone else saw them rise and any subterfuge was hopeless. Cliff and Lynne were the only ones with the coordinates, of course, so they led the pack.

Deborah handed the baggie to Cliff, who promptly inked in his spot and handed it to Lynne. The rest of them waited their turn with only minor squabbles over who was next. Lars

waited a few dozen yards away. Once he saw the crowd arrive, he knew he had nothing to fear from Tex's wrath.

It took nearly half an hour for everyone to claim a prize from the cache, but finish they did with a sense of great accomplishment and an uneasy camaraderie. Deborah had told Lynne and Cliff about how Lars had stolen first place, leaving them with a bitter taste. Still, the first day had been slain. Everyone had signed on all five caches. The caching was over. Time to get back, get drunk, or get laid. Maybe all three.

The assembly made no attempt at haste on the return. Lars fell in with them. There was a lot of laughter and recounting of the group effort at Precarious. The cachers displayed their take of swag and trackables from the last cache and from Swagville. There was a feeling of buoyancy and good cheer. It was not to last.

## **Signal**

Javier had cleared the table of all the lunch debris as they all streamed in. Signal was standing on the back porch filming them as they traipsed the final hundred yards. He retreated to the head of the table where his laptop was sitting open and greeted the returning hoard.

"Welcome back. Good job, everyone. Only three-thirty. I had expected it would take longer. Especially at Precarious. Very impressive organization there. I suggest you all take advantage of the amenities of the island this afternoon. The weather is getting worse, I'm afraid, so tomorrow is likely to be wet and windy. There are kayaks down at the dock for those into that, and a horseshoe pit behind the lodge. And, of course, the open bar."

"What about our phones? Can we log now?" It was Beth who asked the question.

"Yes, Javier will return your phones to you so you can all write your logs and call home. The caches have all been published so you can find them online. Just be aware that you will have to turn the phones in again tonight. You have five more caches tomorrow."

"Where is he? Javier."

"The kitchen, preparing our dinner. Be here on time for that, everyone. I will have a recap of today's adventures for our entertainment."

Phone addiction seemed to predominate as the collective mass migrated toward the kitchen. Javier was there chopping vegetables. The array of pots and pans foretold an Italian dinner, spaghetti with marinara sauce, garlic bread, green salad and who knew what for dessert. Another pot evidenced a politically correct vegetarian sauce, some sort of creamy stuff with mushrooms.

Beth asked him where their phones were.

"Are you blind? Can't you see I'm busy?"

An awkward murmur rose from the others. Javier was obviously having a bad day.

"Whoa. Sorry. Don't take my head off."

"Can I help you, Javier? I'm quite handy in the kitchen." This remark came from Lynne.

"I can do it," he barked. "Come back in twenty minutes. You can get your phones then."

Most of the phone addicts filtered out and meandered to the open bar. Lars and Beth disappeared up the stairs.

Cliff spotted Luke and Flo in the main room where Cliff's team had worked on the puzzle. He approached them.

"Have you two told anyone about the two log books at Rapunzel?"

"No, why?"

"Everyone except you guys and our team signed the first log book, the one on Rapunzel's hair, and left. I don't think the rest know about the real book."

"They missed a good show," Luke said.

"I can't believe the work that went into that," Flo agreed.

"Well, I was hoping you wouldn't tell anyone else about it. It'll be more fun to see their faces when they find out. Congratulations on that FTF, by the way."

Luke responded. "Thanks. Sure, we'll keep a lid on it and watch the fun."

### **Cliff, Deborah, and Lynne**

Cliff returned to his teammates and told them that Luke and Flo had agreed to keep mum on the double log book at Rapunzel. They agreed to stay silent about it, too. So far as she could tell, Lynne thought no one had figured out that she had returned to that cache.

"So what are you guys going to do until dinner?" Deborah asked.

"I want to finish the puzzle," Lynne replied.

"Me too," Cliff added. "Then I'll get my phone and log my caches. How about you?"

"I want to explore the island a bit more while the weather's still halfway decent. It's getting stormy out there. We're pretty far north. It'll be dark soon, too, so we only have maybe an hour. I want to walk off the wine. I guess I did overdo it a tad there. Oh, look! The others have their phones. I guess Javier is handing them out. I'm going to grab mine and then check out the kayaks."

"You aren't going out alone are you?"

"No way. Don't worry. I just love watching the ocean. There was some fishing gear there, too. I may fish from the dock. I can log my caches later."

The trio headed for the kitchen to fetch their phones. As they had told Deborah, Cliff and Lynne sat down and finished the puzzle. Several of the other cachers watched over their shoulders as they filled in the remainder of the crossword grids. There were oohs and aahs or groans as they finally realized the meanings of the various clues. Others, like Roy, worked on the puzzle themselves.

When they finished, Cliff and Lynne retreated upstairs to their rooms. Cliff called Ellen, his wife.

"How's it going up there?"

"I'm having a blast. I think we're competitive. The caches have been really clever, and mostly pretty evil."

“Evil is good. I want to hear all about them, but I can’t right now. I’m at the zoo with the kids and it’s, well, literally a zoo. I have to keep an eye on them every second or Tommy’ll end up climbing into the crocodile pond or something.”

“Not good. It’s illegal to feed the animals.”

“Very funny. Gotta run. Call me tonight. Love you.” She rang off before he could return the sentiment.

He stepped out into the hallway. He decided to get outside and follow Deborah’s lead. There wasn’t much daylight left. Since his room was at the end of the hall, he passed several other rooms on the way to the stairs. As he did so, he thought he heard a woman’s voice say something. It sounded like “don’t” to him.

He paused in front of the nearest door for a few seconds and leaned his ear against it. This time he heard a clear “Knock it off” from the woman. He recognized the voice as Flo’s. He knocked on the door and said loudly, “Everything okay in there.”

“Cliff, come in,” Flo’s voice came back.

He opened the door and Flo was standing next to her bed. Sprague was near her, stepping back and turning toward Cliff.

“Cliff, good timing,” Sprague said. “I was just trying to convince Flo to do a one-on-one interview for my film, but she’s camera shy. Maybe you can talk her into it. You’re on my list too. You all are.”

As Cliff moved closer he could smell the alcohol on Sprague’s breath. It smelled like whiskey. He noticed the expensive video camera on the nearby chair.

“I don’t know. It sounded like she was too tired. Maybe you should do my interview now. I’m not busy.” Looking over Sprague’s shoulder, Cliff saw Flo mouth the words “thank you.”

“Fine idea. Let’s go downstairs. The lighting is better there.” He picked up the camera.

Cliff followed Sprague down to the first floor. Sprague turned to a hallway that bore a sign reading “Staff only.” They passed through a doorway and Cliff was surprised to see a sophisticated audio-visual setup. The room wasn’t large, but it was jam-packed with equipment. High on one wall was a large video screen with multiple video feeds multiplexed onto the screen. It was very similar to the security camera rooms he had been in when he was a corporate security manager briefly after his FBI retirement, but the video quality was much better. He immediately recognized the Rapunzel tower on one screen and the bridge at stage two of Upon Reflection on another. So there were hidden cameras at all the cache sites, he realized.

At the other end of the room was a green screen backdrop and LED light panels mounted on stands on either side. Sprague mounted his camera on the tripod centered in front of the screen. There was a stool directly in front of the screen. He turned on the LED panels. Despite their compact size they were surprisingly bright. He motioned for Cliff to sit on the stool. Cliff complied.

Sprague began filming immediately, did a sound check and then began talking.

“CliffNotes is probably a name known to some of you more senior geocachers. Cliff Knowles is a retired FBI agent who several years ago singlehandedly solved the case of the so-called Geocache Killer, thereby saving the sport and preventing the many park services from banning the sport altogether. Thanks for coming, Cliff.”

“It’s my pleasure, Signal. Thanks for inviting me.”

“Tell us how you got into geocaching.”

“Well, I had just retired from the FBI and I needed an activity. I tried working as a security manager at a company, but that didn’t really take. It was boring and stressful at the same time. So I quit that. I needed something fun to do. I suck at golf so that was out. I’d read about geocaching in a newspaper article and decided to give it a try. I was hooked immediately. I’ve been geocaching ever since.”

“You were an FBI agent for twenty-five years, is that right?”

“That’s right.”

“You must have some exciting stories to tell about that. Please share one or two with us, will you?”

“It’s not as exciting and glamorous as people think, although it had its moments. Unfortunately, I can’t really say much about my cases without first clearing it with the FBI.”

“I see. How about as a corporate security manager? Any good stories there?”

“Not really. I handled the guard force, the parking lots, badging, security clearances, contracting for technical services like the cameras you have here. I spent some time in a room just like this one now and then. Not as fancy as this one, though.”

“Like what you see?”

“Absolutely. You have a top-notch set-up. But it was still a boring job. I eventually started my own law office and got my private investigator license. That’s been my post-FBI career.”

“What was your favorite geocache? ... before you arrived here on this island, I mean.”

“That’s impossible to answer. There have been so many.” The questions and answers continued for another twenty minutes. Cliff dutifully responded, but got tired of it and finally told Sprague he needed to use the restroom and got up and left. Instead of going to the restroom he went upstairs to see Flo.

He knocked. “Flo, it’s me, Cliff.”

“Come in.”

He stepped inside. Luke rose from the chair when Cliff approached.

“Cliff, Flo told me what you did. Thanks for getting that jerk out of here.” He extended his hand.

Cliff shook it. “What did he do, Flo?”

Flo did not appear particularly upset, giving off more of a disgusted vibe than anything else. “He knocked and I invited him in. I could tell he’d been drinking. He told me he wanted to do a one-on-one interview with me for the movie thing. I told him okay, but then he pulled out this tiny tank top he wanted me to wear. He said it was going to be like Survivor or The Amazing

Race where they have the sexiest contestants bulging out of their outfits to get people excited. I told him no. I don't know why he chose me. Beth is the babe here, not me."

She paused for a moment. Cliff stood awkwardly for a second wondering whether and how to respond. Flo was in fact not the kind of babe material those reality shows paraded around, although she was perfectly respectable looking with striking dark eyes. Fortunately, she resumed speaking.

"Maybe he's approached her, too. Anyway, he came over to me and actually told me he could 'help me change.' He grabbed my shirt and was trying to unbutton it. I yelled and pushed him away. That's when you knocked. I don't know where it would have gone if you hadn't shown up."

"That sounds pretty creepy. I'm sorry you had to go through that. I could smell the whiskey, too. Let's hope he cleans himself up. For what it's worth, he did take me down to his video room and do an interview. He's got a pretty professional-looking setup down there. We did sign that agreement. You may have to do one, but he can't make you wear anything you're uncomfortable with."

"No worries, mate. I'm going to stick right with her from now on," Luke said. "I was in my room logging my caches when she texted me to come over. That was right after you left. I don't know what he was thinking. Geocaching is a family-friendly, wholesome sport. If he tries to promote it with ladies' cleavage and bums, that's a big mistake."

"Now Tex in a tank top would be worth it," Flo said. "Or even Lars." The men didn't crack a smile until she added, "Lighten up, guys. I'm fine. Really. It's kind of funny when you think about it."

"Okay, if you say so," Luke said, "but I'm staying with you."

"Good idea," Cliff said. "It looks like everything is fine. I'll leave you to it, then."

Cliff left and headed downstairs. He saw Tex emerging from the video room hallway as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Did you just have a video interview in there?"

"Yeah. You too?"

"How was he? Drunk?"

"A little, I think, but not too bad. Why, what happened?"

Cliff gave him a short version of what happened with Flo.

"That's not good. He did ask me to remove my sweatshirt, and just wear my T-shirt, but I didn't think anything of it. It's not underwear, just a University of Texas Longhorns tee. All the women seem to have found a team with a man on it. That should help. I'll keep an eye out for any funny business, too."

"Thanks. Luke seems to have stepped in to keep Flo safe. They're inseparable now. It's probably just the liquor."

"All right. When I left, Beth and Lars were supposed to be next. She should be okay with him there. I'll hang around and make sure Lars goes in with her."

"Do that. I'm heading out while the weather holds."

Cliff proceeded out toward the dock area to see how Deborah was doing. Sunset was still over an hour away, but the sun was already behind heavy clouds and would soon be blocked even more by the mountains on Vancouver Island to their west. It looked like dusk. The wind was picking up. He was wearing a fleece-lined shirt-jacket. He buttoned the top button.

When he arrived at the dock, Deborah was there and so was Lynne. “Our team leader,” Lynne announced. “Join us.” Deborah was sitting in a deck chair with a fishing line in the water.

“Catch anything?”

“No, but I don’t have a fishing license anyway.”

“It’s probably illegal to have your line in the water, then.”

“Oh, is the fed going to arrest me?” She extended her wrists as though to have cuffs applied, still holding the fishing rod.

“These are international waters. The feds probably have jurisdiction. Fortunately for you, my powers of arrest have expired.”

Cliff told them about the incident with Flo. “Well, maybe he’s a creep,” Lynne said. “But it sounds like you menfolk will protect us poor helpless damsels.”

“I just wanted to give you a heads up. I suggest staying near someone else when he’s around.”

“I’m almost old enough to be his mother. I think I’m safe from his predations.”

“Okay then. I’m going to take a walk around to enjoy the view. I was too focused on the hunt earlier to really appreciate it. It is gorgeous here.”

“Okay. See ya tonight.”

## **Signal, Javier**

Sprague looked over the spread. Sliced salami and an assortment of cheeses, chips, and dip. Next to those were sliced vegetables – bell peppers, carrots, cauliflower, button mushrooms. On the sideboard were enormous shrimp with spicy cocktail sauce and a bowl of roasted cashews. All adequate, he supposed.

At the bar he examined the wines and liquor set out. That’s when it hit him. Inexcusable! He charged into the kitchen. Javier was there slicing the sourdough bread with a bread knife.

“Javier! What the hell’s the matter with you? I told you Clos des Papes 2015 and the Château Canon-La Gaffelière 2014. You reversed them. The Clos de Papes is the 2014 and the Canon 2015.” His voice was slurred and his cheeks flushed.

“Mr. Sprague, I packed exactly what you wrote on the list. I can show it to you.”

“Don’t lie to me, Javier. Another screw-up like this and you’ll be looking for another job as soon as we’re done with this weekend. And don’t expect a recommendation.”

Javier stood immobile, knife in hand, for several seconds before speaking. Then he raised the blade, eight inches of gleaming stainless steel, so the tip almost touched Sprague’s Adam’s apple. “Be careful ...*sir*.” He spit out the last word with a vicious bitterness. “The knives around here are dangerous. I’ve done everything exactly as you ordered.”



Sprague blanched and backed away. Spluttering, he replied “You be careful. Your mother and sister are both illegal. ICE will love to hear about them, I’m sure.” He turned and fled the kitchen, bumping into Lynne as he did so. She’d been passing outside the door when she’d heard Sprague’s voice and had stopped to listen.

Sprague pushed passed her without saying a word. “My lord, Javier, what brought that on?” She stepped in front of Javier in the hopes that would deter him from going after Sprague with the knife. He stood silently for a moment and lowered the knife.

“He said I reversed the vintages on the wines, but I packed exactly what he told me to pack.”

“For that he was going to fire you? And threatened to report your family? Surely he wouldn’t. I think he’ll come to his senses when he sobers up.”

“He can be a mean SOB, I tell you. But he’s ‘fired’ me before when he’s had too much to drink and then forgotten about it. He probably won’t remember this.”

“Javier, I saw you lift the knife to his throat. You have to be careful about doing things like that. I know he provoked you, but you don’t want to do anything violent.”

“Don’t worry about me. I can handle him. Now get out of the kitchen. I have work to do.”

“All right, but just remember what I said. Stay calm and I’m sure everything will work itself out. It smells delicious, by the way.”

She walked out into the dining room where the other geocachers were filling small plates with the hors d’oeuvres or pouring drinks. Sprague was nowhere to be seen. She found Cliff digging in the ice chest for a beer. She explained what she had just seen and heard.

Cliff’s reaction was one of increasing concern. He led her over to Roy, who was talking with Masa and Luke. “Lynne, tell them what you told me.”

She repeated the story.

“I was just telling them what he did with Flo earlier,” Luke said. “He’s got a serious drinking problem. Is he drunk now?”

“I’m pretty sure, yes,” Lynne answered. “I could smell liquor as he walked by.”

“We’ll all just have to keep an eye on him,” Roy added. “We need to let everyone know.”

Some of the geocachers had taken their plates and drinks into the other room. The team leaders called everyone together in the dining room and summarized what had happened.

“What about Javier?” Lars asked. “He’s the one with the knife. I mean, Signal may be a bad boss, but it’s not illegal to fire an employee, at least I don’t think so. I don’t know the law in this country. But I know you can’t stab someone even if he did threaten to fire you or even turn in your family to the police.”

“He didn’t stab anyone,” Lynne protested. “He just pointed the knife at him.”

“I thought you said he put the knife to his throat.”

“Well, yes, sort of. Okay, I guess he did but he was provoked.”

“All right, all right,” Cliff said. “There’s no point in arguing about who’s right or wrong. Let’s try to keep Signal away from the booze and separated from Javier and any one-on-one with the women.”

This sentiment seemed to be the consensus of the group. They soon left the topic and began talking about the caches. It had been a great day up until this incident and no one wanted to let that be lost. The wine, whether or not the right vintage, was met with hearty approval.

After forty or so minutes, Siggнал appeared and announced that everybody should take their seats. Dinner would be served momentarily. The guests took chairs and sat. Soon Javier was bringing out huge salad bowls, followed by a large tureen of minestrone. Siggнал seemed in good cheer. There was no sign of the altercation from before. The spaghetti and garlic bread came next, along with plenty of red wine. The dinner proceeded smoothly for over an hour. After the gelato and coffee were served, Siggнал got down to business. He brought out a laptop and a projector which he positioned on the table before him. It took him a moment to connect them.

“Everyone did great today. All ten of you found all five caches. This is exactly what I was hoping for. I will be putting up a leaderboard shortly, but first I wanted to show you some clips from the videos I’ve been collecting.”

The room darkened. Sprague pushed a button and a large screen descended behind him. He pressed a key on the laptop and the screen lit up.

“I’m sorry this is a bit crudely put together. I didn’t have time to do much, so it’s mostly just a bunch of raw clips.”

A video of the cache site of Precarious suddenly flashed on the screen. A murmur went through the geocachers. Most of them had been in the video room for interviews so they now knew that there were cameras on at least some of the cache sites. Within seconds Tex appeared in the video. His exploit climbing the rope and scooting out over the cliff edge to get the cache brought oohs and aahs of admiration from the others. This was followed by a short clip of the others at that same location as the hook tool went shooting into the sea.

“The group retrieved this exactly the way I intended. I should have put a better hint indicating there was a tool and how to use it. Instead, Tex risked his life going out on a limb, literally, and the rest of you lost the tool. I realize now that it is too dangerous, so I have already archived this cache. I don’t have a way to make another tool right away and I don’t want future geocachers climbing out on that limb. Still, I have to admire the pluck and ingenuity you all showed.”

There were nods of agreement around the table. There were several other clips of the geocachers’ exploits, mostly ones of failures, such as people slipping on wet grass or getting a branch snapped in the face. These all brought laughter or good natured gibes. These kinds of foibles were all part of geocaching and a shared experience they could all enjoy. There were groans all around at a shot of Roy lying prone on the bridge at stage two of Upon Reflection, trying to get a good view with his mirror. There was audio with it and Roy was cursing a blue streak. Roy looked embarrassed at the language now that it was public. Several others squirmed uncomfortably. Until this moment, no one had any idea their conversations were being recorded at the caches.

The video next showed Tex posing for his interview in the video room. In the background was a beach scene. As Tex took off his heavy sweatshirt, exposing his tee shirt and rippling

muscles, movement in the background scene revealed that there were other men, nearly all wearing thong bathing suits, some holding hands. It quickly became apparent it was a gay beach and it appeared one man was admiring Tex's rear. The geocachers stole uneasy glances at Tex and Sprague. Sprague was chuckling.

It took Tex a second or two longer than the others to notice the background because he was concentrating on his own on-screen appearance. The sounds from around him brought the scene into focus for him. "Hey, wait a minute. That was a green screen. I'm not gay ... I mean, not that it's bad ... I ... that's not funny ..."

Before he could continue or Sprague could reply, the scene changed. It was Cliff on the screen. The shot was tight on his face so that it was impossible to tell what the background was. Sprague's voice came from the speaker, "*Tell us what you did in the FBI, Cliff.*"

"*I spent some time in a room just like this one now and then,*" was the reply.

The camera then pulled back and revealed a strip club in the background. A pole dancer wearing nothing but pasties and a G-string gyrated in the distance just over his left shoulder. Most of the men averted their eyes in embarrassment. Roy and Sprague were the only exceptions, both laughing heartily.

"*Like what you see?*"

"*Absolutely.*"

Two of the women started to speak, but Cliff cut them off.

"Now wait a minute! That's just wrong. That's over the line. You can't put this in ..." but he didn't get a chance to finish either. The camera panned right and zoomed in on the dancer. She had huge, no doubt surgically enhanced, breasts and lurid tattoos on her midsection, but it was the face that brought gasps. Sprague had edited Beth's face onto the dancer's body. It was a crude editing job, obviously not really Beth doing the dancing.

Beth covered her face with her hands and softly cried, "no, no, no."

A shriek emanated from Flo and a cacophony of objections and curses arose around the table. Lars jumped up from his chair and rushed over to the end of the table where Sprague sat. He ripped the laptop from the projector and threw it to the floor. The projection screen went blank. Tex, yelled "Stop it, Sprague," as he stepped around Lars and picked Sprague up like he was a toddler and shoved him against the wall. Sprague sputtered protests, but they were silenced as his head smacked against the wall hard. Cliff had stood to intervene, too, but he'd been at the far end of the table and had sat down again when he saw the other two men manhandle Sprague.

Tex let him go and things settled down a bit once the offending images were gone. Sprague was angry. He took his seat again and took a big swallow of wine. It was obvious by now that he was still drunk.

"I guess no one here has a sense of humor," he spat. "I thought you'd get a kick out of it. Of course that footage was just for us here. I won't put that into my movie. Lighten up, everyone." Another big swallow drained the glass.

The others were still voicing their opinions on the tastelessness of the video, telling him that he had crossed a line, but he shouted everyone down. "Yeah, yeah, I get it. You're all a

bunch of blue-nosed prigs. Screw you. Maybe you'll like it better when I tell you what the big cash prize is. A hundred thousand. That's right, a hundred grand cold cash. I was going to wait until tomorrow's wrap-up dinner to tell you, but if you're going to turn on me ..."

"You're saying the 'substantial cash prize is one hundred thousand dollars?'" Roy asked, incredulous.

"That's right. You all have your phones. Go ahead and video me if you like. I've pledged a one hundred thousand dollar grand prize to the winner of this two-day competition."

Several geocachers pulled out their phones and did exactly as he suggested. He repeated it on camera yet one more time. A deathly silence filled the room.

"I thought that would shut you all up. So maybe I should put up the leaderboard now. *If anyone is interested, that is.*" The last sentence was spoken with dripping sarcasm.

"Okay, okay, everyone," Roy said, standing. "Maybe we all overreacted. Let's give the man a chance here. We are his guests." While this didn't mollify anyone, it was met with grumbling acquiescence.

Cliff turned to Deborah, who was sitting next to him, and whispered, "Roy's salivating like a Pavlov dog. This is not good. That prize is going to turn this into something cutthroat. No more fun." Deborah nodded her acknowledgment, but her eyes were fixed on Sprague.

Sprague reassembled the laptop and projector. The computer wasn't damaged, so the screen lit up again as before. Sprague brought up a spreadsheet.

Cacher	Swag- ville	Rapun- zel	Upon Reflec- tion	Pre- carious	15 Letters	Total
Florican	5	15	1	2	3	26
TexMurphy	6	3	7	20	8	44
CliffNotes	1	7	8	7	7	30
Roy_All_T	8	4	5	4	5	26
Brannfugl	7	5	6	3	20	41
Lynne14	2	6	15	8	6	37
Bethtie	15	2	3	6	2	28
Doily	3	8	20	15	15	61
Gemsbuck	4	20	2	1	1	28
Mossbug	20	1	4	5	4	34

"Doily is our leader for day one," Signal announced calmly. "Congratulations, Deborah."

"Hey, wait a minute," Lars blurted out immediately. "That's not right. I was FTF on Rapunzel. The log book was blank when I signed it."

"The overflow log book, yes. But you didn't follow the directions to have patience. If you had waited, like Luke's team and Cliff's team, you would have seen the full show and gotten access to the primary log book. I have that book right here." He lifted the Rapunzel book that

Cliff and his team had signed and opened it to show Luke's name in the FTF box. "I have removed it from the cache now. Future cachers will have to sign the overflow book."

Lars began to sputter, but then thought better of it. His fate was in Siggнал's hands. Then he realized that his exploit at 15 Letters of snatching the log from under Doily's nose must have been on camera. Was he punished for that? He looked at the spreadsheet and saw that he had gotten the 20 points. He bit his tongue.

"That's BS!" Roy exclaimed, pointing an accusatory finger at Sprague. "There was no instruction about two log books."

"The instruction was to have patience. You didn't."

Cliff whispered to Deborah, "I had thought it was going to be funny when Roy and Lars found out about Rapunzel, but the big money changed everything. Look at Roy. He's apoplectic."

"Siggнал just put a bull's-eye on my back," she whispered back.

Flo, who was sitting on the opposite side of Cliff, leaned over. "Deborah, you're going to have plenty of company tomorrow, I'll wager."

Deborah looked around the table and saw everyone looking at her. She grinned sheepishly and said nothing but she knew Flo was right. Now everyone had figured out their team strategy of putting her in front.

"Way to go, Deborah!" Beth exclaimed, breaking the tension.

"Oh, well, thanks. It's all due to Cliff and Lynne, I'm sure," she mumbled.

A smattering of applause rounded the table, followed by team members murmuring with each other.

"Well, then, I guess I'll leave you all to prepare for tomorrow's adventure. Be sure to leave your Garmins on the table so I can load tomorrow's waypoints in."

With that Sprague rose and walked unsteadily out of the room. As he left, he barked an order at Javier to clean up.

A few of the other geocachers came by to congratulate Deborah and her team for the first-place rank. There was some chitchat about Siggнал being a jerk and having a drinking problem, but soon the assembly dissolved into separate rooms where the teams could confer about the next day's strategy.

## **Day 3**

### **Signal**

“That was quite some rain last night, wasn’t it?” Sprague asked when everyone had assembled around the table, GPS units laid out as before. He made no mention of the previous evening’s unpleasantness. There were no signs of a hangover. “I’m afraid the nasty weather will continue through the day, but it has moderated a bit this morning. Be careful out there. These caches have high difficulty and terrain ratings in some cases. Remember, it’s only a game. If conditions get too bad, just come on back. You don’t have to finish all five caches.”

Roy whispered to Lars, “Only a game, my ass. With a hundred grand on the line? Gimme a break.” Lars returned a grim nod of agreement.

“Since you have all chosen up teams, I’ve decided to do things a bit different today. You’ll notice that there are five GPS units that are different from the others. They each have a piece of paper under them. Each paper has one cache description. It’s different for each one. Each team leader will choose one of those five units. The coordinates for that one cache will be loaded in that unit. You can’t look at the description before choosing. All the other units have no waypoints in them, so the team leader will give the other team members the coordinates. Every cache has the full descriptions of all five caches, so once you find your first cache you can program in the other waypoints. Go ahead, team leaders, take your place in front of one of those five units, but don’t turn the paper over until I give the instruction.”

The team leaders shuffled around a bit for a few moments, but the choice was essentially random. Beth went immediately for the closest one. Roy, thinking the best would be placed the farthest away, moved around to the far end of the table. Luke and Tex each picked a spot, leaving Cliff with only one choice at the end. The other geocachers stood in front of one of the remaining empty GPS units.

“All right, everyone, turn your papers over.”

### **Roy, Lars, Masa, Beth**

When Roy turned his paper over, his heart sank. It was a night cache called Starry Decisis. He showed it to Lars. The sink of his shoulders told Roy that Lars understood. They wouldn’t be able to look for the cache until after dark that evening.

“I have a plan,” Roy whispered. He moved over to Beth. Masa was busy programming their coordinates into his unit. Masa immediately turned the sheet of paper so Roy couldn’t see it. “I’m not here to steal your coordinates. I want to make a deal. Let’s go in the other room.”

Roy, Masa and Beth moved to the kitchen. Lars stood in the doorway to keep others from joining them and to keep an eye on Cliff’s team. Roy went on, “Look, we all know that Cliff’s

team is going to try to give Deborah the most points they can to keep her in first. She's way ahead. Our only chance for the money is to have someone tail her and sign the logs before she does. Lars was able to do that yesterday. He snatched the log book from right under her nose. Siggнал still gave him full credit for the FTF. Lars is going to follow her today since he's the high scorer on our team and try to do it again. Masa, you're the high scorer on your team. Why don't you go with them for the first cache, too. If you or Lars find the cache first, or can grab it before Deborah, you sign first and give it to Lars, and vice versa. With any luck you can get first and second and push Deborah down to third. In the meantime, Beth and I can share our cache information and choose which of our two caches to go for first. After we've found that, we'll have all five cache descriptions. We'll meet at a pre-arranged place."

Masa thought about this for a few seconds and looked at Beth. She shrugged and said to Roy, "Our cache is near the southern end of the island, a long way from here. Where's yours?"

"Not far from here. Less than three hundred feet."

The possibility of spending part of the day with Lars was a strong motivator for Beth, but she tried to think purely in tactical terms. "Masa, I think we'll be better off doing a close one first and getting all five cache descriptions so we can then do them in the most efficient manner. You could go with Cliff's team to try to beat Deborah. I don't have a chance with my score."

"We talked about this last night. It doesn't make sense for me to follow Deborah. My chance of getting first with those three and Lars all there is not good. If the purpose is to try to give Deborah a lower score, you can do that just as easily as I could by finding the cache first."

"You're right. We have this backward. It makes more sense for you to go with Roy. You have a better chance there for a first than trying to edge out three people on Cliff's team plus Lars. I can go with Lars. You can do the close one first and if we get it fast, you can go on to ours and then go on to the meeting place."

Roy answered, "Okay, that'll work. I won't take the first slot if I find it since my points are too low anyway. Masa can have it. Let's say we'll meet at the cache with the southernmost latitude other than the one in your GPS, whatever that turns out to be. That way you can do that cache and then the one you have now. Look! Lars is signaling. Cliff's team is in the hallway. I think they're getting ready to leave. Decide now. The train's leaving the station."

Lars was signaling frantically now. Cliff's team had already left the building.

Beth said "Okay, agreed. I need to go." Beth took off running. She caught up with Lars and they both hurried after Cliff's team. Masa and Roy exchanged the papers with the cache descriptions.

When Masa read the cache description on Roy's sheet, he knew they'd been had. Roy's cache was nearby, but it was a night cache. The description made clear that it could only be found by following the trail of tiny camouflaged reflectors on the trees from the starting point using a flashlight. Roy was just finagling to get another set of coordinates. It was too late to do anything about it now, though. Beth was gone.

"That was unfair of you, Roy. Your cache is worthless until tonight. You didn't tell us it was a night cache."

“You didn’t ask. Look, it’s still a good deal for both our teams. Let’s just go do your cache and then we’ll have the full list and meet Beth at the next one. I’ll let you sign first when we find this one like I said.”

Masa shrugged. “I guess we might as well get started.”

“Hold on, I need to program your information into my unit. ‘Balboarama’. What does that mean, anyway? There’s almost no description.”

“I guess we’ll find out when we get there.”

They knew a fast start was critical. They departed through the kitchen exit and headed south. No one else was in sight. There was a light rain and steady breeze, but they both had outdoor gear and good hats. They hiked at a brisk pace for twenty minutes along the shore path, but then had to turn inland and bushwhack through the heavy forest. It was slow going for another fifteen minutes, but they finally arrived at ground zero. For the second time this morning, Roy’s heart sank.

The cache site turned out to be an immense rock field. It was a hollow surrounded by very tall trees. In the center was a treeless area shaped more or less like a croissant. It was covered with rocks, hundreds of rocks, maybe thousands. It was over fifty yards across the long direction and thirty the other way. The rocks were different sizes and shapes, ranging from pebbles to boulders. They were difficult to walk or climb on, too. The GPS units were pointing to somewhere near the center of the field.

“What’s the hint say?” Roy asked.

“‘Under a rock’.”

“That’s real helpful.”

“Pure evil. I hate rock field hides.”

“Our only hope is that the coordinates are accurate. We’re just going to have to make our way in. Be careful not to twist an ankle.”

They slowly clambered over the stones. As they neared the zero point, though, Masa veered left while Roy went right.

“Where’re you going?”

“My unit says it’s this way.”

“Mine says over here. Wait, now it’s pointing back behind us.”

Roy cursed and shook his head. “The trees and hills here are killing the satellite signal. My unit is jumping all over the place. It was evil enough just putting it in the middle of this field, but he had to choose a spot with bad reception.”

“Whining does no good. Start searching. It’s a micro, so it could be under something pretty small.” He began to overturn the smaller rocks. Roy did the same where he was. Seconds later, they both moved again to where their GPS units pointed them and began again.

“This isn’t going to work,” Roy said after a few minutes. “We’re going to have to devise a system, a pattern of searching. Let’s mark off the perimeter of where our units say it could be and then do a grid search.”



Soon they had a rectangular area marked with sticks. Masa began searching from west to east while Roy began on the eastern edge and moved westward.

## **Tex**

Tex was tempted to follow Cliff's team. He wasn't far behind Deborah and if he could find whatever they were going for first, he could move into first place. But he could see Lars and Beth going after them and he realized it would be a free-for-all once someone spotted the cache. He didn't want to get into a fight and realized his chances of getting a first to find was better on the cache that he alone had in his unit. Not only that, it looked like a physical challenge with a level five terrain cache requiring kayaking. It was also an EarthCache, a special type, and he had never been first to find on one of those. EarthCaches feature a geological location with unique or educational features. They must be approved by the Geological Society of America in addition to the usual geocaching reviewer. His individualistic nature took precedence over everything else. He set off for his cache, which bore the name Petri.

According to the cache description the cache was located on the northern shore of the island below an overhanging cliff. It could only be reached by kayak or small boat and only at low tide. Signal had conveniently provided a tide table for the day as part of the cache description. If he left right away, he should be there about the right time.

The instructions said to go to the harbor, choose a sea kayak and paddle north, counterclockwise around the island. He tucked the paper in his pocket and hurried down to the harbor. There were life vests hanging on a rack. He put one on. In other circumstances he would have done a lot more preparation. He would never have gone out alone in open water, especially in unfamiliar waters in bad weather, but what the hell. You only live once. He'd done more dangerous things.

It wasn't a big island, and the current was with him. He made it to the cache site in fifteen minutes. The instructions said there was a small size cache anchored to a rock there. He spotted it even before he landed on the beach. He pulled his kayak up out of the water and stepped over to the heavy-duty plastic container. It was a "dry box" of the type scuba divers use. He'd seen them before; he'd even used them. It held nothing but a small log book, and the promised papers with the cache descriptions of all five caches. He inked his thumb, pressed it in the box in the log book next to the "FTF," and signed. He took one of the sheets with the cache descriptions. Ocean conditions didn't look too bad, so he took the time to program all the coordinates into his GPS unit. Then he replaced the cache, making sure it was watertight. Lastly, he had to satisfy the Earthcache condition. EarthCaches usually require an extra step beyond signing the log. The finder often has to answer some questions about the geology of the site when he logs online. In this case, though, the condition was to bring back a piece of petrified wood. The beach was littered with them, but there were ten small pieces lined up on a rock above the high tide line, just within his reach. He picked one up and examined it. It had a "III" scratched into it. He checked another. It had an "IX." Roman numerals. They could be made using straight lines and

didn't require ink or a marker that would erode away. He found the one marked "I" and zipped it into his parka pocket.

He pulled his kayak out into the water and climbed in. He was soaked by this time since there was no dock at this end and he'd had to wade through the ocean to pull his kayak up onto the shore. It was raining, too, and beginning to come down harder. He'd worked up a sweat, then cooled down while he was signing the cache. Now he realized he was chilled, and the temperature was dropping, too. He began to paddle vigorously to get warmed up and to fight the current back to the harbor.

Ten minutes later he realized he was only a hundred yards from the cache site and getting tired. The wind, now a stiff breeze, had changed direction and was coming at him almost head-on. There was no way he was going to make it back to the harbor. He couldn't go back to the cache site, either, because he'd be trapped under the overhang, underwater, when the tide rose. He began to look for a place to bring the kayak into shore. He saw some trees on a steep downslope growing right down to the waterline only fifty yards ahead. There was no beach, but it looked like he could get the kayak in between some rocks there and wade ashore. He'd have to abandon the kayak, but he didn't care about that. He was in survival mode.

By the time he'd maneuvered the kayak in close enough to shore he was totally spent. He poked his paddle straight down to test the depth of the water. It was about four feet, up to his armpits, at the crest of the waves. He struggled out of the kayak and grasped a large rock that was partially submerged. Immediately the winds and current whipped the kayak away. If he lost his grip he'd be following it. He watched as the trusty craft disappeared northward, perhaps to land on another island, or be lost in the Pacific.

He waited for the low water between wave crests and lunged toward shore, which consisted of yet another rock, but one higher up the slope. He managed to grab hold of it in time for the next wave crest to hit so he wasn't swept out to sea. He repeated the process once more and was high enough up so that the waves didn't reach him, even at the crest. His arms were like rubber now, but his legs still had strength in them. He had to climb. He didn't know how much higher the tide would get, but since he'd arrived at low tide, he knew it was going to reach his current spot at some point.

He made his way to the nearest tree, more of a bush, really, the roots of which descended almost into the ocean. He didn't know what kind it was, but to him it was salvation. He grasped the trunk and pulled himself up as he used his legs on the rocks for thrust. He was going to have bruises on his shins, ankles, and knees, but he was safe now. He managed to stand despite the precipitous angle and looked up. It wasn't far to the top of the slope, but it was steep and he'd have to bushwhack through the scrub trees while being pelted by the rain and wind. He stood collecting his energy for a few minutes and then began to climb. When he reached the top he could see the shore trail, the same one he'd used yesterday to get to Precarious. The rain was pouring now, but he was beyond caring. He pulled his parka tight, pulled his hat low, and lay down in the middle of the trail to rest.

Ten minutes and two protein bars later he sat up. He was still very tired, but he knew he could walk. His legs weren't that depleted. He read through the cache descriptions. He'd originally planned to kayak back to the harbor, of course, but now he was on shore and the craft was long gone. He might as well head for the nearest cache. That turned out to be Speleocache. The description said it was a cave cache. He'd done his share of those. He checked his flashlight, which, fortunately, was a waterproof model. It was still working. Okay, then, time to get moving. He set off.

When he arrived at the cave opening Luke was standing there shining his flashlight into the interior.

"Tex. Hi. You on your second cache already?"

"Yeah, I just did my first. Is this your first of the day?"

"It is. Flo is inside. It must be quite a ways back. She's been in there for over ten minutes."

"Why didn't you go in with her?"

"Take a look for yourself."

Tex stepped forward and peered into the cave opening. It was about three feet high and four feet wide. He crawled in a few feet and then saw what Luke meant. The entrance was more of a tunnel than a cave. It sloped downward for about ten yards, then it narrowed to a vertical crack only about eighteen inches across and two feet high. There was no way he could get through that. Apparently, Luke felt the same way. He was surprised Flo made it. Her hips must have been a challenge. He shone his flashlight through the crack and could see that the floor continued to slope down another hundred feet or so and the passage turned a corner. He couldn't see anything beyond that.

He crawled back out and reread the cache description. That opening was the only narrow point according to the paper. If you could make it past that, you could make it easily the rest of the way, it said. However, it required navigating in pitch-black tunnels. The description said the way was marked with fluorescent arrows, but it would still be a scary challenge.

"Move back. I need to call to her again."

Tex stepped away from the entrance.

"Flo, you okay in there?"

A faint voice replied, "Another minute. I'm almost back."

"Thank God. I was getting worried."

Tex contemplated the situation. If the cache was put back in the cave there was no way he could get it on his own. He was lucky to arrive when others were already here. He had to make a deal or wait for the next finder and hope they'd deal. Otherwise he'd have to skip the cache and move on.

"You haven't seen the list of other caches yet, then?"

Luke looked at him with interest. "No, but Flo'll bring it out in a minute."

"Look. I just did Petri. It's a kayak cache, only the sea's too rough to get it now. I barely made it back onto shore. There's no way you can get it if this storm continues. Signal isn't

going to be able to get to it in order to check who signed it, either; not until tomorrow or the next day anyway. I didn't see any camera there, and I looked for one. Hold on. Let's move away from the entrance."

Tex wanted to get out of camera range. He led Luke into a nearby stand of trees.

"So, here's the deal. There are some petrified wood pieces there marked one through ten in Roman Numerals." He pulled out his wood piece to show Luke. "See the mark? If you let me sign this cache after you, I'll give you half my piece. You can scratch a 'II' into it. That's your proof of being STF on Petri and you don't even have to sign it. There's no way he can check before the winner is announced."

"Hell, Tex, I'd let you sign it after us anyway. You couldn't make it through that opening if I can't. I don't want to win anything by cheating. Honestly, I don't need the money. A hundred grand would just be another tax headache for me. My points are too low to win anyway. You've got a shot, though."

"Come on, a hundred grand? What about Flo?"

Luke thought about this. He'd only known her for two days, but he sensed she wasn't in a good financial situation. As he was deciding, he heard her call to him.

"Hey, where are you?"

"I'm here, Flo, just talking to Tex." He hurried over to the cave opening. Flo was on the other side of the narrow slit, holding the geocache.

"Tex is here?"

"Right."

"Okay, I've already signed the log book as FTF. I'm going to hand it out to you. Be sure to hand it back to me. Tex and the rest can get it themselves."

"Don't be a pill, dear. Tex can't fit through that hole. You know that."

"That's his problem. There's no way I'm going all the way back through there. There were spiders and slime and these huge hairy bugs and I scraped my hands and knees all up. I'm going to leave the cache just around that corner behind me. It's going to be a much easier find for everybody else than it was for me. That's enough of a favor."

"Now Tex is a good man. You saw how he handled Signal last night."

"Whatever. Do what you want. I can't stop you from sharing. Here, take it. It's cold in here. I just want to get out of here."

Luke took the proffered container and opened it. He signed the logbook and inked his thumbprint in place. He led Tex back away from the entrance again. "Okay, I'll take the deal. I'm going to give it to Flo. If she's close to the money, I'll leave it to her to decide whether to claim the STF."

Tex took out his petrified wood piece again and found a rock to break it with. On his second blow, it split right where he wanted. He kept the piece with the "I" and handed the other to Luke. Luke handed him the logbook for Speleocache. He signed and handed it back.

"What's going on out there? I'm cold, I told you." Flo called from inside.

"Coming."

The two men returned to the cave entrance. Luke handed the cache back through the slit. Flo returned it just out of sight around the bend then came back to the cave entrance. She had to lie in the mud as she had when she'd entered. She placed one arm through the opening, then her head. With some wiggling she got her second shoulder through, and using her elbows, scooted forward until her hips were at the entrance. She had to turn onto her side for this final part. She looked like the loser in a chocolate pie food fight. Tex couldn't help sniggering.

She tried to push her way through, but her hips were wedged in the opening too tightly. Luke had helped her enter by giving her behind a push. Now he stepped forward to give her a pull. He took both her hands in his and tugged backward while she tried to push with her feet, but she couldn't get a purchase on the wet mud of the cave floor. Luke's grip slipped and he went flying backward, landing hard on his keister.

Tex found it all quite amusing, but was more interested in getting going. He couldn't very well leave them like this. He stepped up to where Luke had been and grabbed both of Flo's wrists. With one mighty heave he pulled her through.

"There you go."

"Whoa. That was intense. Thank you."

"My pleasure, ma'am." He lifted his hat for a moment, but the rain was coming down so he didn't remove it.

"So you two made a deal while I was in there, I suppose?"

Luke explained to her the nature of the petrified wood cache and Tex's admonitions about the sea conditions.

"Give it to me," she said. "That's totally irresponsible to send us out on the water in this weather. I have no compunction about using it. I'm not going to win without it anyway."

Luke handed her the piece of petrified wood. Tex explained to her how to mark it with a Roman numeral II. She pulled a sheet of paper from her pocket. Fortunately it was still readable, although just barely. She and Luke started programming the other caches into their GPS units. Tex wished them good luck and took off.

## **Cliff's team**

Cliff and the two women headed out from the lodge but soon realized they had company. Lars and Beth had joined them.

"Don't tell them anything about the cache," he warned Lynne and Deborah as the other two approached.

"No problem," Deborah answered as they walked along. Lynne wasn't as fast as her teammates, so of necessity the others accommodated to her ability.

"Hi, guys," Lars said cheerfully as he reached them.

Deborah gave him the evil eye and said nothing.

"I just swore them to silence," Cliff answered.

“As I would do in your place. That’s okay. When you start searching, I can too. The clue information and cache descriptions haven’t been all that helpful at the final stages so far.”

Beth arrived slightly out of breath from trying to catch up with Lars.

“They aren’t sharing,” Lars said.

“No prob. You and I are a team for this one. Let’s go.”

The five of them set off in silence toward the center of the island. Lynne stopped and called out, “I think this is the spot.” Her two teammates looked at their Garmins and gathered close. Cliff pulled out a compass and oriented it so the N was on the north arrow. He faced that way then turned slightly, pointing to the northwest. Lynne whispered something to Cliff while Beth and Lars tried to overhear.

Deborah spoke. “Guys, I think it’s this one.” She was pointing down at a moss-covered rock by the trail fifteen feet farther along the trail. Cliff and Lynne walked over to her spot, looking at their GPS units. Lars looked around where Lynne had first stopped them and saw a mossy rock there.

“I get it. This is a letterbox hybrid. First marker, a mossy rock.” He pointed to the two stones.

A letterbox hybrid is a sort of tribute to the sport of letterboxing, a precursor to geocaching. Letterboxing began in the 1850s in England and continues to this day. Hobbyists hide boxes in public places just as geocachers do and provide clues to how to find them. Now they may use websites, but in the past it was in printed books, by word of mouth, or by other means. The clues often involve orienteering and solving puzzles. Despite some significant stylistic differences, the essence of the two sports is the same. Letterbox hybrid caches use a combination of coordinates, sometimes only for the first stage location, and a set of directions or clues to find the final, much like a multi-cache. The main differences are the inclusion of orienteering using compasses or other direction-finding methods, and using a rubber stamp at the cache location so that letterboxing purists can record their visit in their traditional way.

As the assemblage clustered around Deborah’s spot, Cliff nodded and whispered something to her. He pointed in a slightly different direction from where he had before. The two women nodded and began to move off trail in that direction, apparently finding this location better than the first. By this point, they had their own compasses out. Beth glued herself to Deborah’s side while Lars kept pace with Cliff. Cliff and the two women on his team began to diverge as their compasses did not quite agree. They were now spread out in a rough line forty feet from end to end. The area was heavily forested, so it was difficult moving, especially while looking down at their compasses.

“Titania!” Beth yelled suddenly.

Everyone looked at her.

“The cache name is Titania,” she called to Lars. “I saw it on her GPS.”

“Good catch,” Lars called back.

“Sorry,” Deborah said to her team members. “I should have turned it off. We don’t need it here anyway.”

Cliff and Lynne pulled out their own GPS units, which they had stowed in their bags when they had swapped them for their compasses. They, too, had left theirs on and realized they were useless at this point. The cache description from here was based in paces, not using coordinates. The only information on them was the cache name and coordinates of the starting point where the mossy rock had been. They turned theirs off, too. Lars and Beth now had the cache name for whatever that may be worth. Either of them might have made the same mistake. There was nothing to be done about it.

Cliff resumed his march to the northwest, weaving between trees. Deborah was to his right about thirty feet and Lynne another twenty five, picking her way through the heavy underbrush.

“Hold it,” Lynne called after a minute and stopped. “I get it around here.”

Cliff stopped, too, but was now seventy or eighty feet away. “I think here,” he called back.

“Your paces are longer than mine.”

“Hey, you two, this is stupid,” Deborah called. “What is a ‘pace’ in this environment, anyway? We’re climbing over fallen logs and going around trees. These directions are impossible. We just need to find the ...” she hesitated, wondering whether Cliff would get mad if she said it out loud.

“Tree with three blazes,” Cliff finished. “It’s okay. They’re just going to follow us once we find it anyway. You’re right. ‘Two hundred fifty paces’ is a stupid direction under these conditions, but there’s a tree somewhere in this general vicinity. The more eyes the better. Lars, Beth, will you help us find a tree with three blazes? I’m not sure exactly what that means.”

“Sure, Cliff,” Lars answered. “I tell you what. Why don’t we make the same deal you made at Precarious yesterday. Why don’t you share all the information and we’ll help you look. If one of you finds it first, Deborah can sign first and then we get to sign next as numbers two and three. If we find it first, the finder signs first, then Deborah, then our other team member.”

Cliff consulted with his other team members in private, then, “We’ll consider it, but not until we get to the final location. We don’t want you going ahead. For now, we’re looking for a tree with three blazes and then we change direction starting from there.”

The five of them spread out. It took twenty minutes, but eventually Lars spotted the tree well to the right of where the search had centered. Signal’s ‘paces’ were apparently close to Lynne’s, but he had headed more northward than the group. The tree was a young western hemlock with three stripes spray-painted on it in Day-Glo orange. He called everyone over.

When everyone was there, Cliff pulled out his Garmin unit again and turned it on. “Okay, now we have to project a waypoint.”

“Distance and bearing?” Beth asked. She had her unit out and ready.

“No you don’t. I told you no sharing until we get there. And maybe not then. We haven’t decided.” He began pushing buttons on his Garmin. His teammates watched in muted admiration as he whipped through the process. Neither of them knew how to project a waypoint on a handheld unit. He stared at the red arrow and when it settled down, headed to the northeast.

Fifteen minutes later the expedition halted. The storm had intensified, but the large trees provided protection against the wind. Water cascaded off the branches, though, and everyone was wet through and through. Cliff declared that they were almost there. "Give us a minute to confer on your proposal, will you?" Lynne and Deborah huddled close, but Beth and Lars came up right behind.

"No, no secret talks," Lars said. "You guys have seen the cache page and know the description and hint. If you don't share we're going to have to dog you and listen to everything you say. I found that tree for you. Don't you think you should ..."

"Okay, okay, I get it. It'll go a lot faster if we have five people looking, like before."

"So what are we looking for?"

"Let's go another fifty feet. That's the final spot according to my projection. But you know these handhelds don't project very accurately. We could be off by two hundred feet or more."

"Ja, I know. You should have given us the bearing and distance. If we all projected it, we could average the results. You still haven't answered my question."

"We don't know what we're looking for exactly. There is no separate encrypted hint, just a literary quote in the cache description that's supposed to apply at the final location." He pulled out the sheet of paper and began to read:

*There's some ill planet reigns:*

*I must be patient till the heavens look*

*With an aspect more favourable.*

He continued, "I know Titania is a moon of one of those big planets. Saturn, I think, but I could be wrong. Saturn has the most moons. It's probably named after a goddess. I think the quote is a hint, but I don't know exactly how. Anybody have any ideas?"

"It sounds Shakespearean," Lynne offered. "The use of first person suggests it's from one of his plays, not the sonnets."

"But which one?" Cliff asked.

Beth tapped Lars on the shoulder and whispered something to him.

"I thought you said no secrets," Cliff barked.

"Fine. I was just telling him that I know which play. I was a drama major at the uni. It's *The Winter's Tale*. I played Hermione once."

"Okay, that's good. Winter's Tale. Not sure what to make of it."

Lars added, "And I know which planet. It's not Saturn."

"So out with it."

"Uranus."

Lynne cocked her head with interest. "Another hint, maybe. Or not."

Cliff barged ahead fifty feet and started looking around. The others were quick to follow. They were nearer the edge of the forest here. There were still many trees, but more open space



than before. The wind was also stronger, driving in at a forty-five degree angle. Everyone started looking around intently, trying to spot one of the telltale signs of a geocache – a pile of sticks, something dangling from a tree limb, something metal like a pipe or signpost.

“So are we looking for something moon-shaped? My little brother had a Nintendo game that had a planet with a name like that. I think it was Titania, anyway. The characters were part animals, part humans, I think.”

“Great, that’s all we need, another interpretation,” Cliff grouched. I don’t think he expects us to be able to know which play or which planet is involved, much less a Nintendo game. I think the clue is just from the quote. An ill planet. Maybe the reference to the heavens. Look up and see if there’s anything up high.”

“It’s pouring rain, man,” Lars retorted. “You look up.”

“So look with your back to the wind.”

Lynne snorted derisively. “Gentlemen, please, just shut up and keep looking. We don’t know what it means, but I’ll bet we’ll recognize it when we see it.”

The five spread out more widely than before, separated by a hundred feet or more. Some of them were focusing on the trees and plants, others on the ground. The search continued for fifteen minutes with no inspiration and no luck. When Beth thought the others were far enough away, she headed to meet Lars.

“Follow me,” she whispered.

He did as he was told. She led him in the direction they had been heading, northeast, but farther than they had previously gone.

“I couldn’t tell you back there. They were listening. I think it’s not the planet thing at all. Titania is the fairy queen in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. I saw a bunch of mushrooms out this way. They grow in circular clusters. We call those fairy rings. I think that’s the interpretation of the title. Maybe the hint is just to let us know we’re looking for a Shakespeare reference.”

“Or maybe he used a quote with the word planet in it to throw us off. But your interpretation makes more sense. At least it gives us a reason to focus on something.”

She led him a few feet farther into a small clearing and pointed. Sure enough, he could see a number of mushrooms there. As they got closer, it became clear the fungi grew in a nearly perfect circle.

Beth looked back over her shoulder and verified that the others were a long way away. They were visible through the thin tree cover, which meant Beth and Lars were visible to them, too. She put her finger to her lips and made a motion with her palm to get down low. Lars understood. They both got on their hands and knees and began crawling around the circle checking out the mushrooms. Within thirty seconds Lars had it in his hand. He hissed a notification to Beth. It was a huge plastic replica mushroom affixed to a base to keep it upright, nestled among the real ones. The opening mechanism was easily found. He pulled out the log sheet and signed it, inking his finger in the number one slot. Beth had crawled over by his side by this point.

“Let me see it,” she asked. He handed it over. She immediately inked in the number two slot and started signing.

“Hey, what are you doing? The deal was if we find it we get slots one and three, not one and two.”

“Screw that. You proposed that deal, not me. They never actually said they agreed to the deal, either. There’s a big point difference between slots two and three. We did all the work. You found that blaze tree. I knew the meaning of the title and found the fairy rings. All they did really was to choose that particular cache sheet back at the lodge.”

“They’re going to blame me for breaking the deal. You’re putting me in a bad position.”

“That’s your problem. You can take the heat. You just gained twelve points on Deborah. If she got second, that’s only a five point gain for you. Come on. You wouldn’t have the FTF if it weren’t for me, so how about a little appreciation.” She hugged him close and rubbed her body as sensuously against him as one might, considering the heavy clothing.

Lars stared at her as he tried to decide whether to be mad or thankful. He did enjoy her attempts to convince him.

“Speaking of screwing ...”

“Out here? Forget it, big boy. We have work to do.”

“Ja, okay. I didn’t know about that fairy woman or about fairy rings, but I’m the one who found the cache. That’s a FTF no matter what. What’s done is done. I’m going to go tell them we found it. We owe them at least that much.”

“*You* owe them at least that much. I don’t. You can blame me if you want. I’m leaving. You can catch up with me on the trail.” She took a quick look at the sheet listing all the caches. “Look at the EarthCache! It’s accessible only from the ocean? No way, not in this weather. And we’d have to go all the way back to the lodge and then row back up here? Not a chance. Not me, anyway. What’s left? It’s this one – Speleocache, the southernmost other than Balboarama. That’s where we agreed to meet Roy and Masa.” Still on her knees, she took a quick look at her GPS unit and decided the coast trail was the quickest way. She stood and took off eastward to access the trail.

“Beth, no, don’t do this ...” He stood and looked around. The others were still searching a long way off. He sighed and took off after Beth. If he went back to the others, they’d be angry, maybe even outraged thinking he’d broken the deal he proposed after they shared the information. He would get all the blame. Cliff had a temper and might even get physical. Lars was in no mood to fight a man that size, a former FBI agent no less. Maybe with any luck, they’d take a long time to find this cache and he could get ahead of Deborah again at the next cache in the meantime. In two minutes he’d caught up with Beth.

Cliff was frustrated. He’d never really enjoyed the searching part of geocaching. He liked the thinking and the solving, the hiking, and most of all the finding, but not the searching itself, especially when he didn’t know exactly what he was looking for. The rain and mud only made it worse.

He looked around for his teammates. He could see Deborah a hundred yards or so away, but not Lynne. Lars and Beth were also out of sight. He trudged over toward Deborah, who was turning over rocks.

"This is getting us nowhere," she said as he approached. "Are you sure you did the projection right?"

"I did it right. Did you mark the blaze tree in your unit? If you did, you can look up the distance and bearing yourself to verify it."

"I didn't mark it. I'll take your word for it. But this is frustrating. I still don't know what we're looking for. Where are the others?"

Cliff looked around again. Now he could see Lynne to the east another hundred yards. "Let's go talk to Lynne. Maybe she's figured out the meaning of the verse by now." When they reached her, Lynne was poking her hiking stick up into overhanging tree branches. "Any luck?"

"No. You guys?"

"No. We need to do some brainstorming on this cache description. We're missing something. Where are the others?"

Lynne looked around and pointed. "I saw Beth over that way about fifteen minutes ago. I don't know where he is."

"We need to put our heads together. Let's gather up again. Maybe we need to expand our search area." Cliff cupped his mouth with his hands and shouted in the direction Lynne had just pointed. "Beth. Lars. Come on over here. We're regrouping."

He heard nothing in response.

"You don't think they found it and took off, do you?" Deborah asked, alarm setting in.

"Follow me," Lynne said. "I know I saw her over this way." She leaned into the wind and marched straight toward where she had seen Beth. The rain had let up, but the wind was stronger than ever. The other two followed her.

When they arrived at the clearing Cliff knew he been double-crossed. There were boot prints all over, in two sizes. That meant both Lars and Beth had been here, and, from the looks of it, they'd spent some time here.

Lynne gasped. "Oh my. Look at the mushrooms. They're huge. And in a circle."

"A fairy ring," Cliff added. "Tatiana was a fairy, not a goddess. That play, the one with all the fairies ..."

"*A Midsummer Night's Dream*," Lynne added. "The fairy queen. The verse was a hint to think Shakespeare. I should have thought of it. Beth was the Shakespeare expert. She knew that all along."

"Bastards," Deborah said. "They signed and took off. We had a deal."

Cliff was seething, too, but ranting would get them nowhere. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We haven't found the cache yet. Maybe this is not it."

But by the time he finished his sentence Lynne had the cache in hand. She handed it to Deborah. Deborah opened it and signed in slot three, shaking her head in frustration. Cliff and Lynne followed. He pulled one of the cache description sheets from the cache.

“At least they didn’t take all the sheets.”

The three read over the list of remaining caches and programmed the coordinates into their GPS units.

“Starry Decisis. That one’s a night cache,” Lynne said. “So there’s only three more to do now. Look here. Petri. Kayaking!? In this storm? I can’t swim. I wouldn’t kayak on a swimming pool on a calm day, much less the Pacific Ocean in a storm. Is he crazy?”

Deborah said, “So it’s the cave one or Balboarama. The cave is closer.”

“Actually the kayak one is closer,” Cliff objected. “It’s not far from here on foot to the final. Maybe we can go to the location overland and see if there’s a way down to the beach.”

“The cache is chained to the rocks, accessible only from the water at low tide, which means even if you could get to it, you couldn’t bring it to us. I’m with Lynne. I’m not going in a kayak in this storm. Besides, look at the tide table. It’ll be underwater now. Even if we found a route down, we’d be battered with waves against the rocks. Or drown.”

Cliff’s shoulders sank. “You’re right. It’s hopeless if this information is correct. But maybe there’s a trick here we’re supposed to find. He’s been pretty devious. Why would he put out a cache no one can find? He archived Precarious, remember, due to safety concerns. He hasn’t archived this one yet, so maybe it isn’t as dangerous as we think. Maybe he’s hooked a rope or something to pull it up out of the water even at high tide.”

Deborah shrugged. “I think the quickest way from here to the cave one is the coast trail. The trail’s only a couple hundred feet from that kayaking final. We can take a quick look if you want, but I’m telling you it’s not going to work.”

“Okay, let’s move out. From their boot prints it looks like they headed to the coast trail, too.”

## **Roy, Masa**

“Finally!” Roy turned the rock over and stared at the long plastic tube glued to its underside. He had assumed the cache would be a fake rock, a plastic replica. He had been picking up rocks and immediately dropping them if they had the heft and feel of a real rock without looking at the underside. Then Masa had chastised him, pointing out that with all the difficulties Signal had thrown at them, he wasn’t going to make it that easy. Roy, realizing this was probably true, had had to go back over his area turning every rock over. His back and arms were aching from the effort. Rocks were heavy.

“You got it! An hour and twelve minutes. And no one else is here yet. They must all be having trouble.”

Roy signed in the third spot and handed the cache to Masa. There was no point in Roy signing ahead of Lars as it would just reduce Lars’s point total and that was their only chance at the top prize. He had to hope Lars could get here for the Second to Find before anyone else took that slot.

Masa signed in the FTF spot. “There’s no explanation in the cache for the name. I thought there would be.”

“Oh, that’s right. You’re too young, or maybe the movies didn’t make it to Japan. There was a series of movies about a boxer named Rocky Balboa back in the 70’s and 80’s. So it’s a joke – a rocky location, Balboa.”

“Oh, yes, I remember the movies. I was just a kid but I saw them in Japan. I didn’t speak English then. They just called the character Rocky. I don’t remember the name Balboa. Maybe it never got translated.”

“We have to mark this in a way that Lars and Beth can find it quickly.” He took a felt pen from his pack and put a small X on one side of the rock.

“They’re not going to be able to see that until they’re right on top of it. Maybe not even then.”

“I know. I’m going to mark it another way. This is just so they can be sure.” He rummaged through his bag until he found a tape measure. There was a prominent boulder nearby. Roy measured off the distance and checked the direction relative to the cache. “Okay, seven feet five inches south southwest. Write it down so you can tell Beth.” He stacked three small stones on top of the boulder and stepped back thirty feet. The tiny stones weren’t particularly noticeable. He doubted they would catch the eye of any other cacher from a distance. There were other boulders as big or bigger in the rock field that were more prominent.

Masa stood behind the boulder looking at the cache location. Beyond it about sixty feet was another boulder, a larger one. He climbed over the rocks to that location and placed four small stones in a square shape on top, then stacked a fifth stone on top of those to form a tiny pyramid.

“That might attract the attention of other geocachers,” Roy said.

“But it’s far from the cache. If it draws them here, that’s good. They aren’t going to search over there where the cache is. This way, we can tell Beth and Lars it’s on a straight line between these two. That’s easier to find than saying go north northeast from your rock.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. I see. We should get a move on. They might be waiting for us at the next cache already.” They both checked the cache descriptions on the lists from the cache. “Speleocache.”

Roy extracted a small camera from his backpack. Bringing cameras along on geocaching was common in the early days, but in recent years everyone used their smart phones for this. Roy did too most of the time, but he still kept a camera in his bag. He took pictures of both boulders and the cache rock itself, then one showing them in line. He couldn’t print these or send them to Lars, but he could give him the camera and show him how to display the photos on the screen. Then they took off for Speleocache.

When they arrived at the cave entrance no one else was there. Roy took one look at the narrow slit and declared that he wouldn’t be able to get through there. Masa, who was much skinnier, thought he might. He stripped off his parka and backpack. The rain was light, but the wind was brutal and he quickly became thoroughly chilled. This gave him incentive to get inside

the cave quickly. He had to struggle, but he managed to wiggle inside. He called for Roy to hand him his flashlight and pen. Roy passed them through the opening. Masa pulled the paper cache description from his pocket and shone the flashlight on it.

After a minute of study, he said, "This could take some time. It's over a hundred feet in. I have to crawl most of the way on hard rock."

"Do you have knee or elbow pads in your pack?"

"No, do you?"

"I think so. Hold on." Roy rummaged through his pack and withdrew two items. "Elbow pads. No knee pads. Here." He handed them through.

"Hand me my gloves, too. They're in my parka pockets."

Roy did so.

At that moment Lars and Beth arrived. "Hey, we're here," Lars announced.

"How'd it go?"

"I got the FTF and Beth the second."

"Outstanding. How did that happen?"

Lars and Beth recounted the events at Titania.

"Knowles and his team are going to be pissed," Roy commented.

"Let 'em be pissed. It's a contest," Beth retorted. "How about you guys? Masa inside?"

"Yeah. It should take a while. He just went in. He has to crawl way back in total darkness except for his flashlight. We got the FTF at Balboarama. Masa took that and I signed in third place so Lars could get the fifteen points for second." He pulled out the camera and explained about the marking and location of the boulders, then handed it to Lars.

"Should we go there now, or wait for Masa here? If some other team gets there, they'll get the second place."

"I'm not sure. It's not far. Let me check with Masa to see if he can estimate his progress." Roy stuck his head up to the narrow slit to yell in to Masa. He was surprised to see Masa a few feet on the other side signing the log book.

"Is that Lars and Beth out there?"

"Yeah. You found it already?"

"Yes. It was just around the corner. Flo and Luke signed it, then Tex. She must have left it there instead of putting it back where it was. I don't blame her."

"Did you sign in number four?"

"Of course."

"Okay, hand it out."

Masa pushed the cache container through the opening. A steady stream of rainwater was running into the cave entrance, channeled by the concave slope of the hillside around it. Masa's clothing was completely soaked. Roy handed the cache to Lars, who signed it, then handed it to Beth, who filled the next slot before handing it back to Roy. Roy signed his name, then looked with satisfaction at the final three empty slots. He handed the cache back to Masa.

"Cliff's team will be last on this one. This'll kill Deborah's total."

“Not that much,” Lars objected. “Sure, she’ll only get three points, but I’m only getting five. I can’t win by gaining two points a cache on her.”

“Then you need to get moving to Balboarama. You can still get slot two.”

“What about the next one – the kayaking one?” Lars asked.

Beth jumped in. “Forget it. I already rejected that as too dangerous. Terrain 5. I’m not going kayaking in this storm. I don’t think you should, either. Besides, if it’s doable, Cliff and his people would already have done it, so there’s no rush on that one and the night cache will have to wait until dark. Come with us and show us the rock hide.”

As if to provide dramatic emphasis, a flash of lightning crossed the sky above them and the crack of thunder split the air a second later. It began to pour again.

“Okay, let’s go,” Roy said. By this time Masa had wriggled out of the cave and was standing, putting on his parka. The four of them headed back toward Balboarama.

### **Cliff’s team**

When they came to the point in the coast trail nearest the EarthCache final, Cliff stopped the group. “Let me check real quick to see if there’s a way down.” They followed him to the edge of the bluff. It took him no more than ten seconds to decide trying for it was hopeless. “All right, this isn’t going to work. Let’s go on to Speleocache.”

Twenty minutes later they were at the cave entrance. Deborah took one look and announced that she couldn’t do it. She was claustrophobic. The women looked at Cliff, and it was obvious he was too big to fit through the opening. That left only Lynne.

“I suppose it’s me, then. I never thought I’d be the one to do the tough physical stuff.”

“A lot of women would love to be as slim as you,” Cliff said.

“No need to sugar-coat it. I’m a scrawny old woman. Besides, it’ll be nice to get out of this rain and wind for a bit.” She read over the cache description once more, then proceeded to strip off her coat and backpack and scooted through the opening without difficulty.

Cliff handed her the necessary items through the opening and watched her begin to crawl back into the darkness. No sooner had she disappeared from sight when a deafening thunderclap shattered the air and the heavens opened the sluice gates.

“Holy cow!” Deborah said, pulling her parka hood closer around her head. She turned so the driving wind was at her back.

Cliff stood behind her and used his body to provide some shelter. “Are we having fun yet?”

“Stuff it, CliffNotes.”

“Uh oh. Look.” Cliff pointed to the cave entrance. What had been a rivulet of water trickling into the entrance was now a strong stream and increasing.

“It’s all being funneled into the slit. Can she get out through that?”

They both crowded around the narrow opening on their knees and illuminated the interior with their flashlights. The water flowing into the cave was hitting them mid-thigh as it passed

through the opening. There was no sign of Lynne, but they could see a large pool of water on the floor of the cave. The water level was rising slowly but steadily as the water poured in. The direction of flow away from the entrance was visible and told them the water was going the same way Lynne had gone, somewhere deep into the cave.

The rate of rise seemed to slow or stop. Their beams didn't penetrate far enough to be sure but Cliff thought the water level in the cave had topped off at a depth of about two feet, maybe a bit more. Lynne could crawl through that, although it wouldn't be fun. What worried him was what the water was doing farther inside the cave. If it had topped off in the area around the entrance, while water was still flowing in, that meant water was flowing out somewhere at the far end, down the passageway Lynne had taken. If the tunnel narrowed, as the cache description said, that two feet water level would become higher. If this kept up, in just a few minutes Lynne would have to crawl against the current with water at least at her chin level, maybe over her head.

He bellowed at the top of lungs. "Lynne, get out of there. We've got a downpour flooding the cave. Forget the cache."

He heard her voice echoing off the stone, but he couldn't make out what she said at first due to the rain and wind. Another bolt of lightning crossed the sky and thunder hit their ears like an explosion.

"I've got it," he finally heard Lynne say. "I'm coming out."

Cliff watched until Lynne emerged into the farthest reaches of his flashlight beam, maybe sixty feet away, barely visible. She was on her hands and knees. The water level hit her chest. Her right arm was down while her left arm held the plastic cache container just above the water level. Cliff could see the bubbles from the current hitting her right arm, almost like the bow wake of a boat. She was trying to move using only her knees and one hand in order to keep hold of the cache. She had no pack or other way to secure it to her body. He watched for minutes as she tried to move toward him, but it was obvious she was having trouble fighting the current. Her progress was painfully slow.

Deborah shouted at her, "Lynne, drop the cache. Use both hands. The current's too strong."

"No, I can do it."

In excruciatingly slow motion Lynne fought her way into the larger cave area where the ceiling was higher. Suddenly she disappeared into the water. Her head bobbed up seconds later, farther back in the cave.

"I slipped," she gasped. "It's too muddy here." She fought her way back to her previous spot and sat up, bracing herself against the current with her right leg against one wall and her back against the opposite wall. She still held the cache in her left hand. The current rushed by, visibly increasing in volume and speed as all watched helplessly. Lynne was only twelve feet from the slit by this time. Cliff and Deborah were a few feet out of reach.

"I can't fight the current here. I'm sorry. But I'm safe in this spot. The water level can't get any higher. It's flowing out the back. It'll have to let up soon."



“It doesn’t look like it. Like Deborah said, forget about the cache. Can you make it using both hands?”

“No, it’s too deep to be on my hands and knees. The water would come to my nose. The mud is so slippery. I’ll just wait it out and when the water drains out, I can walk out. I can just hold onto the cache until then. If I let go of it, it’ll go floating back to who knows where.” She said this through chattering teeth.

Cliff saw Lynne shudder. She had to be freezing. This wasn’t going to let up any time soon. Waiting it out didn’t seem like an option to him. He said to Deborah, “Quick, get me a small piece of wood.”

She did as told without knowing what he had in mind. He pulled out a small coil of nylon rope from this pack. There was a magnet tied to one end of it, but he untied the knot and put that back in the bag. Deborah handed him a stick she found nearby. He tied the stick to the end and floated the stick on the current toward Lynne while he held onto the other end. It was at least five feet short.

“Can you grab that?”

“It’s t- t- too far. I’d have to lunge. If I missed it, I’d go slipping back.”

Deborah tapped him on the shoulder. He looked over to see her holding a stretch of stout cotton cord. “It’s only six feet, but with yours, it should reach.”

Cliff pulled his piece back and compared it to the one Lynne offered. “Is it strong enough?” he asked.

“Maybe not for her full weight, but I think it could take at least fifty pounds.”

“How do we tie them together. I was never a boy scout. I don’t know anything about knots.”

“Give them here. I do all kinds of tatting, macramé, and crochet. I have a knot book at home. You need a sheet bend.” In seconds she had the two lines tied together.

Cliff tested the knot, pulling on both his rope and the cord. Its strength surprised him. “Okay, let’s try it.”

He held onto the cotton cord and let the stick float down to Lynne once more. This time it reached her easily with two feet or more to spare.

“Grab it, but don’t pull hard yet. We need to test to see if it can take your weight.”

Lynne grabbed it, but instead of holding on, she tied the cord around the cache.

“Lynne, forget the cache. It’s you we want.”

“No. Take the cache first. I’m not going to let that ordeal turn out to be for nothing.” She lifted her hands up to shoulder height like someone surrendering to police. The cache floated at the end of the line. “Come on, Cliff. Don’t leave it there. The current could rip it loose any second. I don’t know how good my knot is.”

Cliff hauled the cache to the entrance and grabbed it. He handed it to Deborah. She set it aside in a safe spot without opening it and returned to Cliff’s side. He floated the stick back to Lynne. Rain continued to pour and the current was unabated. This time Lynne grabbed the rope, wrapped it around one wrist and grasped it with both hands.

“Okay, I’m going to start pulling, but don’t leave your perch yet. I want to see if it will hold. Just pull back on it.”

Cliff pulled on the cotton cord, gradually increasing the tension. He didn’t detect any slippage in the knot. The cord cut into his palm where he’d wrapped it around his hand. “Okay, I think it’s going to work, but try not to put your whole weight on it. Just use it to help keep you from slipping back. Go ahead and try to walk out.”

“Ready?”

“Ready. Go ahead.”

Lynne left her secure spot and began an awkward crawl using only her knees with both hands being tugged forward by the rope. The water ran against her chest, splashing up into her face. She made it half way to the narrow slit and stood.

“I made it,” she said gratefully. As she took the next step, her foot went out from under her and she fell down flat on her face. She was literally hanging on for dear life, her head underwater and only her grip on the rope keeping her from being swept back down the cave.

### **Roy’s team, Beth’s team, Team Fluke, Tex**

When Roy reached Balboarama for the second time, Luke, Flo, and Tex were already there, searching. The storm had intensified. Everyone looked bedraggled and unhappy, but like the dedicated geocachers they were, they weren’t going to give up after putting so much effort into the search.

Flo was only ten feet or so from the cache, but the others were spread out with fifty feet or more between them. It was obvious that everyone was having trouble getting reliable readings with their GPS units. So far as Roy could tell none of them had spotted the markers on the boulders. The rain was coming down so hard that there was mist in the air making it hard to see anything, but even more significant was the direction of the wind. The cache location was on the upwind side of the search area, so everyone was facing the opposite direction to avoid being pelted in the face by the rain.

Before they entered the rock field, Roy pointed out the two boulders to Lars and Beth. They nodded. “Okay, here’s the plan. Flo’s too close for me to just try to grab it. Nobody here knows Masa and I have already found the cache, although they may suspect it. If she sees me staring right at her feet, she may get it first and give it to Tex and Luke. The fact that we’ve shown up and Cliff’s team isn’t here may cause them to think Cliff’s team found it and left, so we’re all in the same boat. Let’s move around to the west and approach from there on the upwind side. Nobody’s looking that direction. I’ll lead the way. Stay close behind. I’ll walk over the cache, between the two boulders. When I stop and adjust my pack, that’s when I’m directly over it. Note the spot. We’ll all keep on walking to the center of where they’re searching and spread out to the far side, looking at our GPS units like we’re getting readings over that way. I’ll get out away from everyone and then fiddle with something on the ground like maybe I found something. Then I’ll stand up and yell ‘Found it’ and take off back toward the lodge. Everyone

will converge on that area. Lars, you and Beth hang back and when the others are far enough away, make a beeline for the cache. Once you have it in hand it won't matter. You two sign and we can be on our way. Everyone else can take the remaining slots. We know Cliff's team is behind us."

"Why don't you just walk up to the cache and grab it, then hand it to Lars?" Masa said.

"It's not that easy to spot in this rain. I'd have to look around for my mark and Flo would see me looking and she'd start looking, too. She might call Tex over, and after what Lars did yesterday, he'd probably take it from us. I'm not going to fight mountain man there. It takes a while to open, so he'd have time to grab it before Lars could sign it. We have to get everyone away from there."

"Okay, I see. Your plan is good."

Beth and Lars agreed. The four of them moved around to the west and approached the search area, talking casually and complaining about the jumpy readings on their GPS units as though they had just arrived for the first time.

Flo turned around at the sound of approaching voices. She called to the others "Well, look who's here." Tex and Luke came over and the three of them headed toward Roy and the others. The two groups converged directly over the cache area. Tex's boot heel was standing right on it.

"You guys just getting here?" Tex asked.

"Yeah, we decided to combine forces," Roy answered.

"We thought one of you would already have been here. Cliff's team headed north and I had the kayak cache. Luke and Flo had Speleo. So one of you had this cache and the other had the night cache. I know you didn't do the night cache yet. One of you must have come here first. You wouldn't have any other set of coordinates."

Roy realized Tex's reasoning was irrefutable, so he stuck to the truth – almost. "You're right. I pulled the night cache and realized I couldn't get it, but Beth and Masa were kind enough to let me join him while Lars and Beth went with Cliff's team to do the letterbox. They managed to get the first two slots without that team seeing them, so then they came down and joined us here with the sheets with all the other caches listed. But Masa and I had been searching for half an hour with no luck, so we decided to go get Speleocache and come back. We saw you guys all signed that one."

"Wallowing in the mud and bugs. Fun. NOT," Flo replied. "It looks like Masa got the duty for you guys." Masa's clothing was totally mud-caked.

"I got the fourth slot," Masa answered noncommittally.

Roy spoke. "So what happened with you, Tex? You couldn't get Petri in this weather."

"*You* couldn't, but I did."

"Wait a minute. Seriously? You went out in a kayak in this storm?"

"I did and I got the FTF. It wasn't blowing this hard then. But you're right; it was foolish. I almost didn't make it back. I barely made it to a landing spot near the cache. The kayak

disappeared with the current. Forget about that one now.” He glanced at Flo, but said nothing about the petrified wood he’d given her. She kept a poker face and said nothing.

“Well, then, I guess it’s the seven of us going for the first on this one. Good luck.” Roy took a look at his GPS and proceeded eastward toward where the other group had been searching. His team followed, then spread out as planned.

“You, too,” Luke said and started off in a different direction where his Garmin pointed.

Tex stood where he had been for a minute and watched where Roy and his people went. He didn’t trust any of them. Their story didn’t feel right to him, although it was possible. He had seen Lars and Beth take off after Cliff, so that part he believed, even the part about finding the letterbox before Cliff’s team and coming back with the cache sheet. But it didn’t make sense to him that Roy and Masa would give up here to go get Speleo. They had to know that someone else, either Tex or Luke and Flo, had gotten the FTF and probably STF on that one. Why leave a chance for a first and second here to go for a third and fourth there? It was about the money for Roy and Lars, maybe Masa, too, so they would have played it smart. So they had probably found it and now Roy was taking Lars and Beth to sign Speleocache. And they had headed straight for where he was standing. Tex knew it would be Lars who needed to grab the second or third to find, so Roy would have told him how to find it.

Lars hung back in the vicinity of the cache, intermittently staring at the red arrow on his GPS unit. In between, he stole glances back at where Tex was still standing. Why didn’t he leave that spot? Roy had told him Tex was standing right on it once they were far enough away from it, which is why he hadn’t adjusted his backpack as a signal. He’d never been able to walk over the cache. When Roy had told him this, Lars had looked back at Tex, but he couldn’t be sure Tex was still in the same spot. He knew it was right around there and wouldn’t take long to find if he had a couple of minutes undisturbed, but he had to wait for Tex to get out of there.

Tex noticed Lars stealing looks at him. That was fishy, too, he thought. Lars wasn’t picking up rocks. He just kept looking at his GPS unit and back at Tex. Then Lars, noticing that Tex had been looking at him, started picking up rocks and pretending to be looking for the cache.

### **Cliff’s Team**

“Hang on!” Cliff yelled instinctively. It made no sense since Lynne’s head was underwater unable to hear, and she was obviously already hanging on as best she could. He started pulling on the cord hand over hand, fearful that it would break any second. As he leaned back, Deborah reached into the opening as far as she could and grabbed the nylon rope. Just as she grasped it, the cotton cord broke from the strain.

“Help! I can’t hold it.”

Cliff fell on his rear when the cord broke, but he scrambled back up immediately and dove for the opening. The nylon rope was slipping through Deborah’s hands. His hand closed over the end of the nylon rope just as his cheek hit the rock side of the opening. The impact stunned him for a moment.

“Lynne!” Deborah screamed as Lynne’s face rose above the water like the creature from the black lagoon, but only for a moment. Deborah sputtered, coughed out water, then lowered her head again, because the current was driving right into her mouth and nose if she held her head up. “Pull, Cliff, damn it! Can’t you see she’s drowning?”

Cliff recovered and was almost surprised to see he still held the nylon rope. Deborah had let go. He was lying prone at the entrance to the slit, with one arm through the hole, water streaming over his arm and shoulder into the cave. His cheekbone hurt like the devil. With sheer arm strength he pulled Lynne toward him against the current. Her head popped up again, but went under once more. Cliff struggled to his knees, leaning back and bringing the end of the rope to the entrance. He could now grab the rope with his other hand. Once he did that, he began hauling hand over hand again. Lynne slid on the muddy surface right up to the entrance. She struggled to her feet as Cliff grabbed her wrist.

“Blaah,” she said, grabbing for some purchase on the rock wall and spitting out bits of mud. The footing was still treacherous. “Don’t let go.” She was gasping for breath. She had to get down on her stomach again in order to get through the opening.

Cliff held her wrist tight with one hand and guided her head through the opening with the other. Lynne twisted her body to fit through and emerged into the rain. Cliff finally let go of her hand. Lynne looked up at the sky and faced the driving rain. The mud that had coated her face began to wash away.

“Rain in the face has never felt so good. Thank you both. I don’t know how much longer I could have held my breath.”

“Thank God you’re okay,” Deborah said.

“Have you signed the cache log yet?”

“The cache? Geez, I forgot all about it.” Deborah retrieved the geocache and opened it.

Lynne turned to thank Cliff and saw him sitting on the ground holding something to his face. She stepped over to him.

“Cliff, are you okay?” She could see he was bleeding from a facial wound. She picked up her backpack, which was right where she’d left it, and took out a first aid kit. Sheltering him from the wind and rain, she helped Cliff get the wound dry with some tissue and applied a bandage.

“I’ll survive. My fault for diving into a rock face first.”

“Cliff, I wouldn’t have made it without you. Thank you for ...”

“Fine, fine. Just be quiet and get that parka on. You’re shivering all over.”

Lynne donned her parka. “I’ll be okay once we get moving again and get warm.” Her tone was unconvincing, but as if the heavens heard her, the rain suddenly stopped and the wind began to die down.

Deborah came over with the cache. “Everybody’s signed it except us. Flo and Luke took the first two slots, then Tex and the others. I just took slot eight. You two can fight over nine and ten.”

“I went through that for tenth place?”

“Ninth. I’ll take tenth,” Cliff added. They laughed.

## **Everybody**

“Oh cripes,” Beth muttered. “Look there.” She pointed to the north, the direction of Speleocache. Roy looked over. Cliff and his team were coming.

Cliff and the two women entered into the rock field heading straight for the cluster of bodies. Most of the others headed to meet them. Tex was the exception. He waited to see what Lars would do.

Lars hesitated, but realized Tex was suspicious of him. As of last night Tex had the most points after Deborah, he knew. Now Tex had a first on Petri and third on Speleocache. Lars’s own chances of getting the money would be slim if Tex got the second on this one too. He decided trying to grab it out from under Tex wasn’t a good strategy. Once Tex saw him looking around there he’d do the same and might find it first. Even if Lars could find it first, Tex could take it from him the same way Lars had taken the log book from Deborah yesterday. Lars knew he was no match for Tex physically. Tex might even do that out of a sense of justice. He needed to get Tex away from that area altogether. Lars headed to meet Cliff and the others. He looked back to see Tex standing in the same place. “You coming?” Tex began to follow.

“Well isn’t this cozy,” Cliff remarked as everyone gathered around. “All of us on the same cache. No one here has found it yet?”

“Apparently not,” Luke replied.

“I guess there’re no secrets about where we all stand now,” Cliff continued. “We got third through fifth on the letterbox,…” he gave a hard stare at Lars, “and the last three on Speleo. Lynne nearly drowned in there.” Everyone gave Lynne a sympathetic look and began asking her if she was okay. She was still shivering.

Luke said, “Tex got the FTF on Petri. Everyone else skipped it due to the weather. You?”

“We skipped it too. These caches have been irresponsible. At least in this weather. Tex, how in the world …”

“It was tough, man,” Tex said, pride bursting from every pore. “But I like a challenge. Believe me, under any other circumstances, I wouldn’t have gone out either.”

As though on cue the sun broke through the clouds as suddenly as the rain had sprung up after the lightning. Everyone looked up in surprise. Patches of blue sky could be seen on the western horizon.

“Who had this cache for their first one?” Cliff asked.

Luke pointed to Roy. “Roy says they struck out and went to Speleo then came back. They just got back here right before you.”

“You were here first and didn’t find it?”

Roy shrugged. “The GPS signals bounce all over here. You’ve got thousands of rocks. Nobody said it was easy. We should all get to work on it, whadda ya say?” He turned and headed out to the central search area.

Lynne tapped Cliff on the arm. "I'm exhausted. I can't be lifting rocks for hours. I'm going to sit over there on that big rock. You've got nine people scouring the area. Someone will come up with it."

"Are you going to be okay? Maybe we should go back to the lodge."

"I'm okay, just tired. The rain has stopped. From the looks of it, the sun will warm me soon. Once I warm up, I'll be good to go."

"Okay, if you say so."

As Lynne went over to the perch she had indicated, the group broke up and everyone began following their GPS receivers in various directions picking up rocks. When she saw no one else was watching, she motioned to Cliff to come over to her. He caught the signal and did.

"Did you notice Roy didn't really answer your question?"

"I did."

"I think he found the cache. Remember, Lars and Beth were with us, then they were at Speleo right before us, too. I think Roy took them back here to show Lars this one."

"Could be. I'll alert Deborah to watch Lars and Roy and stay close to them."

"Hang on. See how Roy and Lars are talking? They're looking at Tex, who's watching them, too. I think Tex has figured the same thing. Roy and Masa probably both have signed already and both know where the cache is."

"Luke's suspicious, too. Did you notice how he didn't say Roy struck out, he said Roy *says* he struck out. I think he's onto them."

"Wait. Do you see that. Just behind Tex. That big rock."

Cliff looked that way. "Yeah. So?"

"What's that on top?"

"Oh, I see it. I can't tell from here, but it could be a marker pile."

"Go check it out. Unless I miss my guess, either Roy and Masa put it there, or Signal did to help mark the cache."

Cliff found Deborah rummaging through the rocks eighty feet away, cursing her GPS for its fickleness. "Follow me," he whispered. "Lynne has an idea and I agree. We think Roy and Masa found the cache and marked it for Lars and Beth. There's a pile of stones over near Tex." Deborah nodded and followed Cliff toward the bigger boulder.

When the group had broken up to start looking again, Roy and Lars had watched with dismay as Tex returned to close to where he had been before, almost right on the cache. Tex, however, wasn't looking for the cache there. He was watching Lars.

"Damn, Tex won't get off it," Roy said sotto voce.

"You know exactly which one it is. Why don't you just go over there and pick it up. Like you said, once it's in hand, there's nothing he can do. Just hand it to me and I'll sign in second."

"No, he'll just take it away if he sees me grab it. You know he's still pissed about how you grabbed the logbook from Deborah yesterday. Besides, you heard him. He got the FTF on Petri where you got zero. That's a twenty point gain on you. He was ahead of you on Speleo, too. Even if you get the second on this one, he can get the fourth slot and that's enough for him to

stay ahead of you. We need for you to get second here and then give the cache to Luke and Flo to push Tex and Deborah down to the lower point slots, then hope for a FTF on the night cache. That's our only shot at the big money. I'm going to try to distract him. When I get him away from there, go for it, sign quick and give the cache to Beth or Luke or Flo."

"I got the FTF on the letterbox and Tex hasn't been there yet. He's not that far ahead. And those rocks all look the same. I know about where it is, but it's still going to take some looking. It may not be that easy."

"Just act casual like you're turning rocks over normally. As long as you don't draw attention to yourself, you can do it."

"Now look. Cliff and Deborah are going over toward Tex."

"I've got to distract them all. Don't watch me, just keep searching."

Roy moved away well to the north of the cache location. He kept looking at his Garmin and then up at the cliffside. Every thirty seconds or so he'd bend down and pick up a few rocks, then take a few more steps and repeat the process.

Luke and Flo saw him doing this and moved closer, suspicious that he had picked up on some clue they hadn't noticed. When Tex saw this, he, too, moved toward Roy. Despite his suspicions, he wasn't sure Roy had been lying about not finding the cache earlier.

Cliff and Deborah arrived at the large boulder with the tiny pyramid of stones. Cliff looked her in the eye and said, "Don't look at the boulder. Stand here and look at me like we're having a conversation."

"We are having a conversation."

"Then it should be easy. I don't want to bring any attention to this rock, but this is the marker that Lynne spotted."

"Not that one over there?" Not wanting to point, Deborah tilted her head toward the smaller boulder that Roy had first identified and marked.

Cliff looked over. "Oooh, I didn't notice that. Good eyes. I've seen this kind of thing before. The cache owner marks a cache with two rock piles. The cache is usually right in the middle of a straight line between the two."

"Lars is coming our way. I think he's worried. We must be onto something."

"Okay, start looking. Start at the center of the line, then I'll move toward this end, you move the other way."

"That's close to where Tex was standing just a minute ago." She and Cliff marched over to the midpoint of the line and began lifting every rock.

"That's probably why Lars was watching him."

Lars came walking over to them at a fast clip, but didn't say anything. Instead, he pulled out the camera Roy had given him and reviewed the pictures, then moved to the spot where Tex had been, about fifteen feet from where Deborah was now searching. He knew Cliff and Deborah had figured out the significance of the marker stones. Without trying to hide his intent he began searching the rocks where the pictures indicated. He found the cache almost immediately. Cliff and Deborah moved over to him quickly, realizing now that Lars had a photo of the cache site,



but they didn't arrive fast enough to grab the cache before him. They watched as Lars signed in the number two slot that had been left open for him. Deborah held out her hand and Lars handed it over without a word. He had no choice. Luke and Flo were nowhere near.

Deborah signed 'Doily' in the fourth box since Roy had previously signed in number three. The rain had now stopped completely. Lars tipped his hat and smiled as he walked away, the other two glaring at his back. Cliff signed right after Deborah and waved his arm to Lynne, who was watching from the far side of the rock field. She hurried over as best she could on the uneven surface, but Luke and Flo had seen Cliff wave and they arrived first. Cliff handed them the cache. Lynne was next and Tex brought up the rear since he had been too fixated on Roy's distraction routine until it was too late.

"So that's everybody," Tex said as he planted his fingerprint in the box.

Roy arrived on the scene and hustled Lars away. "Did you get the second?"

"Ja, but Deborah was right there. Cliff too. I had to give it to her."

"Okay, so that's fifteen for you, eight for her. You just gained another seven points. And Tex was last."

The sun began to peek through the clouds. "We're still in the running. The storm is over, I think. Do you want to try the kayak one?"

"I still have to go get the letterbox one. The lodge and dock are on the way, so let's stop there and see what's going on. Tex is the only one who got that, so there's still a second to be had. Have you ever kayaked?"

"Ja, on a lake in the summer. Never in a fjord or the ocean in a storm."

"Well, like I said, it's on the way, so let's go see what's what. I'm starved. It's after one. There's no rush for me getting up to Titania, so if we don't have to go out on the water, we can get some lunch." They headed north at a fast clip.

Tex had everything except the night cache and Titania. He did a rough calculation and decided it was worth it for him to try to get to Titania before Luke, Flo, Roy, or Masa did. That would mean skipping the lodge. He grabbed a protein bar from his pack and opened it, then headed after Roy and Lars.

"Good work, you two," Lynne said to Cliff and Deborah.

"You spotted the first boulder. Doily spotted the second. It was a team effort."

"You guys going back to the lodge?" Flo asked. "Luke and I are hungry and the only cache we can do before dark is the letterbox. That can wait until later. We're going to be the last ones on it anyway. We thought maybe we could all eat lunch together."

Lynne smiled broadly and replied, "I'm in. I need some hot soup. Something hot anyway." She was still shivering. The rain had stopped and the wind had abated some, but there was still a stiff breeze on her wet clothes.

"Sure, why not," Cliff added. "We've done everything except the EarthCache and the night cache. Neither one is doable now." The five of them headed north, following the path the others had taken, but their pace was leisurely. After a few minutes of walking, Cliff said, "You

want the coordinates of the letterbox? It's not easy to find using the cache directions. I marked the final location."

"Absolutely," Flo answered. She and Luke programmed the coordinates into their Garmins as Cliff read them off from his.

"It's a fake mushroom," Lynne added.

## **Tex, Roy, Lars**

Tex realized that Lars already knew where the Titania cache was hidden. He also knew that trying to get accurate coordinates by projecting a waypoint and following orienteering-style directions was very difficult. He decided to glue himself to Roy since Lars would no doubt lead Roy right to the cache. The three of them reached the lodge area. Tex expected them to continue northward toward Titania, but instead Roy and Lars went down the hill to the dock area. The sun was now out and the rain gone; even the wind had almost died down, but there was still enough of a breeze to cause chop on the water, and the waves were high from the storm activity.

Javier was huddled in a heavy parka at the staging area for the kayaks. The three geocachers approached him. "This cache is scratched," Javier said before anyone asked. Mr. Sprague sent me here to tell anyone who showed up. The seas and wind are too high.

"What do you mean 'scratched'?" Tex said. "Is he going to archive it?"

"No, it's still a good cache, but it's not safe to go for it today. He wants to leave it for future cachers. He asked me to apologize. He didn't anticipate the storm coming in so fast. He thought it wouldn't get bad until after midnight. You don't have to do it. He's just going to count the other four for the contest."

"Wait a minute! I already found that. I got the first to find. He's going to count that, isn't he?" Tex's choler manifested itself in a flush of red rising up his neck.

"I don't think so. He said, ..." but he didn't get a chance to finish the sentence because Tex grabbed the front of his parka and lifted him up so their eyes were at the same level.

"That's twenty goddam points. I risked my life for those."

"I ... I .. I'm s- s- sorry. He just told me to tell everyone. He didn't think anyone could get to it. He saw that one kayak was gone, but he didn't know which team took it out early. He was afraid someone was lost at sea when it didn't come back, but he later saw everyone on the cameras at the other caches, so he knew no one was missing."

"I made it to the cache, but couldn't get back against the wind and current." Tex let go of Javier and held up the petrified wood piece as evidence.

"Maybe he'll change his mind if you show him that. Please put me down."

"He'd better. Or else. You tell him that."

Roy butted in, "You guys can argue it out. We're going to get some grub." He and Lars headed back to the lodge.

Tex hesitated, but then followed. He had to stay with Lars and Roy. As he walked away he turned back to Javier. "I mean it. You tell him what I said."

The trio entered the lodge. A spread of cold cuts was on the sideboard and a tureen of hot soup sat steaming next to it over a small fondue candle. Styrofoam cups had been thoughtfully provided next to the soup. Roy ladled some soup into a cup and put a plastic lid on it, then made a quick sandwich. Lars and Tex did the same.

"We can eat on the way," Tex said after he'd taken a couple of bites. "Come on. I know Cliff's team already found Titania, but I want to beat Flo and Luke."

"That's your problem," Roy replied. "Lars already found it and I don't care whether I beat them or not. I'm not in the running. I'm going to eat."

Tex had the option of going after it on his own, but he knew it could take hours. He never was that good at navigating and didn't remember how to project a waypoint with a Garmin. He decided to stay with Roy. Thankfully, for his sake, Roy and Lars ate quickly and rose to go just as Cliff and the others arrived.

"I'm going upstairs to shower and change," Lynne announced.

"Me too," Masa said.

"Me three," from Flo. The three cave explorers marched up the main staircase, mud falling from their clothes and hair.

Roy mumbled something to Lars and they headed out the door. Tex stayed with them. Roy had done the math in his head. Roy's fortune was tied to Lars getting first. Deborah and Tex were really the only serious competition to Lars, he calculated, although Masa had a chance, too. Deborah had already found Titania so there was no point in trying to beat her there. It was to his advantage for Luke and Flo to get there before Tex, thus pushing Tex's points further down the scale. Normally he would have waited for the others to finish up at the lodge to delay Tex, but the fact that Petri was scratched changed things. Tex had lost his FTF points there and didn't get a first or second at either Speleo or Balboarama. Lars had a first at Titania and a second at Balboarama. Lars must have picked up about twenty points on Tex today, putting him well ahead. Whether Tex got fifth or seventh at Titania no longer mattered ... as long as Tex didn't win his case with Sprague on Petri. That made Masa the stronger contender for now. Since Masa chose to take a shower, he and Lars were now better off going to get the cache without waiting for him.

As they got about a quarter mile away from the lodge, Lars tapped Roy on the elbow. "Hold on. Hand me your GPS."

Roy, puzzled, did so.

"There, I programmed the coordinates to Titania in for you. You don't need me to go all the way and point it out. It's not hard to find with the coordinates. It's only hard navigating with the original letterbox directions. It's a big plastic mushroom in a circle. You can't miss it. I'm going back to the lodge. I want to clean up, too, and get some more to eat." He handed the Garmin back to Roy.

"How about me?" Tex said, holding out his Garmin.

"Forget it. You can follow Roy just like you were doing anyway. It doesn't help me for you to beat him to it."

Lars headed back toward the lodge while Roy and Tex continued on. They reached the cache location, found the cache promptly, and headed back.

### **Masa, Beth, Flo, Luke**

While Masa and Flo were showering, Luke changed his clothes, too, although he hadn't gotten as wet or dirty as they had in the cave. He then joined Beth who was eating lunch. "So if I understand it, you've already been to Titania?"

"Right." She stuffed a chunk of fresh baked bread in her mouth.

"So you have the final coordinates."

Beth looked at him warily. It took her a minute to work out the best tactics. Masa was her teammate and theoretically she should give the coordinates only to him so he could get there before Luke and Flo. But she knew they could just follow Masa and once at the fairy ring, any one of them might find the cache first. Since Roy and Tex had already left, she knew it was only the last three slots at stake anyway, so only one or two points.

"I do."

"Can we have them?"

"Well, if I give them to you, Masa could come in last. How about if I give them to you, you promise Masa can sign before you. You two can sign after him."

Luke realized this was no advantage to him; in fact it was a disadvantage. It guaranteed he and Flo would get the last two slots. He could just follow Masa and at the cache site they had a chance of spotting the cache before he did and getting slots eight and nine instead of nine and ten.

"We can just follow him. How about we promise that we won't take two slots ahead of him. If he finds the cache first, he can sign first. If one of us does, he can sign second."

"Deal. But I'm not going to give you the coordinates until Masa's ready to go."

"Fair enough."

Masa came down the stairs in dry, if not clean, clothes, followed by Flo. Beth explained the deal to them. They agreed, but wanted to eat first since they hadn't yet had a chance. There was no rush now since they all knew they were getting the last three slots.

"The sun's out now and the wind has died down, too. Do you think Petri might be possible now?" Masa asked.

"No chance. It's too rough," Luke replied. "It's high tide now, too. Besides, Tex was arguing with Javier down at the dock. I could hear them from up here. Signal isn't going to count Petri for the contest since the weather made it too dangerous for anyone except the first team, which was Tex. He's not going to count Tex's FTF, or at least that's what Javier was saying. Tex is going to appeal."

Flo reached into her pocket and felt the petrified wood she'd received from Tex. If the decision to cancel that cache's points held up, her overall chances were dashed, she thought. If she could get that second, though, along with the first at Speleocache and, with luck, a first or

second tonight on Starry Decisis, she thought maybe she had a real chance. She said nothing to the others.

Flo and Masa finished their lunch while Beth began to program the final coordinates to Titania into Masa's and Luke's GPS units. Just then Cliff and Deborah came in.

"A motley crew we have here," Cliff said.

"Hi, Cliff," Luke replied.

Noticing Beth's activity, Cliff guessed what she was doing. "So you violate our deal and sneak off after grabbing Titania, and now you're giving the coords to them?"

"I didn't make that deal, Lars did."

"On behalf of both of you. At the very least you could have yelled at us that you found it so we didn't have to keep looking."

"I'm sorry, but I want to win, too. That's as much money as I make in two years. I don't blame you for being mad, but, like I said, that wasn't my deal. I'm the one who figured out about the fairy ring. I didn't even get the first. Lars did. Besides, you didn't agree to the deal."

"I read the Shakespeare verse to you. That was the clue. That was agreement."

"I never heard the words 'I agree' or 'it's a deal' or anything like that from you."

Cliff was going to make a snide retort but Lynne came walking into the room just then and his attention turned to her. "Hey, here she is. How are you feeling?"

"Human, finally."

"We were worried about you," Deborah said.

"A long soak in the hot shower was what I needed."

"Have some soup," Flo added.

Lynne made herself some lunch from the fixings on the sideboard and sat down.

Luke, Flo and Masa picked up their GPS receivers and headed toward the door.

Cliff turned toward them. "Are you guys going direct to the coordinates or are you going to follow the letterbox route?"

"What difference does it make," Flo answered, not making it into a question.

"It's cheating if you don't follow the route. What's the point of doing a letterbox hybrid and skipping the letterboxing part?"

"Give it a rest. A find is a find. I crawled all the way back in that damn cave, chewed up my knees and elbows, got crawled on by hairy bugs and I don't know what all. I'll bet you just stood outside and let someone hand you the cache. Then those rocks. You're a weightlifter. My arms are so tired I can barely hold a pen and my back is killing me. I'm not built like you. So how about a break?"

They walked out. Cliff realized she had a point.

## **Cliff's team**

When Cliff and his two teammates had first arrived at the lodge, Lynne had gone directly to her room to take a shower. Cliff had suggested to Deborah they go down to the dock and find

out the status of the ocean. Now that the weather had cleared, he wasn't sure whether Petri, the EarthCache, would be possible. She pointed out that the tide table showed low tides at about seven a.m. and seven p.m. The cache description said it was accessible from approximately two hours before and after low tide if the ocean wasn't too rough. That meant Tex had just made it within the morning window, around eight forty or so. The next window would open around five p.m., meaning the kayaking part would have to start around four thirty. So there was plenty of time, if it was to be done. But it would be getting dark before they were back. Deborah reminded him that even if it was possible, that would mean getting a late start on Starry Decisis, the night cache.

"I know," he told her, "but let's just check it out." They descended the steps to the dock and found Javier there on a folding chair, huddled in a parka. "Javier, hi. What's the deal?"

"Mr. Sprague has canceled the Petri cache. He's not letting anyone take out a kayak any more. The sea is too rough." He waved his hand in a sweeping motion toward the strait. The chop was indeed impressive.

"What about Tex? I thought he found it already."

"Mr. Sprague said he wasn't going to count this cache for anyone toward the contest points. Tex said he was going to appeal. I don't know. Maybe he'll change his mind."

"That's it, then," Deborah said. "If Tex loses this, I should be in first."

"I'm not sure about that. We need to go back and total things up."

"Okay, but let's do it out here. Everyone is inside. I don't want them to hear us."

Cliff sat down and took out a piece of paper and a pencil from his pack. He drew a rough chart in a layout similar to the one Signal had shown them the night before. He didn't know the exact order for every cache, especially Titania, which still had five cachers on the way, but between him and Deborah, they were able to fill in most of the rest. Cliff guessed that Roy and Tex would get the Titania cache before the other three and filled in tentative numbers there. Deborah had copied down the scores from the previous day so they added those in.

Cacher	Titania	Balboa- rama	Speleo- cache	Day 1	Total
CliffNotes	6	6	1	30	43
Doily	8	7	3	61	79
Lynne14	7	5	2	37	51
Roy_All_T	3	8	4	26	41
Brannfugl	20	15	6	41	82
TexMurphy	5	1	8	44	58
Bethtie	15	4	5	28	52
Mossbug	4	20	7	34	65
Floricar	2	3	20	26	51
Gemsbuck	1	2	15	28	46

"Look at that. You're not in first anymore."

“That rat! Lars stole the first from me yesterday and did it again today.”

“Well, he did find it first this time, so I guess he’s entitled to that. But we had a deal. You should have had the second. If you’d gotten those fifteen points, you’d be well ahead. It was really Beth who shafted you.”

“She and Lars are a hot number. I’ll bet she did that to help him. He probably put her up to it. Either that or she’s hoping he’s going to share with her even though she’s teamed with Masa. And what about Tex? See, if he gets the twenty points for Petri he’s only one point behind me.”

“So it’s going to depend on what Siggнал does with Petri and what happens tonight. Everybody now has the starting coordinates and the cache description. It’s going to be a mad scramble.”

“At least it’s not raining any longer. Do you see anything in the description that can give us an edge? A subtle hint or something? The title maybe? What’s Decisis, anyway?”

“Starry Decisis. It’s a pun. It’s the same pronunciation as the legal phrase *stare decisis*, which is Latin for ‘stands decided.’ That what lawyers and judges use to refer to some legal issue that has been adjudicated by a higher court and thus binds them. I think starry just refers to it being a night cache and decisis is just a pun indicating it will decide the contest. You know, like your fate is in the stars. I’m more worried about the next part where we follow the reflectors.”

“As Yogi Berra said, ‘when you come to a fork in the road, take it.’ What the ...?”

“I know. I think the reflectors are going to lead down a trail that forks. That means we’re probably going to have to split up, at least if there are reflectors both directions. That could make it hard to get it to you if Lynne or I find it. We might be separated.”

“Okay, let’s go back in. Lynne should be out of the shower by now. I’m hungry.”

## Everyone

By three thirty everyone was back at the lodge. Javier was fixing dinner and the geocachers were all talking about the day’s caches. Everyone had done the same as Cliff and figured the points. Cliff’s guesses about the last cachers at Titania had proved correct.

“Where’s Siggнал, anyway?” Tex fumed. “I deserve those points at Petri.”

“Nobody’s seen him,” Lars answered. “I’d like to know, too. We all would. I’d be ticked if I were you, but it is unfair to have a cache that only one person – or team – can get. If he hadn’t canceled it, we could all be out there in our kayaks right now going for it. If he gives it to you, that’s unfair to us.”

“Who the hell are you to complain about unfair? After the way you stole the caches from Deborah?”

There were murmurs of agreement from some of the other cachers. Deborah was glaring at Lars and nodding.

Beth exploded. “What a bunch of hypocrites. Deborah, you didn’t solve that puzzle yesterday. Cliff and Lynne did. Lars had as much claim to it as you did. And at Precarious it was

Cliff there, too. Lars and I did the full letterbox route, too. Most of the rest of you didn't, including you, Tex. And only three of you went in the cave." She snuggled closer to Lars and hugged his arm.

Cliff thought about her observation and realized there was a lot of truth in it. The money had changed things and turned the friendly shared hobby into a back-stabbing frenzy. Team efforts were normal in geocaching, but most geocachers wouldn't claim a puzzle cache find or letterbox hybrid if they hadn't solved it themselves or done it the way the cache owner specified even though the official rules permitted it.

"Let's all just relax," he said. "Plenty of geocaches aren't fair – too high up for short people, extreme terrain, genius math ability required, whatever. Signal is in charge. He's going to do what he's going to do. Just accept it. We should have good weather for the night cache, I hope. Why don't we all try to enjoy the final cache. We're all going to be together."

"Well, I don't accept it," Tex retorted. "I'm going to find him. I want my FTF, and not just because of the money." He stood.

"I'm going with you," Lars said.

"Me, too," Flo added. She hadn't said anything up to this point. The three of them headed down the hall to the private area.

"Why is Flo going with them?" Lynne asked no one in particular. "She's out of the running. What does she care?" Eyes turned toward Luke.

Luke knew perfectly well why she was going. If Sprague allowed Tex points for his FTF on Petri, she had a shot at the STF if he accepted the petrified wood she had. It was a long shot, but she was definitely out of the running without those points. With them, if she got a first or second tonight, she could still win or at least had a shot at third place. There were supposed to be three money prizes. He didn't approve of her using that wood Tex had given her since she hadn't even been to the cache, but as Beth had just pointed out, almost everybody was cheating at least a little. He wanted to explain it to the others, but decided he'd better not say anything. The others didn't know about that particular peccadillo. Cliff could tell from his expression that he was troubled and holding something back.

Finally Luke said, "Look. Cliff's right. We should just enjoy our wonderful sport. If we win some money, that's nice, but none of us came here to do that."

Roy sputtered, "That's easy for you and Cliff to say. You've both got money. Don't deny it. Just because we didn't come here knowing there was a money prize, it doesn't mean that we don't care about it. Some of us are living pretty close to the edge money-wise."

Cliff and Luke made eye contact. There wasn't anything they could say to that. Roy had a point.

**Signal, Tex, Lars, and Flo**



After checking Sprague's office and finding it empty, Tex, Lars, and Flo moved to the next door, the video room. They could hear noises inside. Tex threw the door open and charged in, the other two right behind him.

Flo let out a gasp and covered her eyes. Sprague leapt to his feet as he zipped up his fly. On the screen was a high-resolution video of Beth in the shower. The rooms had separate bathrooms. The shower stalls were fitted with clear glass doors. The hidden camera had been mounted across the bathroom from the shower. Beth's comely figure was displayed in all its glory as the stream of hot water ran over her form. Since Beth was out in the main room right now, Lars knew this must be a recording from some time earlier.

"You bastard! What kind of scum are you?" He rushed forward and punched Sprague hard in the gut, causing him to crumple to the floor. At the same time, Tex rushed to the computer console where Sprague had been sitting and started moving the mouse around trying to find the Pause or Close buttons on the video player.

"Get out of here," Sprague spluttered from his fetal position. "You have no right."

"Shut up, you piece of garbage," Tex said. "*You* have no right." He left the chair and kicked Sprague hard in the rear.

"Flo, quick, close the door," Lars said. She did. The video was still playing, so Lars took the spot where Tex had been and quickly closed the video. "Don't tell the others. Beth especially. She'd be mortified. I'll delete this."

"He may have others," Tex added.

"I'll take care of the files. If he has any others I'll get rid of them. I'll reformat his whole hard drive if I have to."

"You sanctimonious losers," Sprague said. "Like you've never looked at a naked woman." He looked at Lars. "It's so easy for you young good-looking fellows. You snap your fingers and someone like that hops in your bed. We aren't all so fortunate. And you –," pointing to Tex, "I've seen what websites you've visited."

"No more of that," Tex ordered, to no avail.

Sprague continued, "Go ahead and delete the shower scenes. She's your girlfriend. I get it. But don't touch the geocaching files. The movie – it's important. It'll be huge."

Tex looked around for a phone. There was no landline in the room and he still didn't have his own phone back. "I'm going to call the police." He took one step toward the door.

"Stop! Don't! You do that and the contest is over. You'll lose your shot at a hundred grand. And all these videos will become public. You want that?"

Tex hesitated.

"You came in here to appeal Petri, didn't you? Javier told me. You're right. If you found it legitimately, I'll give you the full twenty points. Show me the petrified wood."

Tex was torn. He didn't want to look like he'd allow himself to be bribed, but he did find that cache at great peril and deserved those points. He could still call the police later. He pulled out the petrified wood from his pocket and handed it to Sprague.

"What about me?" Flo pulled out the piece Tex had given her. "I get the second."

Sprague struggled to his feet wincing. He looked at the two pieces and noticed the jagged edges. He fitted the two together. They had obviously been one piece.

"Hell, no. You never got anywhere near there, did you? Tex took the kayak out this morning, not you. I have that on video."

"Fine. Then I'll call the police. She took a step toward the door."

"Hear me out. I know you're all upset about the videos. Okay, that I understand. But I'm serious about geocaching. If you hadn't barged in here, no one would have known about the videos. I'd never make them public. I never wanted to hurt anyone. I'm just a lonely old man who ... but never mind that. We all love the sport. You've played fair. You don't want to claim a find you didn't make."

"Fine. Don't count it. You're right, I didn't find it. So I'm out of the running. So I have nothing to lose. You can't bribe me." She shot a meaningful glare at Tex and took another step toward the door.

"He said videos, plural," Lars interrupted. He'd begun scrolling through the file folder labeled "Shower." "He's got all of us."

"Wait, you've got me naked, too?" Flo said, alarmed.

"You and Luke together. Quite a scene. I enjoyed it immensely. But go ahead and delete it, Lars. Like I said. I understand. But I'm not giving credit for a find you didn't make. Geocaching is my life as much as it is yours. I'm not going to corrupt it."

"I deleted the whole folder," Lars said. "I'll empty the trash bin, too, and see if there's a backup file somewhere. Don't worry. It'll all be erased." Lars's fingers flew over the keyboard. Computers he knew well. "There. Done."

"Thank you." Flo took another step.

As her hand reached the doorknob, Sprague hissed, "Call the police and your streak ends."

Flo turned to face Sprague with a livid fury. "What?!"

"You heard me. I can delete all your logs for the last two days. In fact, I can delete your logs from years ago. You won't even make the top one hundred cachers."

"Bastard! I've spent almost twelve years on that streak. Twelve years. You can't ..."

"But I can. Legitimately, too. There was that time you crossed the date line and logged caches on two different dates, but they were actually the same day."

"They were two different days, just the same date. I adjusted ..."

Tex poked Sprague hard in the chest. "That's out of line. She found those caches. You said you wouldn't corrupt the sport."

"Careful, you lummo. I can change the difficulty and terrain ratings on your finds, too. Instead of fives they can be threes. You'll lose your spot as mister macho." He whirled toward Lars. "And you. I can change the API of the website. Your app can stop working overnight if I say the word."

"Now hold on," Lars said, but got no further.

“So you see, I hold the fate of all of you in my hands. Why don’t we just forget this whole ugly episode? The videos are gone. I’ll go around with Lars here and remove all the cameras and show him my entire video system so he can ensure it can’t happen again. Only legitimate geocaching stuff. We can just go out there, finish the contest, and no one else has to know. Besides, Lars just deleted all the evidence so the police have no proof. There is no backup. Thank you for that. Tex, you get your twenty for Petri. Awesome job on that. I’ll open it up out of fairness to the others. Flo, no credit for you on that unless you go find it now.”

The three geocachers exchanged looks. Tex nodded toward the door, signaling they should go. They steamed out of the room cursing him under their breath. He followed them out to the main room. All the others were still assembled there.

“Everyone, listen up. I’ve decided that Tex is entitled to his find on Petri. Out of a sense of fair play I am opening it up for anyone else to try, but I must warn you that the seas and wind are still too rough for safe kayaking and the tides are too high right now. It’s entirely at your own risk and I strongly advise against it, but in about forty minutes the timing should be right for the tides. Do I have any takers?”

There was some murmuring. Cliff spoke up. “By the time we got there and back it would be after dark. We wouldn’t be able to go for Starry Decisis as early as the others.”

“True. That’s a choice you’ll have to make. And remember, that cache, including the log book, is chained to the rocks. You can’t retrieve it and bring it to another team member to sign.” He looked pointedly at Deborah. “Anyone else?”

No one else spoke. “All right, if no one’s going to try for it, I’ll go secure the kayaks in the boathouse. It’s officially closed for the rest of the day. You can come back any time in the future to get it if you want.”

“Can we get our phones now, so we can log today’s finds?” Masa asked.

Sprague looked nervously at the trio that had invaded the video room. “No, not yet. After Starry Decisis is found, we’ll have a celebration and award the prizes. I’ve instructed Javier to prepare a light meal early so you don’t have to choose between food and geocaching.”

## **Everyone**

The “light meal,” served at five o’clock, turned out to be steak, baked potatoes, Waldorf salad, and a choice of wines. The wine was barely touched, the one exception being Signal, who partook liberally. Everyone knew the contest was on the line. They rushed through the meal, wanting to be prepared when sunset hit.

With Tex getting credit for Petri, the contenders for the top prize were now known. Lars, Deborah, and Tex, with 82, 79, and 78 points respectively, were the odds-on favorites. But Masa, at 65, had a theoretical shot if he got the first and the other three finished in the last three slots or didn’t complete it at all. Of course, that meant the teammates of all these players had a stake in the success of their team’s point leader. Only Luke and Flo were totally out of the running.

“Okay, folks, this is what we’re going to do.” The voice was Sprague’s. “We’re going to start this final cache together. In another half hour it should be dark enough for you to see the reflectors. I want everyone gathered here until then. When I give the signal, you all start.”

“Like *The Amazing Race*,” Roy commented.

“That’s going to be bedlam,” Lynne said.

“It’s going to be exciting,” Sprague replied. “It’ll be great, really.” He slurred his words. “Javier and I will be out there with our cameras. We’ll be there at the finish. The geocaching world will love it.”

Lynne leaned over to Beth and whispered, “A drunken Signal out in the dark woods with us. That’s all we need.”

Luke and Flo sat eating. Flo had already told Luke about Sprague’s threat to terminate her twelve-year streak, although she hadn’t told him about his filming their private activity. Since they were out of contention for the money and they’d had a long hard day, they’d decided not to participate in the final cache run, but they hadn’t told Sprague. Unlike the others, they were taking a long time with the meal and were enjoying second desserts.

Now that Sprague had set the start time, several geocachers retreated to their rooms for final bathroom runs or equipment checks. Cliff grabbed a second piece of cheesecake and sat down across from Luke and Flo.

“You’re not going out?”

“No,” Flo said.

“What happened in there earlier? In the video room. You came out like you’d seen a ghost.” Cliff’s team hadn’t had a member in the video room and no one had shared the story with him.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Signal threatened to terminate her find streak even though every find was legit,” Luke replied.

“Why?”

“I said I don’t want to talk about it. Signal acted like a jerk to all of us. This is no fun anymore. Let’s just leave it at that.”

Cliff mulled the response over as he chewed his last bite of cheesecake. “Okay.”

Lynne came over to him and tapped him on the shoulder. “I need to talk to you.”

Cliff rose and followed her to a private spot.

“I went out earlier and scoped out the start area of Starry Decisis. It’s not far from here.”

“And?”

Lynne went on to describe a trail that headed westward. It split into three trails almost immediately. She didn’t have a full map, but she’d taken the left path and it split again in another hundred yards. It was an area no one had explored doing the other caches and appeared to have a network of intersecting trails.

“We need a strategy. That hint says to ‘take’ a fork. Obviously that’s intentionally ambiguous. I think there are going to be reflectors on all the forks and maybe again when those

trails split. It wouldn't make sense to have all ten of us walking lockstep as a bunch to the final cache and then what ... fight each other for it?"

"Actually it'll only be eight of us. Luke and Flo are sitting it out. They don't have the points to win and whatever happened in the video room has put them off the whole thing. Flo's not talking."

"Really? Interesting. I thought they all looked pretty somber. So anyway, what about the trails forking?"

"You think we're going to be divided into three or maybe more groups?"

"That's what it looks like to me. I'm just guessing, but it makes sense for the suspense factor of the movie."

Cliff mulled this over. "So some of the trails will be dead ends and maybe some will merge or lead to the final cache from a different direction. If that happens, we need to decide in advance how we're going to do it. We can't all stay together. We'll lose out if the cache is along another fork. Let's just decide now that we'll favor the left side at every split. So at the first split, since there are three trails, each of us will take one of them, assuming they all have reflectors. If they split again, each of us will take the leftmost trail at each subsequent split. That way we should be within hailing distance of each other. If it keeps splitting I'll be at the very leftmost branch. You take the middle. If we put Deborah on the rightmost fork at the first split but have her bear left after that, too, she should stay in hailing distance of us, but also be in a better position to hear if one of the others finds it. She doesn't have to get a first. She only has to get three points more than Lars and stay ahead of Tex."

"Righto, I get it. Eventually each of those paths must either lead to the same spot – the cache – or just run out. If the reflectors stop, just turn around and go back to the last fork and take the other path."

"Exactly. If you or anyone with you from another team finds the cache, call to Deborah."

"Okay, let's go tell her the plan."

The pair located Deborah and she bought into the strategy.

The entourage gathered in the main room of the lodge in clusters demarcating the teams they had formed. Luke and Flo stood with the others despite not planning to do the cache. Javier filmed from the hearth of the massive stone fireplace as flames crackled behind him. His legs must be getting scalded, Cliff thought, as Sprague droned out a pep talk designed for the viewing audience, not the geocachers present. Finally, he told the teams to line up on the front porch with flashlights on and GPS units at the ready.

"On my count. Three ... two ... one ... go!"

Cliff stayed with Lynne and Deborah. Lynne was in pretty good shape for a woman in her sixties, but she was the slowest of the trio and apparently in the whole crew, since all the other teams got to the trailhead in front of them.

Lars and Roy were first onto the trail, but they had to slow down in order to spot the reflectors. The first few were quite easy to spot since they were mounted on trees close to the

trail at about chest level, sometimes in pairs. After a while, they were spaced farther apart and set higher or lower, sometimes only visible from the right angle due to foliage that blocked the sight line to make it more challenging.

Flo and Luke made the initial dash toward the posted coordinates, but only until they thought they were no longer being filmed. They didn't want to get into an argument with Sprague about why they didn't participate, but once they were "in the wild" they could go anywhere they want, which was back to the lodge.

Cliff's team, although in the rear, quickly caught up when everyone slowed to try to spot the reflectors. The whole herd moved steadily, though, since at first there was only one direction to go – straight ahead along the trail. Then they reached the fork Lynne had told Cliff about. Voices rang out everywhere.

"I see one! It's this trail."

"There's one over here, too."

"Hell, no. He's got markers on all three. We're going to have to split."

Cliff and his teammates had already made their plan and were the first to proceed past the fork. Deborah's assignment, the rightmost leg, headed uphill rather steeply. Lynne took the middle fork, which bore rather to the left, and Cliff took the one even farther to the left, which headed slightly downhill into thicker woods.

After taking twenty steps, Cliff called to Lynne, "Lynne, can you hear me?"

"Barely. Can you hear me?"

"What?"

Cliff heard her voice, but couldn't make out the words. There were other voices, too. Masa was only a few paces behind Cliff and Beth had apparently gone with Lynne, because she cheerfully replied to Cliff's call, "I can hear you, too, CliffNotes."

Next to Masa was Tex who was simply following Cliff, not even trying to spot the reflectors. Roy and Lars had both taken the rightmost fork, the one Deborah had taken. Since Lars was now in the lead pointwise, his strategy was simple – don't let Deborah pass him in points. He planned to stick with her. He couldn't let her get the first to find, and unless he got the first, he couldn't let her get the second, either. After that, it didn't matter. If she got fourth and he got fifth, that was fine. She'd only gain one point on him. They pinned her between them, one in front and one in back as they hiked up the hill. They reached the crest of the hill and there was a clearing and a bench. It was a beautiful spot to sit and watch the stars. There were clouds still blocking much of the sky, but there was also plenty of clear sky. The Milky Way was visible through some of the clear patches but none of the trio was looking upward. They were all examining the trees around the edge of the clearing.

The cache description said to follow the trail of sparklers to a large oak tree at the edge of a clearing. The cache was a full-sized cache attached to the trunk of the tree. It should have been easily found if this was the right location. There were only two oaks, but no one found anything after ten minutes.

They had entered the clearing from the south. There were two other trails connecting to the clearing, one to the west and one to the northwest. Lars explored the other trails and said there were reflectors on both of those trails, too.

“Which way do they face?” Deborah asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Do they reflect back at you when you’re going uphill or downhill?”

Lars hadn’t considered that. He had assumed the other paths were trails leading up to this clearing, but perhaps not. He went down one of the paths fifty feet and then came back up and repeated the process on the other trail. “You’re right. They only reflect going downhill. We’re supposed to keep going away from here. Reflectors going downhill on both.”

Deborah pointed her flashlight to the westward trail, the leftmost of the two per Cliff’s plan, and headed down. Lars followed.

“I’m going to check out this other trail,” Roy said. “Since I’ll be the only one on it, I’ve got a chance at getting us the first. You stick with her.”

“Ja, ja. I know.”

At the next fork in Cliff’s trail, he stayed left and Masa followed him, but Tex decided to take the right fork. There were reflectors on every path so far. Cliff knew they were now on the west side of the island. They had skirted the northern edge of the landing strip, and then gone south, but the path was now bending westward. Yet another fork presented itself with yet another collection of reflectors on both. Cliff yelled out to Lynne once again. No answer.

It was time to rethink his strategy. It did no good for him to find the final cache if he couldn’t get it to Deborah quickly. Tex could be in earshot and would win if he heard Cliff call out that he found it. The description said it was attached to the tree. He couldn’t take it away from there – strictly prohibited in geocaching, and probably physically impossible, too. Since he couldn’t summon Deborah either directly or relaying through Lynne, he needed to get closer to them, so at this fork he went right instead of left, moving northwest. Masa chose to stay to the left. He’d reached the same conclusion Roy had – his best chance at the FTF was if he was alone when he found the right clearing. He still had an outside chance.

Lynne and Beth reached a clearing. It was only the two of them, so they kept one wary eye on the other while frantically looking for the magic oak tree that held a fortune. They soon realized that there were no oak trees surrounding the clearing, only evergreens and none of them had a cache attached. There was another trail connecting to this clearing. Beth checked it out. There were reflectors, leading into the clearing, but not out.

“What do you think? Is this the right clearing? Both trails lead into here. This must be the destination.”

“No oaks. It can’t be. It’s a dead end.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going back to our last fork and go the other way.”

“That’s a waste of time. We’ve already been that direction.”

“Going the wrong way on that trail is no better. You do what you want to do, luv. I’m heading back.” She turned and headed the way she had come just as Cliff and she had agreed. Beth headed out on the other trail. Both women were now alone.

The trail downhill was hardly worthy of the name trail. Deborah had to pick her way carefully with the flashlight beam, which was growing fainter by the minute. Fortunately, a full moon scooted into a clear patch of sky and provided some natural light. She turned off her flashlight for short stretches to save battery life. She did have spare batteries for the GPS unit, provided by Sprague, but her regular geocaching bag did not carry spare C batteries because they were too heavy and she rarely used a flashlight for any length of time geocaching.

She heard a crash behind her. She whirled to shine her beam that way. Lars was flat on his face muttering something in Norwegian and moaning. She considered going to help him, but after the way he’d stolen her first yesterday and double-crossed them today, her uncharitable side took control. She took off running the opposite direction, although it was more like prancing as she picked her way in the dark high-stepping over roots and rocks. The trail forked yet again. The foliage was denser to the right, so she went that way twenty yards and then huddled behind a thicket of berry bushes. Within thirty seconds, Lars came huffing to the intersection. She could hear him, but not see him. He was still muttering in Norwegian and went off down the other trail. Good! She was now alone. She stood and hurried down the trail, glad to be free of her shadow.

Cliff was winded from the long climb, but the trail had begun to descend. He’d been going westward and could now hear the sound of the ocean ahead. He stepped out onto the coast path. It ran due north-south parallel with the shore. He shone his flashlight both directions and saw reflectors only one way – north. Behind him he heard “Chikushō!” Masa was cursing in Japanese. He must have come out onto the same trail, seen the north-pointing reflectors too, and realized he was behind Cliff now. Cliff followed the trail around a stand of trees and came out into a clear area. The path led along the top of a cliff area, very much like the area where Precarious had been the previous day.

What he saw took his breath away. There in the water fifty yards offshore and a quarter mile to the north was Sprague’s yacht, lit up like Times Square on New Year’s Eve. A spotlight from the boat was directed at the shoreline where there was a tiny beach. The curvature of the shoreline allowed Cliff to see across the water. On the beach was a dinghy tied up. A steep wooden stairway zigged and zagged up the cliff. Cliff saw a form, a silhouette only, directing the light at the stairway, moving it higher and higher as a figure – Signal – climbed. Cliff recognized the form on the boat as Tomas, the assistant who had stayed on the boat while everyone else was ashore.

Of course! Sprague had planned the cache so that he could get to it before the geocachers by boating around the island and coming up from the western side. He’d want to film the final find. Cliff watched as Sprague took the final step and disappeared into the darkness of the top.



The man on the boat killed the spotlight. The seas were still rough, more so on this side than on the east, and the yacht pitched and rolled menacingly. It was obvious the boat couldn't stay there long or it would be thrown onto the rocks. Cliff was impressed that Tomas had managed to keep the spotlight more or less on Sprague the whole way. He watched as the yacht moved away again.

Cliff estimated it would take him at least seven or eight minutes to reach the point on the cliff edge where Sprague had last been, and who knew where he'd gone from there. Cliff began to jog. The trail here was well-maintained and relatively safe to run on without fear of tripping or twisting an ankle. Moonlight made his flashlight unnecessary.

The trail moved inland a bit again and the boat left his field of view, blocked by the land and foliage to his left. As he approached the spot where the ladder led down to the beach he heard a scream. It was a man's voice, a deep, thick-throated cry of fear and despair. It lasted only about three seconds and stopped suddenly. The sound was coming from farther up the coast to the north. The cliffs were higher there. Already winded from his running, he had to struggle with the long climb toward the sound. When he reached the crest, there was Javier, a professional-looking video camera in one hand, a tripod in the other, a heavy battery pack clipped to his waist. He, too, was running toward the sound.

It didn't take them long. A few seconds later they turned a bend and saw Tex Murphy standing at the edge of the cliff looking down.

"It's Signal!" Tex said, pointing over the edge. Cliff and Javier rushed to the edge and looked over. Sprague's body could be seen on the rocks below, waves lapping at his form.

"I think we can get down there," Cliff said. "The tide is still low, but it'll start rising soon. I think we can walk around the point from those stairs back there if we do it fast."

"What stairs?"

"There's a beach back about eighty yards and a wooden stairway goes down to it.

Just then Lars arrived on the scene from the north. "What's going on?"

"No time to explain. Signal fell off the cliff."

Roy, then Deborah, appeared, also arriving from the north followed seconds later by Masa, from the south.

"Come on, Tex," Let's get down there."

Cliff and Tex hustled back toward the stairwell. A strong light came from behind them. It was Javier filming, or perhaps he was just using the powerful camera light to help them see.

The two men made their way down the stairs. The sand was firm and mixed with a lot of rock, almost more gravel than sand. Moving around the northern promontory was tricky. They had to time their dash between the waves and when they got to the other side there was no beach, just large rocks they had to climb over. They made their way slowly to where they hoped Sprague's body would still be.

When they were about fifteen feet from the torso, they encountered a deep gap between their perch and the body. Waves rushed ferociously between them and doused all three.

"I can make that," Tex declared and tried to push past Cliff to plunge over to the other rock.

Cliff put out his arm to block him. "No you can't. It's too rough. You'd be swept out to sea." The moonlight was still bright and they were afforded a good view of the body. Sprague's form was face up. It appeared he had landed on his back on the rocks, falling from the edge two hundred feet above. Brain matter was oozing from the shattered skull. It was clear he was beyond help.

"What's that, ... the silver thing ...?" Tex asked.

Cliff stared, aghast. There was a steak knife handle protruding from Sprague's right thigh. The distinctive curvy handle made it unmistakable. It was one from the lodge dinner that night. His arms flopped loosely to each side. The force of the fall had apparently caused his clothing to split open. His down jacket was unzipped and some of the buttons of the flannel shirt had popped off as had the top button of his pants. Next to him on the rock was a large plastic box. It was covered with glowing star stickers. A large wave came cresting over the body and the box as they watched.

"That's the cache," Cliff exclaimed needlessly since they could both see the geocaching icon on the side and glowing stars pasted or painted on as it floated away on the receding wave. Sprague's body shifted and one leg fell off the rock. He began to slide.

"Let me ..." Tex began, pushing Cliff's arm away, but there was no time to finish. Sprague's body slipped to the far side of the rock into the surf. Within seconds another wave crashed over them both and they had to grab hold of their own rock to keep from being pulled into the ocean. When they looked up they could see glimpses of Sprague's body following after the geocache, heading out to sea. Then it was gone.

"Come on, let's get out of here before we end up like him," Cliff said. The duo, drenched and shivering, emerged at the top of the stairs ten minutes later.

"We saw," Roy said. "That was above and beyond, guys. Too bad you couldn't ... well, too bad."

Someone had built a fire in the small clearing that adjoined the trail. "Come over here, guys," Lynne said.

Cliff and Tex plopped down in front of the fire, wet and shivering. Across the flames were Luke and Flo.

"What are you two doing here? I thought you were going to stay in the lodge. I saw you go back."

"Signal made us come with him on the boat. He told us we had to. He wanted everyone to be there for the big finish, for the movie. We all were in the dinghy. We went up the stairs first."

"What do you mean 'had to'? You were out of the money and you already had your return ticket. Why didn't you just stay there?"

Luke looked nervously at Flo. "He threatened to delete Flo's logs, several of them, to break her streak. She's been working on that streak for nearly twelve years. Ask Javier."

Cliff looked over to Javier.

“That is so. Mr. Sprague asked me to fetch them from their room. They didn’t want to come. It made us late getting here.”

Cliff turned back to the couple. “So what happened? Did you see how he fell?” Cliff didn’t want to reveal to the others that he’d seen the knife. He knew there’d been an attack of some kind and wanted to be the only one who knew besides Tex. He was glad Tex didn’t say anything.

Flo answered. “No. We were near the head of the stairs. He told us to wait there until he called us. We were sitting out of the wind behind some trees to stay warm. We saw you run by right after he screamed. Then Masa. Of course we got up too and were going to follow you guys to see what was going on, but he’d told us to stay there. While we were trying to decide you and Tex went running back the other way, so we just came up here and found out what you were doing. Then we started this fire.”

“That was the cache, wasn’t it – Starry Decisis?” Lars said, joining the circle. All the others gathered around as well.

“Yup,” Tex said. “One hundred grand. Gone.”

“I knew it. I found the place where it was attached to the tree. Right over there. It’s covered with reflectors.” Lars pointed to an oak tree at the edge of the clearing. Several people shone their flashlights that direction and the trunk burst into a brilliance matching Liberace’s best dinner jacket. “There’s a Velcro strap around the tree. I could see that the cache had been there, but was taken off.”

“What was Signal doing with it?” The question came from Beth. “It should have been left there for the FTF.”

“Maybe it was,” Tex said. “He didn’t fall, not accidentally. He was attacked. There was a knife in his leg. Maybe the first to find is the one who stabbed him.”

Cliff suppressed a desire to punch Tex in the mouth. Now the cat was out of the bag. Everyone would be on the defensive. “Now, let’s not jump to conclusions, everyone. Maybe the knife stuck him as he fell.”

“What kind of knife was it?” Roy asked.

“A steak knife, like we had with dinner,” Tex said.

“Someone should call the police,” Masa offered. “Does anyone have a cell phone?” Heads shook no all around except for Javier, who pulled out a phone.

Cliff saw it and snatched it from him. “Hold on! Let’s not do anything we can’t undo. There’s nothing they can do now anyway. We need to figure out what happened first. If we call the police we’ll all be murder suspects and we’ll be stuck here for days or longer. Did anyone see what happened?”

No one answered.

“Who put you in charge?” Roy demanded.

“I’m a detective and a lawyer. You want someone else, fine. Take a vote. Everyone who wants to be responsible for what we do next raise your hand.”

As before, no one answered the call.

“Fine. Let’s go around and everyone say where you were when you heard the scream, if you heard the scream. I’ll go first. I was on the trail going north toward this site. From a distance I had seen Sprague climb up the stairs and disappear northward once on top. About five minutes later I heard the scream and started running. It took me another four or five minutes to reach the spot where he fell. I passed Javier on the way. Javier?”

“I was on the trail just north of where the stairs come up. We were running late. It took us longer to go round the island than we thought and he wasn’t sure we’d make it before the cache was found. He was going to go ahead and check it. Mr. Sprague had told me to wait until he called for me, but then I heard the noise. I wasn’t sure if it was a joke or part of the movie or what, but I figured I’d better check it out. I thought if it was part of the action, like someone had already found the cache, he’d want me there to film it so I went to the sound. Then you passed me. I couldn’t go fast with the camera equipment. He was the only one there.” He pointed at Tex.

Cliff thought about this. Javier had a motive. He’d been threatened with termination and with immigration problems. He had access to the knives – everyone did. He’d already threatened Sprague with a knife, in fact. He could have pushed Sprague over and run south thirty or forty yards, then turned around and started north again to make it look like he was running toward the noise. He’d been the first on the scene after Cliff.

Tex started to respond to Javier, but Cliff held up a hand to stop him. “Let’s go around the circle. Beth?”

“I was on the trail, in the forest.” She pointed eastward. “I heard the scream and came running, but I tripped over a root in the dark. That’s why I’m all muddy.” She had a bruise on her cheek, too, which she didn’t mention. Her parka had a big tear in the front. She’d been the last to arrive, Cliff thought, although he couldn’t be sure because she had arrived while he and Tex had been going to rescue Sprague.

“She looks like she’s been in a fight,” Tex said. “And she has the best reason of anyone. Siggnal had a video of her in the shower and was jerking off to it.”

All eyes flew to Beth who hid her face in her hands as Lars comforted her with an arm around her shoulders. Several geocachers gasped, indicating they, like Cliff, hadn’t heard this before. Clearly, that had been what was going on in the video room when the three had barged in on Sprague. That meant Lars and Flo also knew this. Whom had they told? Probably Luke and maybe Roy. Were others pretending to have heard this for the first time now? Cliff could tell it didn’t come as a surprise to Beth herself. Lars must have told her.

Tex continued, “Why would I do it? If I was the first one, I would have gotten the FTF and the hundred grand. I was north of here on the coast trail when I heard the scream just around the bend. I was here in maybe forty seconds and looked around. No one was here. I’d heard another noise, too, like a thwack and reckoned someone had fallen over. I looked down and saw him, then you showed up.”

“Okay, you’ve had your say. We skipped Lars. Lars?”

"I didn't hear any scream. Roy and I were on a trail further up the hill, almost to the clearing, although we didn't know it then. I was still looking for the reflectors. Then I heard Tex yell to you guys about Signal and ran as fast as I could down to here. Roy was right behind me."

Cliff looked over and Roy was nodding his agreement. "You two were together the whole time?"

"No. We split apart back at one of the forks, but our trails joined together again later. We were together after that. Deborah saw us."

"Deborah?"

"Yeah, they were following me, trying to horn in to keep me from getting ahead of Lars, but the trails kept splitting. Roy took off first and then I was able to shake Lars when he fell down. He took one fork and I took another. But I never saw them join up again. I was in the forest on the south side of the clearing and thought I heard something, but I didn't realize it was a scream. When I heard voices coming from down here, I came too, as fast as I could. I saw Roy and Lars come up to you guys and I joined you." She was standing back a distance from the fire, but zipped up her parka and moved in close to the fire as she spoke, her hands turned so her palms faced the flames. She was sweating, Cliff noticed. But then, so were Luke, Flo, and Cliff himself. Some of the others might be, too, but were too far back from the fire for Cliff to tell.

Lynne was next around the circle. "Deborah doesn't have any motive, either. Like Lars and Tex, if they were first here, they'd claim first place and the loot. Shoving him over would cost them all. I don't think it's any of the women. None of us are big enough. Sprague was rather hefty, wouldn't you say? It had to be a man."

"Hold on," Roy said. "Sprague was drunk. We all saw it. Anyone could stab him and a good sneeze could send him over the edge if they were close enough to it, so it didn't have to be a man. Lars and I were going to split it if he won. I think all the teams were splitting the winnings. So no one had a motive, unless maybe it was Flo or Luke. They couldn't win, and Signal was going to break her find streak. Throw twelve years down the tubes. We know they were here with him. They admitted it."

"Stop! We're getting ahead of ourselves. Lynne, you never said where you were."

"I was still searching in the forest on one of the trails. By myself. I have no alibi. Lock me up, guv'nor." She affected a cockney accent as she liked to do when being sarcastic.

Lynne had been one of the last to arrive and had no motive that Cliff could see. Cliff thought it was like her to try to solve the mystery. That was her forte, but he wasn't sure her logic held. Roy had a point. "Luke, you say you and Flo came up the stairway ahead of Javier and Sprague?"

"That's right."

"And you were sitting back out of the wind when I ran by?"

"Right again. Then Masa behind you."

Cliff didn't remember seeing them when he ran by, but then he probably wouldn't have. He'd been focused up ahead where the scream had come from. If they were telling the truth, they

confirmed that Masa couldn't have done it since he would have been behind Cliff to the south at the time of the scream, but Cliff knew that already. Masa was one person Cliff could eliminate from his own knowledge. Luke had not said they saw Javier running to the scream, so he must have been ahead of them. That meant, assuming they were truthful and memory served accurately, the order of people coming from the south, beginning with the farthest, was Masa, Cliff, Luke and Flo, and Javier. Cliff had arrived first, but that was because Javier was carrying equipment and Luke and Flo were sitting back in the trees. That didn't help Javier, though. He still could have done the deed, come back a ways and then turned around before Cliff got to him.

"Masa, I know you were behind me, so you're out. Roy?"

"What Lars said. We were together on the trail."

"You and Lars are covering for each other. That's pretty convenient," Tex said. "Lars had more to lose than any of us. Sprague threatened to change the API and deny Lars access to it. That would destroy his business. The rest of us could go on as usual without a big cash prize we hadn't expected anyway, but Lars would be out of a job altogether. With Sprague dead, he'd no doubt continue on with the existing administration."

This was yet another tidbit Cliff hadn't known. He wished he'd been there in that video room when the confrontation had happened. "Okay, Tex, you've got the floor. So tell us exactly what happened in there. No more secrets."

Tex laid out the whole story in detail. Grimaces and muttered curses crossed in the wind and flames as the story unfolded. The women crossed their arms over their chests as though he were filming them in the nude even now.

"This is BS," Roy declared vehemently. "No geocacher would do it. Why? We'd all lose any shot at the prize money and any change of leadership would hurt the sport. Sprague lowered membership fees and started paying staff to approve new caches. It's much easier to get new caches approved than it used to be and there's better quality control. Who knows what's going to happen next? The whole sport could get ruined now. The only person here with any real motive is Javier."

"No, sir. I didn't do it. I had no reason. I will lose my job now with him dead. I need it. Mr. Sprague was a bad man to work for, I know. He has threatened to fire me before, but he never does. I would not kill him for that. I would not kill anybody. Mr. Emerson was the one on the scene. He has a temper and hurt Mr. Sprague already."

Heads turned quizzically. "Who's Mr. Emerson?" Cliff asked.

"Mr. Tex Murphy. His name is Mr. Emerson. I made the reservations."

Tex pointed an accusatory finger at Javier. "I risked my life to try to save him. For that I'm accused of murder?"

"How do we even know it was murder?" Lynne asked. "Maybe the knife slipped as he was doing something with the cache, adjusting it, or putting something inside. He might have stuck himself accidentally, staggered back and fallen over the edge. I think we should just all treat it that way and tell the police it was an accident. I have to be back in the U.K. the day after tomorrow."

Lynne said this calmly and analytically, like the puzzle solver she was, but Cliff found her tone unconvincing. She didn't believe what she was saying, he was sure. But why say it, then? Because she wanted to get back to England?

"No way!" Tex countered. "I saw that knife. It was plunged to the handle into the thigh. Someone drove it in with force."

Cliff had seen it, too. He knew Tex was right. Someone had stabbed Sprague. But why with a steak knife and why in the thigh? An idea was beginning to coalesce in his brain.

"All right. It's time. This has a solution. Everybody move over to this side of the fire." Roy and Lars grumbled, but everyone moved over close to Cliff on the side of the fire toward the water. They were more than curious now; the tension was almost palpable. Was Cliff going to accuse someone? Had he solved it?

"Sprague was stabbed intentionally. What seem like motives aren't reason enough to kill him. Everyone has something to lose by his death and nothing definite to gain. The motive is there, though, and I know what it is. Masa, you go stand on the other side of the fire. It wasn't you. Whatever the motive, I know you were behind me at the moment of the scream, so it couldn't be you."

Masa walked around to the other side of the fire, relief flooding his stoic Japanese features.

"Tex, you were the closest to him at the moment of the scream so far as I can tell and you've physically attacked him before, but it wasn't you. I was with you down there trying to save Sprague or at least retrieve his body and you weren't faking it. You were risking your life. If you'd killed him you would have wanted his body and all the evidence to wash away. Besides, you have no reason to use a steak knife. You have a survival knife on your belt, easily grabbed and no doubt familiar to your hand. As you pointed out, you lost a shot at the money when he died, too. Go over with Masa." Tex did as he was told.

Flo began to shudder and shiver, teeth chattering. Lynne noticed this and gave her a quick pat then stepped away and returned with a sizeable chunk of dead wood which she threw on the fire. It flared up. Sweat beaded on the brows all around.

"Lars, you go over to my left, halfway around. I can't eliminate you yet. I think you and Roy were together as you say, but you could be lying. You could have killed him together, or one of you could have and the other is covering. And you had a possible motive."

"What motive?! I was leading."

"Exactly. The timing would have to be just right, but if you broke into the clearing and saw one of the other geocachers in the process of finding the cache, say Tex or Deborah, with Sprague right there to witness it, you could have realized you'd lost. By eliminating both the cache record and Signal the contest could be declared over and you as the leader up to this cache would be declared the winner. Like a baseball game declared over due to rain in the eighth inning. It's theoretically possible."

"That's crap, Knowles," Roy sputtered. "I was with him. It didn't happen. You think either of us, or even both of us together, could overpower Sprague and Tex? And now the prize

is gone. You think some board of directors or estate administrator somewhere is going to award it to anyone? It was all in Signal's brain."

"I said possible motive. You're right, although I still think the possibility of changing the API was a pretty good motive for Lars. But I'll say for now Lars didn't do it." Cliff pointed.

Lars moved halfway around the blazing ring to the spot Cliff pointed out. Roy began to follow him, but Cliff grabbed his sleeve.

"Wait right here, Roy, right next to me."

"What the hell? We were together We ..."

"Just do as I say." Cliff's grip on the sleeve became one on Roy's biceps. Roy winced but stepped over next to Cliff. Lynne shook her head in apparent disapproval, a motion that Cliff noted with interest.

"Luke and Flo, I'm going to send one of you around to the other side. Lynne, you want to tell them which one?"

Lynne glared back at him silently.

"You know where I'm going with this, don't you?"

"I don't know who stabbed him. I say it was an accident."

"I think you know it wasn't. Who am I going to have go around with Masa and the others?"

Lynne shook her head again. "Luke," she finally answered and looked away. Cliff nodded and made a motion with his free hand to Luke to move.

"And why Luke, Lynne?"

"Luke and Flo didn't want to come. Javier confirmed their story. If Luke'd wanted to stab that swine, and wouldn't we all, he would have done it back at the lodge. Why would he come all the way out here and then do it in front of Flo? These two have been glued at the hip since they got here. You know that."

"Almost. Sprague made a clumsy pass at her in her room, a physical assault really. I had to rescue her. Isn't that so?" He looked at Flo for confirmation. She nodded reluctantly. "Flo, you stand by me next to Roy. Luke you go over with Masa."

"I was with Luke," Flo protested as she obeyed. "Like what Lynne just said. I didn't even want to come here. Where would I even get the knife? Javier hustled us out of our room onto the boat. You think I keep a steak knife in my parka?" Javier once again nodded confirmation.

"That's perhaps the most important question anyone has asked yet."

"I'm not leaving her," Luke said determinedly. He stood by her side.

"Fine, stand there if you want, but I know it wasn't you. Javier, you can go over to the other side, too. I've watched you and Sprague together this whole time. You're a loyal employee and he obviously only makes those threats about firing you when he's drunk. You've been with him for years and he depends on you. If you'd wanted to kill him, you've had a thousand chances to do it with no one else around before now. You'd be losing your job; you *will* lose your job now."



“Gracias. Thank you, Mr. Knowles, thank you.” Javier scuttled to join the innocent side of the fire. That was the first time Cliff had heard him use Spanish.

Cliff stepped back and faced the four women. They all turned to see what he was doing. Roy pulled his arm from Cliff’s grip, which he had loosened.

“Don’t go anywhere, Roy. I need you. You’re going to help me identify the person who stabbed Sprague. It took me a while to put it together, but it was the knife that did it. A steak knife is a weapon of opportunity. Someone grabbed it on the way out of the lodge because they didn’t feel safe unarmed. Because *she* didn’t feel safe. Why? Because she had seen Sprague drunk and knew what a scumbag he was, what a lecherous sleaze. She knew he lusted after the women and apparently had no scruples about forcing himself on them. Right, Flo?”

“Me!? I didn’t stab him. Luke was with me the whole time.”

“You’ve told the other women to watch out for him, though, haven’t you? That he’s a grabber.”

“Everyone knew he was a lech. Yes, I told them to stay clear of him. That video of the stripper with Beth’s face. The camera in the shower. He had the hots for Beth.”

“Beth. Yes, Beth. He definitely had the hots for Beth. And unlike Flo, you were alone, isn’t that right, Beth? Lars and Roy had decided to stay with Deborah. You and Lynne stuck together at first but then you went off on your own.”

“So did Lynne and Deborah!”

“That’s right, they did. Why, when you all knew a drunk Signal, a lecher like him, was lurking out there? Because you felt you could handle him. You all had knives, didn’t you? Whose idea was it to grab the knives as you left? Yours?”

Beth looked over at Lynne.

Cliff lunged forward and grabbed Beth’s parka. It had a rip in the front in the mud smear where she had fallen. He’d noticed a hole, fresh-looking, in the fabric. As he’d expected, there was something hard, long, and sharp in her jacket pocket. He pulled out a steak knife from her pocket, one matching the one from Sprague’s leg.

“It can’t be her,” Lars cried out. “Not if she has her knife. You think she had two?”

Cliff stepped in front of Roy and faced him. He raised the knife high as though to bring a lethal thrust downward toward his heart. Roy jumped back reflexively.

“Thank you for the prop, Beth. As Lars, says, it can’t be you. You still have your knife. You can go join the others.”

She ran to Lars’s side and hugged him gratefully.

“You all saw that little demonstration? Where would the knife have landed if I had stabbed him from this direction? I’m right-handed. Everyone on this excursion is too. The knife would have plunged into Roy’s left torso, near his heart or lungs. Of course, I’m six inches taller than Roy and facing him.”

Cliff turned the knife around and handed it to Roy. Roy raised it in a motion mimicking Cliff’s. Suddenly, he thrust it sharply downward. For an instant, Cliff thought he’d made a fatal

error. Lynne and Deborah shrieked. But Roy stopped the blade an inch from Cliff's chest and grinned.

"Serves you right," he whispered in Cliff's ear.

Unfazed, Cliff spun Roy around. Roy still held the knife in his hand. "Everyone notice how he's holding it. It's a steak knife. It has one serrated edge and one dull edge with a very sharp point. He's holding it with the serrated edge down, the way I did. The way anyone would for a downward thrust. Now watch."

Cliff grabbed Roy from behind, encircling Roy's upper arms with his own crossed arms. With each hand he grabbed Roy's rather substantial man boobs. Cliff's pelvis was pressed against Roy's butt tightly. Roy struggled, but Cliff was taller and stronger. Roy couldn't shake Cliff loose.

"I couldn't do this to a woman; that would be inexcusable, even as a demonstration. That's why I chose you, Roy. You're the shortest man. Everyone look at his knife hand."

Roy still held the knife in his right hand, but with his upper arms pinned against his body it became obvious to everyone that the only way he could stab Cliff was a thrust downward past his own right leg into Cliff's right thigh which protruded a few inches farther outward as Cliff had spread his legs to keep his balance against Roy's struggles.

"Why choose to stab someone in the thigh? If the intent had been to kill, the attack would have been to the torso or perhaps head or neck. Unless, of course, the intent had been to maim and then push him over the cliff. It was the handle. That's what finally hit me. I knew when I first saw it sticking from his leg that something didn't look right but I couldn't figure it out right away. It's a fancy design, all curved to fit the hand. It's intended for cutting steak, so that the serrated edge is down. It's very awkward to hold it the other way around. The handle curves go the wrong way. I finally realized that he'd been stabbed with the serrated edge up, just as it would be if Roy stabbed me now." He released Roy.

"Someone might in theory stab from the front, but in order to stab him in his right thigh, a right-handed person would have to either be standing to one side or thrust diagonally across the intervening space in a downward motion and in either case be holding the knife upside down from the normal position. And why would they aim for the leg? Signal would almost certainly have been able to block the blow, even drunk. The only way it made sense was if he'd been holding someone the way I just held Roy. Someone smaller, shorter than him. A woman."

All eyes were now focused on Lynne and Deborah, the only people beside Roy still standing with Cliff. They both looked back at the others nervously, trying to read their minds.

"That's just speculation," Lynne said with vehemence. "If you're right then one of us should still have a knife and the other one not. Why don't you search us. Here." She pulled off her geocaching fanny pack and her parka and tossed them toward Cliff. They landed with a dull thud on the ground. "You can frisk me, too, G-man." She raised her arms.

"Yeah, me too," Deborah chimed in, tossing her outer garments in a separate pile at Cliff's feet. "I don't have a knife, but that doesn't mean I killed him. I can't believe you'd suspect me, Cliff. You know me. We've been friends for years. At least I thought we were

friends. Go ahead, search if you have to.” She raised her hands like Lynne as though to be frisked.

“I was planning to. Roy, you want to help?” Cliff and Roy bent down and felt through all the clothing and packs. There were no steak knives.

“You going to frisk us now?” Lynne said with a wicked grin, her arms still up. “You want to get your jollies now? Is that it?”

“So are we both murderers?” Deborah added. “We don’t have knives so we must be killers. How about all those others? They don’t have steak knives either. So they’re all murderers?”

“I don’t need to frisk either of you. I already know who did it. Lynne figured it out before I did. That’s why she’s been protecting you, why she’s been trying convince me it was an accident. She knew all three of you had knives because she’s the one who suggested it after Sprague said he’d be out with us. Beth as much as admitted it when she looked at Lynne when I asked about it. Lynne also knew the trails forked again and again, which meant you’d probably all be alone at some point and might need a way to protect yourself. She didn’t bother to warn Flo because Flo was staying back at the lodge with Luke to keep her safe. None of the men would have any reason to bring a steak knife. Sprague had no interest in them, and they could defend themselves anyway. Lynne, when you heard of the knife in the thigh, you knew it wasn’t you, so it had to be either Beth or Deborah. You saw the same rip in Beth’s parka I did, where the steak knife tore through the pocket when she fell. The blade may even have been sticking through then and visible, so she still had her knife. That left Deborah. You’re still trying to protect her. That’s why you tossed your knife in the bushes over there when you went to get that wood for the fire, trying to make yourself a suspect in my eyes. I watched you. We could always retrieve the knife and have it tested for fingerprints.”

“You bastard,” Lynne said.

Deborah started crying. “No! That’s crazy. He wouldn’t have any interest in me. I’m gay. He knew that.”

“Did he?” Cliff said.

But the question didn’t need to be answered, because simultaneously Tex blurted out, “You’re a lesbo?” Lars’s jaw dropped; he’d hit on her earlier.

Cliff continued, “Does anyone really think Sprague would care, even if he knew? Come on, are you two going to make me do it?”

Lynne and Deborah looked at each other but said nothing.

“Okay, if you want it that way. Roy, go over there where Lynne fetched that big branch for the fire and search for the steak knife. Don’t pick it up. We need to preserve the prints. The rest of you look at these women. Which one do you think Sprague would grab?”

“Cliff! How dare you?” Deborah blubbered, but it was to no avail. Both were still standing with their outer clothing on the ground, their figures unhidden. Deborah’s youthful, womanly curves and pretty facial features contrasted starkly with the scrawny, geriatric form of Lynne.

Lynne watched as Roy headed directly to the bush Cliff had indicated. “Okay, okay. It’s over, Deborah. Tell him.” Deborah was sobbing. Lynne put her arm around her and whispered, “He’s figured it out. Just tell us how it happened. I know you’re no murderer.” Roy stopped searching and returned to the fire.

It took her almost five minutes to recover. No one said a word. The only sound was the lapping of the waves on the shore. Finally she spoke.

“It was self-defense, I swear. I found the cache. I found it. I was first! I came out of the forest into the clearing and it was right there on the tree. It was huge, easy to spot. I pulled it off. It was stuck with Velcro. I started to open it, but he grabbed me from behind, just like Cliff said. He had one hand on my boob and was squeezing hard. The other hand was down behind me. I think he was trying to open his pants. He pushed against me a couple of times and I could tell he was hard. I tried to get away, but he was too strong. Then he said if I wanted that prize I was going to have to earn it. He was drunk and licking my ear. I could smell his breath. I, I ...” She started sobbing again briefly, but collected herself once more.

“I kept struggling and we ended up over near the edge. I still had the cache in my hands. It was too big to hold with one hand. He managed to get one hand under my parka and was sliding it under my bra, roughly. Not gentle. His other arm was pinning my arms, but he was trying to reach my belt buckle with it, too. I panicked and dropped the cache on the ground so I could pull out the knife. I had it in my caching bag in front. I could only move my forearms, but I unzipped the bag, pulled out the knife, and stabbed his leg just like Cliff showed. He let out a sound, like a gasp or sort of gurgle and let go of me. He staggered backward and tripped over the cache. He went over the edge, kicking the cache with him as he fell. He screamed all the way down. I knew others had to be close. I ran back into the woods and hid until I saw a bunch of you come out. It was an accident, I swear. I didn’t mean for him to fall.”

Her chest continued to heave, but she didn’t cry any more. She’d sunk to her knees and now looked up pleadingly at all the assembled faces. She barely managed to mumble, “Please believe me.”

“Look what you did to her,” Lynne said, staring venom at Cliff. “You made her go through that again. She’s devastated.”

Cliff noticed Javier with his video camera on his shoulder. “Javier! What are doing?! Stop filming.”

“It’s evidence, for the police. Now we can ...”

“Tex, grab that camera!”

Tex wrenched the camera from Javier’s grasp and turned it off. “Cliff’s right. We don’t need evidence. There’s no crime here. Signal’s fly was partway open. That corroborates what she said. Is there anyone who doubts her story?”

No one spoke. Several heads shook no.

Cliff drew himself up to appear as authoritative as possible. “I’m a lawyer and former FBI agent. I believe in the law. But I also know how hard the legal process can be on victims, especially victims of sexual crimes. I’m sorry I had to put us all through this, but it’s better –

much better – than the alternative, a police homicide investigation. I had to know for sure. If it had been murder, I would have been the first to report it. If we all agree it was self-defense and that no crime has been committed, this can end tonight. We'll have to report the death, but we don't say he was stabbed, even in self-defense. He just accidentally fell off the cliff in the dark while drunk. I heard the scream as did Tex and Javier. We saw his body on the rocks below and tried to save him, but the waves took him away before we could get to him. That's the truth, one hundred percent. That's all we tell the police. This will only work if everyone agrees."

"I'm in," Tex said.

"That's all I wanted from the beginning," Lynne said.

"I get it," Roy said. "He was drunk. He fell. That's all I know."

"No! That's not all you know. Don't lie! Lying to the police is obstruction of justice, a crime. I am not telling anyone to lie, just the opposite. Tell only the truth, but the less you say, the better. If you feel you have to respond to a question, don't answer directly, but say what you want to say. Take your time and say your answer to yourself first and think, 'Is that the literal truth?' He was drunk. You believe it was an accident. You didn't see it happen. You don't want to speculate. Those are true statements. Refer them to me. Tell them I was one of the first on the scene.

Cliff went around the circle one by one, insisting everyone speak their agreement aloud. When they were done, he took the videocam from Javier, opened the small hatch and extracted the memory card. He turned it on and tried to play back any footage in order to verify that all the memory had been removed. The error message told him he had it all on the card. He tossed the card onto the fire. They all watched it melt into a puddle. He gave the camera back to Javier.

"What now? What about the prize money? What happens to geocaching?"

"Good questions, Roy, but ones without answers. Forget the prize money. We don't ever tell anybody about that or the police will suspect it played a role in the death. A homicide case would almost certainly be opened and we'd all be suspects. Everyone who made a video of Sprague offering the prize needs to delete it when you get back to your phone. We just were all invited for a special all-expense paid geocaching holiday on a private island. It ended with a sad accident. That's all. As I said before, that's one hundred percent the truth. As for geocaching, well, it's bigger than one man, even Sprague. He may be the sole owner of the website, but it's a company like any other. There will be a president or acting CEO or someone to take over and things will go on as ever. Flo's streak will make it another twelve years, I'll wager."

"I already logged my finds for today back at the lodge," she offered.

"What if someone at the company tells the police about the prize? The movie?" Lars asked. "Someone must know."

"Maybe, maybe not. He and Javier were doing all the filming themselves even though he could have hired professionals. None of us knew until we got here. That tells me he was keeping it pretty closely held. The invitations said there'd be prizes, but nothing about a cash prize. If someone tells the police and they ask, we'll just say we didn't know anything about a cash prize

when we accepted the invitation. That's the truth. Just don't bring it up and don't mention the later announcement. Did anyone else know about the prize money, Javier?"

"I don't know. Maybe someone at the company. I didn't even know until he announced it here. Tomas doesn't know, I'm sure. He's been on the boat the whole time. He was just hired to take care of the boat for this trip. He's not a company employee."

"Even if someone at the company knows about the prize," Cliff said, "they don't know that he announced it to us. He said that his original plan was to tell us only at the end, remember? It was only because of our reaction that first night that he told us. So far as anyone else knows, we were in the dark, so the money was no motive."

"What about the film, I mean, the shower scenes?" Beth asked. "Are we absolutely sure that stuff is all gone? If there's a backup somewhere ..."

"There isn't," Lars answered. "Trust me. After our confrontation with him, I went around the whole lodge with him and ripped out every camera in the rooms and bathrooms, everything except in the main room and the dining room. Then I spent an hour erasing all the files except the legitimate geocaching ones, the stuff that is consistent with his promotional video idea. I checked his system logs. He never transferred anything to the cloud. It was all on his hard drive. He wasn't very sophisticated about it for a high-tech guy. I also checked his emails. He didn't send any to the company or anyone else while here. I checked his phone, too. No posts to Instagram or any other social media."

Cliff turned to Javier. "What will you tell Tomas?"

"Only what you said. I do not want police either. Tomas will believe me. He said something to me in Spanish on the boat about Mr. Sprague being in no condition to climb that stairway in the dark. Police will believe Mr. Sprague was drunk and fell."

"Can you call him to come pick us up? I'm freezing my ass off and I don't want to hike all the way back. My flashlight's almost dead and the moon is going behind the mountains." It was Roy who said it.

"Hear, hear," from Beth.

"I'm ready," Flo echoed.

Cliff nodded and handed the cell phone back to Javier. He called Tomas and spoke some Spanish when he got an answer.

"He will be back at the stairway beach in five minutes. We'll have to shuttle back and forth in the dinghy, but he says the sea is not too bad right now."

Roy and Tex doused the fire thoroughly with dirt. Everyone else began traipsing back to the stairway landing. An hour later they were all back at the lodge.

When they got there Flo said, "This place creeps me out. Can we just pack up and go back to the mainland tonight?"

"No we cannot. I made no reservations for tonight at the hotel and Tomas will not take us back in the dark, either. We have lots of food. There was going to be a party tonight and breakfast tomorrow before we left. We should just wait until tomorrow."

“You guys can party,” Lars said. “I don’t feel so festive. I’m going to bed.” Beth joined him as they disappeared up the stairs. Everyone else followed once they retrieved their cell phones from Javier.

In his room Cliff called Ellen.

“Hi. I’m done here. We’re coming home tomorrow.”

“Was it fun?”

“At times. It was ... well, it was geocaching.”

Ellen laughed. “Ain’t it the truth! I saw the weather reports. You must have been miserable in the cold and rain. Did you find all the caches?”

“Not all. I DNF’ed a couple of them today. No one got them all.”

“Ah, well, maybe next time. Your children will be glad to see you back safe and sound. So will their mother.”

“Good to know. I’m totally bushed. I’m going to bed. I’ll tell you all about it when I get home. I love you. See you tomorrow.”

“Love you. Get some rest.”

As Cliff was stripping down to take a shower, there was a knock on the door. He tied the complimentary bathrobe around him and opened the door. It was Deborah.

“Can I come in?”

“Of course. Deborah, I’m sorry I had to do ...”

“No, no. don’t apologize. I came here to apologize to you. I shouldn’t have made you go through that. I, I ... was just scared. I’d just killed a man. If I’d known how you, ... how everyone would believe me. I should have just told the whole thing from the start.”

“It’s okay. Like you said, you were scared. That’s normal. I’ve been there myself. The thought of going to prison for murder, well, anyone who wasn’t scared out of their mind would have to be an idiot.”

He opened his arms, inviting a hug, but didn’t approach her. He wasn’t sure how she’d respond to a man touching her, especially one dressed only in a bathrobe. She stepped forward and gave him a warm embrace, then stepped back.

“Um, I still have that hundred I found at the first cache. We agreed to split it.”

“Keep it. I already talked about that with Lynne. It’s hardly adequate compensation for what you went through, but you deserve it.”

“Thank you, Cliff.” She took both his hands in hers for a moment then turned and left. He watched her go.

## **CliffNotes**

“Daddy!” shrieked the tousled-haired boy when Cliff walked in the door.

“Hi there, champ.” He picked him up and swung him around, then put him down. Having done his filial duty, Tommy ran back to the cartoon show he was watching.

Ellen appeared holding a squirming one-year-old girl. “Welcome back. Win any prizes?”

“Nope.”

“Really? I thought there were supposed to be prizes.”

“A few. Just some travel bugs and geocoins. Doily won a hundred dollars as an FTF prize.”

“That’s not so bad. Here’s a prize for you. Her diaper needs changing. Ilsa’s out shopping.”

“The best prize of all.” He took his daughter in his arms and headed to the changing table. “Turn on the TV. Put it on a news station. There’s some breaking news you’ll want to hear.”

Ellen went to the bedroom television and found a twenty-four hour news station. The announcer was talking about a demonstration in Turkey. A crawler ran across the bottom of the screen.

*Tech mogul Simon Sprague falls to his death in accident on private island.*



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