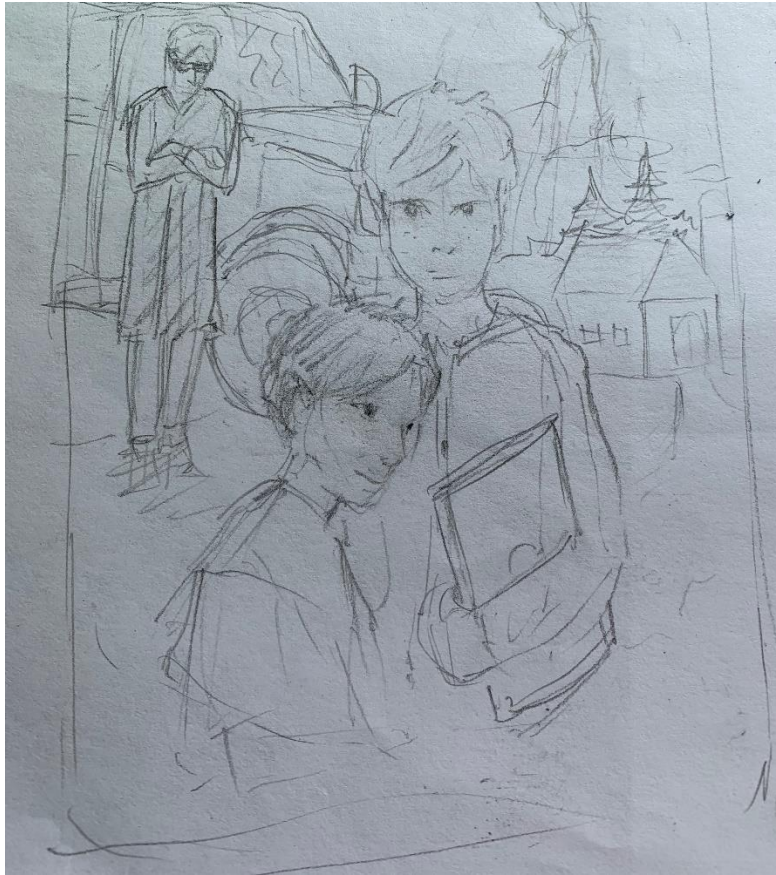


The
Birchfield Brothers

and

The Mystery of the Hoolee Warriors



By

D. L. Westling

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Chapter 1: *Poof!*

As sunlight intruded through the blinds of the brothers' bedroom, Jake Birchfield begrudgingly opened his eyes. The knock on the door told him breakfast was 30 minutes away and that being late wasn't an option. Now awake, the younger of the two brothers slowly lifted his body and turned his head just enough to look across at the bed next to his, assuming his brother CJ had also received the message. But to his dismay, CJ wasn't sitting up or even lying in his bed. In fact, he wasn't even there.

When the eleven-year old rubbed his eyes and pulled himself into a sitting position to get a better view, he saw that his 13 year-old brother's bed was not only empty, but that it was perfectly made, just as if no one had been in it all night.

The younger brother pushed his covers off, forced himself out of bed and walked softly to the bathroom door. He knocked, but there was no response. Then he walked to the door going into the hallway, opened it, and yelled: *"CJ??? Mare??? Märta, you seen CJ? He's not in here!"*

"Jake, get a move on!" Märta responded, not paying attention to what Jake had asked her. "You and CJ need to get in here so you have enough time to finish your breakfast."

"I said CJ's not here. Is he out there???" Jake yelled.

Again, Märta didn't respond to the question.

What's going on? Jake thought. Where is he?

Jake gave the bedroom another going over, bending down to look under both beds and the desks, but saw only dirty socks and underwear. He was starting to walk over to open the bedroom's closet door, but thought he heard something inside bump against the wall. He stopped and took a deep breath. "CJ? You in there?" He said through the closed closet door, but there was no answer. Walking softly and quietly on the deep pile carpet Jake inched his way barefooted toward the closet door. Then, standing in front of it, in one quick move, he twisted the doorknob and yanked the door open, jumped back, and slid into a crouching position, ready to defend himself if need be. But there was no need; CJ was not in the closet.

As Jake stood looking at the empty closet, the bedroom door slowly opened.

"I'm only telling you boys one more time," Märta said, sticking her head in.

"Stop messing around in here and get to breakfast or you'll be leaving for school hungry, because you're certainly not going to be late meeting Val!"

"I was looking for CJ," Jake said defensively. "He's not in here and I don't know where he is. Is he not out there with you?"

"I haven't seen him this morning but I'm telling you both, get yourselves into the kitchen for breakfast!" Märta said emphatically as she glanced around the room and then walked out the door.

Jake quickly dressed, all the while looking around the room, again thinking CJ must be carefully stowed somewhere he hadn't yet checked. But again, he saw nothing, so he left the room heading toward the kitchen at the other end of the apartment. As he did he poked his head in every bedroom and bathroom along the hallway, yelling his brother's name. But each time, he

saw nothing and heard nothing. Moving more quickly, he trotted past the apartment's entry foyer, into the living room, and then out onto the terrace in the chilly morning air. Again, in each location, he saw no sign of his brother. Finally, with his nervousness growing as fast as his imagination, he leaned over the terrace wall and looked down toward the sidewalk at the bottom of the fifteen story apartment building. Relieved, he saw no sign of his brother at the bottom, or any telling commotion on the sidewalk.

Still baffled, Jake ran back inside the apartment and toward the kitchen. As he started walking in to it, he yelled out for Märta but as soon as he did, he looked at the breakfast table, and there sat CJ, completely dressed and casually glancing at his iPhone. "*Where were you, butthead???*" Jake demanded, but CJ only gave him a quick puzzled look and then returned his attention to his phone. In the same instant, Märta turned around from the stove and looked at the brothers.

"Good. It's about time you both got here. Now what would you like for breakfast," she said, "you don't have a lot of time left."

Just as always, Märta, or simply Mare, as the boys usually called her, was moving quickly between the kitchen table and the stove as she readied the boys' breakfast. As per usual, she glided with a cool and unflustered flow as she went about her morning business. Her clothing beige chino crop pants, a light blue long sleeve shirt, and gray runners... mixed well with her bobbed blond hair that was cut to allow for light and quick action.

Märta prepared the boys' breakfast to order. CJ requested scrambled eggs, sausage patties, toast, and milk; while Jake asked for pancakes, bacon, orange juice, and yogurt. "I'll have it ready in just a shake," Märta said.

To CJ and Jake, Märta was not much different than their parents. In fact, they actually saw her a little more than they did their actual mother and father. And in terms of her saying something and them doing it, there was no question to it. In fact, it had been that way for almost the last eleven years.

CJ and Jake weren't surprised that neither parent was in the penthouse apartment when they came to breakfast, because they usually were not. Both parents were renowned and highly demanded physicians in the New York area: Dr. Scott Lawrence Birchfield, neurosurgeon; and Dr. Johanna Schwester Birchfield, cardiovascular surgeon.

Their jobs demanded them to be awake by 5:00 a.m. five mornings a week so they could be in surgery or in their offices by 7:00. Their days typically lasted ten to twelve hours and while they loved the work they did...and knew it made a difference in many people's lives... they also knew that it was almost impossible to have enough time to be with their children as much as they wanted. So that's where and why Märta came in.

When CJ was three and Jake only one, Johanna, or Jonnie as she was more commonly known, decided it was time to return to work. In fact she was desperate to get back to doing what she loved and did so well. But leaving CJ and Jake with a stranger or in day care was not a viable option, mostly because of the work hours, but also because she had to be sure that they would have no less than what she would give them herself. So she and Scott

began to investigate a way they could find someone to become a substitute stay-at-home mom for their sons.

Hours and hours of research and numerous interviews did not produce the right person and this left the Birchfields exasperated. It was a Goldilocks dilemma: Some applicants were too young, others too old; some were too harsh and others too soft; some were suspiciously over-qualified and others clearly unacceptable. And so the careful parents began to think that their future plans would need to be re-considered. But then, a most fortuitous encounter occurred. It was at a medical conference in Stockholm where the Birchfields met Märta Petersson and created a long-term plan that they hoped would meet their unique needs.

Staying at the conference hotel and dining every morning in the hotel's café, by no more than chance, Märta became the couple's regular server. When they first met her, Märta appeared to be in her late 20s or early 30s, spoke perfect English, was graceful, well-mannered, quick-witted, and most important, seemed to be intellectually well above average. The doctors enjoyed chatting with her, but at each breakfast the chats grew in length and ultimately nearly bordered on full-length discussions. The Birchfields started to become concerned that their extended conversations were going to get Märta into trouble with her boss. Nevertheless, they were so taken by the young woman, that throughout the day they managed to insert thoughts about her into their personal discussions... most often talking about how they would like to employ someone just like her to take care of CJ and Jake. Ultimately, a plan started to develop.

Not being able to delve into the depth they wished during the breakfast hour, on the last day of the conference before their return home, Scott and Jonnie decided to make a bold move so they invited Märta to be their dinner guest.

“Märta, what would you think of joining us for dinner this evening? That is, if you don’t have any plans.” Jonnie asked. “We have a reservation at the *Den Gyldene Freden* and would like you to be our guest. There’s something we’d like to discuss with you. You’re welcome to bring someone with you if you like.”

Märta was a little taken aback, somewhat embarrassed, but mostly flattered. She hemmed and hawed a bit, but then said she would be happy to accept, asking if she could bring her mother along. At the designated time, Märta showed up at the restaurant, but alone. She explained that her mother could not come because she was ill, but had encouraged her to go. During the dinner Jonnie and Scott laid out their thoughts. Essentially they told Märta that they wanted to get to know her a little better, but if things worked out, they wanted to offer her a job in New York City taking care of their sons and managing their household. Again flattered, Märta did not know how to respond.

They continued to talk. “Here’s the deal,” Scott said, cutting to the chase. “As soon as you can, we would like you to fly to New York and get to know our family. Spend about a week there as our guest, visiting our home, taking in all the sites, just enjoying yourself. And then, afterward, you can make up your mind.”

Jonnie continued the discussion. “We’ll take care of your flight, your hotel, and all your expenses while you’re visiting...won’t cost you a dime. After a week, both we and you can decide if the position is right for you. You can bring your mom with you if you’d like.” Märta beamed at the doctors and raised her glass of wine in a toast. And at that exact moment, she started down the path that led her to where she was today.

Märta stood in the foyer of the apartment waiting to inspect the brothers before they departed for their school day. Hauling their school supplies in their backpacks, they marched parade style past the large windows overlooking Central Park, through the living room, and up to the elevator where Märta stood. She looked them up and down. “Jake, tie your shoes better than that,” she said and then turned on CJ and straightened the knot in his tie. “Try not to get your sweaters too messed up today, OK? It took all yesterday for them to get washed and dried.” She gave them both a kiss on the cheek. “Now get going. You know Val doesn’t like to wait.”

CJ and Jake stepped into the private elevator that would take them down to the building’s lobby. Mr. Grabowski, the uniformed doorman, greeted them as they stepped out of the elevator and approached the revolving door at the front of the building. “Good morning, young sirs,” He said in his usual way. “Ready for a new week of school, or are ya gonna be playin’ hooky today?” he said, winking at them. The boys smiled and groaned. Mr. Grabowski’s perpetual cheerfulness was sometimes a little hard to take, especially on a

Monday morning. But he didn't let up. "Did you see the Jets yesterday? They finally won!"

"It was just the Cowboys," CJ said, trying not to match the doorman's cheeriness. "I think they've won like zero."

"Anyway, we only saw half the game," Jake added, "because we had to go on an *outing* in the Park," holding up his index and middle fingers in air quotes when he said "outing."

"Well," Mr. Grabowski concluded, "I'm sure you enjoyed the chance to spend some time with your folks, certainly it was a beautiful fall day...perfect for a nice walk."

As the bantering with Mr. Grabowski died down, Val stood beside the silver Lincoln Navigator parked at the curb with the back door already open, waiting for the boys to climb into the back seat. With one look it could be seen that he was a man with a serious demeanor, who didn't enjoy a lot of chit-chat, even though he forced himself to wait patiently as the boys finished their exchange with Mr. Grabowski.

Standing five feet eleven and weighing 185 pounds, Valentine Esposito, 39, remained as trim as he had been when he played college football. He was a man who spoke softly and easily blended in, but he could also easily attain another's attention when necessary. He had seen duty in Afghanistan and Iraq as a U.S. Army military police officer which had left him with a scar under his scalp and a Purple Heart on his chest. His style and appearance in civilian life differed little from his military days. Waiting for the boys at the car, he was dressed in precisely the same fashion that he had on almost every day: black

slacks, light brown dress shirt opened at the collar, a darker brown blazer, and black lace-up Rockport shoes. Not apparent as a part of his wardrobe was the Glock 19 holstered under the sports coat.

“Morning, CJ, Jake. Got everything?”

“Yes sir.”

“Yes sir.”

“Good,” Val continued, “hop in and let’s get going. Don’t want you to be late.”

Val eased the Navigator onto Central Park West and headed north for the ten minute ride to the Dewey Academy. He had already run a taxi service for the Birchfields this morning, picking up Märta at her apartment in Queens at 5:30 and delivering her to the Birchfield residence by 6:00 so she could rendezvous with the doctors before they left.

Val’s routine during the week was pretty much the same day to day. He’d take Märta to the apartment building where the Birchfields’ penthouse was located, then take a short side trip to pick up an extra-large coffee. Returning to the Central Park home, he would park on West 69th Street and wait for the doctors. They would exit by 6:30 and Val would deliver them to their hospitals or offices by 6:45. Then it was back again to the residence to take the boys to school and drop them by 8:00.

After the morning deliveries were made, Val would run any errands required by the family, but generally would stay in the neighborhood so that within a few minutes he could be at any family member’s location. In the afternoon, he would reverse the shuttle routine: taking Märta home, picking up the boys,

and then between 5:00 and 7:00, picking up the doctors. If Scott and/or Jonnie had a rare evening engagement, Val would see that they got to where they were going and return them safely back home when they were ready. On the weekends, he was usually off-duty unless there was a special, unique need that the family had for TWS -- transportation with security.

Scott and Jonnie Birchfield, needless to say, trusted Valentine Esposito with their lives, and more, with the lives of their children. And he never hesitated to provide the rock of security they valued. Val saw himself not only an employee in the Birchfield household, but as serving to carry out an honorable obligation: Dr. Scott Birchfield, former U.S. Army surgeon, had saved Val's life in Afghanistan and Val had happily accepted the opportunity to work for the doctors, and try to repay his debt.

As they drove toward school, CJ and Jake, as usual, had their earbuds in, bopping their heads to Drake or some other silent, similar sound. And also as usual, Val drove in a state of a low key awareness. But as CJ nodded with the music, at one point with his head tilted in the upward position, he caught Val carefully monitoring the car behind them in the rearview.

CJ quietly reached over and nudged Jake, and with his eyes told him to look at Val. He did, and then simultaneously, the brothers turned around and looked out the tinted back window of the Navigator to see what had Val's interest. When they did, they saw a glossy black Ford F-250 so close to them they could just about see their own faces in its grill.

The driver of the pickup was playing a stupid game that Val did not like. In former days Val would have woke up the 450 horses sleeping under the Navigator's hood in the twin turbo-charged engine, and left the F-250 behind him in a vacuum. He would likely have spun around the block, and been on the truck's tail before the sucker could have known what was happening. And there's certainly no reason to think that CJ and Jake would not have enjoyed a little unplanned activity on the way to school. But that was not going to happen today, not with the safety of the boys foremost in his thoughts.

Instead Val slowed to a crawl and eased the Lincoln to the right side of Central Park West so the pick-up could go around him. But it did not do what Val thought it should. Instead the tail-gating driver slowed to the same pace and stayed glued to Val's bumper. Val kept the Lincoln rolling at a crawl, and the pick-up tagged along, holding its position. It was one thing to play a stupid game for a while, Val thought, but it was a whole different thing to play it longer than was smart.

Val brought the big car to a full stop on the side of the street, kept the engine running, and clicked the buttons to make sure the passenger doors were locked. "Sit tight and keep your windows up, boys. Let's see what this fella has in mind."

Val sat still in the driver's seat, his eyes in the mirror watching the tag-a-long driver. "What's he doing?" CJ asked. "Can you see him?"

"Just sit tight," Val whispered as his jaw tightened and he slipped his right hand under his sport coat and touched the Glock. "Let's just wait a minute and see what he does."

And it was just about a full minute that they waited until the black F-250 slowly backed up, pulled around them, moved onto the avenue, and glided past Val and the boys. As it did, both boys strained to see the driver, but Val, instinctively, focused on the license tag.

Jake, who was sitting just behind Val thought he got a good look. “Man...that guy’s really spooky...what a face!”

“What’d he look like?” CJ asked.

“I think he was wearing all black, even his hat. But his face looked really white, like he had on powder ... or maybe a mask. And he had on sunglasses that were like mirrors. Really weird.”

Val had memorized the digits on the tag but had only gotten a glimpse at the driver; he did not say anything about either to the boys. Instead he said, “Just some goof out for a kick. Nothing to worry about. I just hope we’re not late getting to school.”

But CJ wasn’t satisfied. “What do you think he was doing, Val? I mean, do you think he’s going to go around like that all day?”

“Who knows...I don’t think so,” Val said. “There are all kind of nutcakes out there. Most of them are harmless but it’s always just best to keep your eyes and ears open. Just a good way to live, really.” He reached down and took a sip of his lukewarm coffee and safely continued on the route toward school.

Val and the brothers joined the line of Teslas, Mercedes, Jaguars, and BMWs pulling into the school’s drop-off lane off West 109th Street. As always, Val

thought, the line was moving at a snail's pace. He hoped that the delay had not been too long and that CJ and Jake would be able to get out on time, catch up with their friends, and be in their classrooms by the time the last bell rang. After a few minutes, though, he realized the line wasn't just going slow, it was not moving at all. *C'mon, Val thought, there've been enough distractions already today and its not even eight o'clock.*

Val stretched his neck and head as high as it could go in an effort to see what was holding up the line, but all he could see was that everyone else was doing the same thing. Starting to get a little frustrated he said, "Listen, you guys stay in the car. I'm gonna get out and get a better look. Now stay! Got it?"

With that Val quickly jumped out of the SUV and started walking at a rapid pace down the side of the lane to get to the front of the car line. It didn't take long for him to get gut punched with his second shock of the day: Five police cars were parked around the front gate of the school with their blue lights flashing. One uniformed police officer was standing at the gate, and another was motioning the cars away. He over-heard a woman officer say to the driver in front of the line, "Sorry ma'am but there's no school today. You'll need to take your kids home."

As much as Val wanted to know what was going on ...*why the police presence? ... why was the school closed?...* he immediately turned and trotted back to the car, reaching it and climbing in in just seconds. Looking back at the boys and satisfied that they were safe, he took a deep breath, sunk into his seat, and exhaled. But then he took another look at the boys and

saw that they were silently staring out the window on Jake's side, with CJ's head crowding right up next to his brother's.

As soon as Val said, "What are you looking at?" he turned to see for himself what was in the boys' line of vision. Across the street, leaning against a shiny black Ford F-250 pick-up truck, a man dressed completely in black and wearing mirrored sunglasses, stared at the entrance to the school.

By the time Val had reached the apartment building to return the boys to their home, he was making his third phone call. His first had been to Scott Birchfield, who, as Val expected, let his voice mail answer. "Hi, Scott. Val. Listen... for some reason the school has been closed for the day. The boys are fine and I'm taking them home. Don't know what the problem is, but I'll check it out and let you know. Anyway, you probably should let Jonnie know. And again, the boys are fine. Give me a call when you get a chance and I'll give you the details."

The next call was to Märta. "Hey... how's it going?"

"Hey yourself," Märta responded. "Didn't expect to talk to you again this morning. What's going on?"

"I'm coming back to the apartment with CJ and Jake. Don't know why, but school's been canceled for today. I'm just parking downstairs now."

"Well, they'll have to stay here by themselves for a while. I've got to run to the market and laundry. Probably be gone for a couple of hours," Märta explained.

Val didn't like the sound of this. CJ and Jake often stayed home alone, but with two strange events already occurring today, Val hesitated at the thought of the boys being without someone keeping an eye on them, even in a penthouse on the edge of Central Park. Most likely everything would be fine, but after this morning he was concerned about even the slightest chance of another strange event.

"Tell ya' what," Val said to Märta, "On second thought, I'll just keep the boys with me for a while. I have a few things I want to do so they can just ride along. Give me a call when you're back from your errands and I'll bring them back then."

"Sounds good," Märta said.

"By the way," Val continued, "I'm parked downstairs right now. If you want to come hop in I'll take you to the market."

"Not necessary," Märta answered, "I'm not leaving here for another thirty minutes and besides, it's a pretty nice day. Think I'm going to walk through the park."

"Gotcha," Val said. "Be careful and we'll see you later."

With the Lincoln still parked and running, Val ordered the boys to sit tight for a few more minutes as he made his final call. This one was to his friend, Detective Franklin Samuels, NYPD, assigned to Midtown Precinct North. He was surprised when the answer came on the second ring.

"Samuels," the familiar voice said.

“Hey, Sam. It’s Val.”

“Drifter! How are you?” the detective responded, using Val’s playing days’ nickname.

“Not too bad, how about you.”

“You know,” Sam said, “Same ol’ - same ol’”

“I was wondering if you had a few minutes for a cup of coffee. I’m buying.”

“How far away are you?”

“About five minutes.”

“OK, why don’t you head over to the bagel place on West 53rd and I’ll be there in about 15 minutes. Gotta tie something up here first. Only got a few minutes, though.”

“Okay, heading your way,” Val said, closing the call. Then to the boys,

“Alright, guys, let’s go. I’m going to have a chat with Sam Samuels to see if he knows anything about what’s going on at the school.”

CJ asked, “Are you gonna tell him about that guy we saw? I bet he’s involved somehow.”

Jake added his opinion, “Yeah, Val, that weirdo...man did you see him at the school? I mean right after he messed with us...he was just standin’ there!”

“First of all,” Val answered, “it’s not nice to call people names like ‘weirdo.’ Second, let’s see what the detective has to say. I don’t want to try to give him useless information for a case that’s already been solved.”

Val and the brothers took a corner table in the back of the coffee shop while they waited for Sam Samuels to arrive. Val ordered a second tall coffee for himself and doughnuts and milk for the boys. They silently watched the traffic moving up and down the avenue outside as they each mused quietly about the day's events. After almost 15 minutes, Samuels walked in, scanned the room, and went to the table to join his friend and his friend's charges.

Detective Sam Samuels was about the same height as his buddy Val, but outweighed him by about 40 pounds. Val knew that Sam struggled to keep his weight in control and that it was necessary for him to keep it down so he could pursue his career path in the NYPD. Val and Sam had known each other since they played college ball, Val at safety and Sam at middle linebacker. They not only were teammates on the field, but hung out quite a bit in their non-football life as well. Because of each man's genetic heritage – Val, Italian-American and Sam, African-American – and because they often moved in unison, they came to assume several color-themed joint monikers: The Penguin Brothers, Salt and Pepper, and the Swirl... which was short for chocolate-vanilla swirled soft-serve ice cream.

Samuels was dressed more than casual today in a pair of faded jeans, and a white t-shirt under a light-weight black leather jacket. He had a Yankee's ball cap on his head, and on his feet were a pair of dusty black Bass Weejun loafers. Val figured Sam was working on some under-cover assignment and had to dress the part, or that the NYPD dress code for detectives had become quite lax.

“You didn’t say you’d have these guys with you,” Sam said, eyeing the boys while shaking hands with everybody. He had gotten to know CJ and Jake over the years, but only saw them occasionally and always entertained himself a bit with a little teasing and jostling. “Hope you guys are staying outta trouble, the cells are pretty full today,” Sam said.

After the waitress took Sam’s order for a coffee, Val went directly to the issue. “I’m sure you’re staying busy, so we don’t want to keep you too long, but I wanted to know if you could tell me why there were five NYPD cars at the boy’s school this morning...you know, the Dewey Academy on West 108th.”

The realization of why the brothers were with Val became visible on Sam’s face. “Uh...yeah,” he said, and then in a lower voice, “but I’m not sure it’s a good idea to talk about it with ... uh...” he looked at CJ and Jake, “you know.”

Val could tell Sam was uncomfortable with the boys’ presence, that he knew something about the school incident, but that he didn’t want to open up about it with them being there. “Maybe you can just give us the big picture, just a general idea about what’s going on,” Val said, although he really hoped for more information.

Sam hesitated a moment and then said, “Well, so far I haven’t been directly involved but that might change. Anyway, I’ve heard quite a bit just an hour or so ago, but like I was saying...”

CJ jumped in, “C’mon Mr. Samuels...we hear all kinds of stuff...probably not anything new to us.”

And then Jake said, “Anyway we know something about a really weird guy you probably don’t even know about.”

“Listen, guys, if Sam doesn’t feel like he should talk about it then...”

Sam cut Val off and turned toward Jake. “What about this guy?” he said with some intensity. “Tell me what you know and then maybe I’ll share a little information with you.”

Jake started to explain about the man in the F-250 pick-up truck with the mirrored sunglasses, but Val jumped in and gave the essence of the events to Sam in about half the time Jake would have taken. Sam listened with a great deal of interest.

“It was just a strange sequence of events,” Val said. “I doubt it had anything to do with whatever happened at the school because the guy was just blatantly standing there, watching. Anyway if you think he’s relevant, I managed to get the tag number from the truck.”

Sam sat quietly for a minute, thinking over his dilemma. Then he said, “Well, I’m sure you’re going to hear about it all sooner or later, so I’ll tell you what I know. But you didn’t hear any of this from me. And yeah, Val, I’m definitely going to need that number.”

Val told Sam the number and Sam wrote it down on a pad. Then he said, “Hang on a minute, I should call this in right away.” Sam pulled out his cell phone, hit a button, and spoke in a low voice so that the others weren’t able to hear him. Then he turned his attention back to Val, CJ, and Jake.

What Sam told Val and the brothers was both scary and interesting, more scary to Val and interesting to CJ and Jake. Everything had happened so fast

that morning that the police were still trying to piece it all together. The bottom-line was that one of the school's students, a girl in the fourth grade, had disappeared from the school. And, Sam said, disappeared was exactly the word for it.

What the police knew was that the girl had arrived at the school around 7:00 a.m. for an private clarinet lesson with her music teacher, a Mrs. Donna Clevenger. About 15 minutes after they began the lesson, the girl said she had to use the restroom and left the music room to walk down the hall to the girls' bathroom. Mrs. Clevenger waited for about 10 minutes but the girl didn't return. As the teacher started to become worried, she decided to go check on the student. She went to the girls' bathroom, but no one was there. She looked up and down the hallway, but it was empty. She looked in a few classrooms, but none of the teachers had seen the student. Then she went back to the music room and called on the intercom to the main office and asked if the girl had shown up there, but was told no.

After a little more searching around, the music teacher started to become more worried and walked from her classroom in the rear of the school to the office to inform to the school's headmaster, Malcolm Stuart, about the situation. By now it was 7:30 and more kids were starting to arrive. Mr. Stuart wanted to see for himself what had happened, so he trotted back to the music room and took a good look around, including a peek in the girls' bathroom.

Still with no sign of the girl, Mr. Stuart and Mrs. Clevenger expanded their search to other areas of the school, but with no luck. At this point,

exasperation, concern, and fear was pounding at both searchers, so Mr. Stuart decided to call the police.

It was when the police arrived that Mr. Stuart decided to close the school for the day and started sending students home and turning cars away. As he did, the police searched every inch of the school, even used two dogs to help find the girl. They found nothing. They also began questioning Mrs. Clevenger, Mr. Stuart, and all the other teachers and assistants who were in their classrooms getting ready for the school day. Nobody saw or heard anything: no strangers, no struggling, not a yell, no running ... nothing.

“It was as if the girl had just disappeared into thin air...gone up in smoke...poof!” Sam said.

Val and the boys sat at the table staring, stunned by what Sam had told them. Jake spoke first. “What about the strange guy who we’d seen and who was just standing across the street looking at the school. I mean, somebody had to check him out, right?”

“Sure,” Sam said. “In fact, it was probably right after you guys saw him and then left that an officer crossed over to talk to him. But as she approached, he jumped in the pick-up and drove away. Just like that. She wasn’t able to get his tag number, so your help with that is much appreciated,” he said looking at Val. “By now there’s a BOLO out on the truck and a description of the driver and we should have him within the hour.”

Then CJ asked, “Do you think he could have something to do with it? I mean yeah, he was a weirdo.. I mean he looked strange and all, but he was just

sitting there across the street. Doesn't seem like he'd just be sitting there if he'd done anything."

"I have no idea," Sam said, "but still it was pretty suspicious the way he acted. I think at least they'll pick him up to ask him a few questions."

"Listen," Sam said, "I can't sit here with you guys all day drinking coffee. It wouldn't surprise me if I was assigned to work on this case. I'm suspecting there are going to be quite a few of us involved."

Val gave Sam a sideways glance. "Why do you say that?" he asked. "And, just for my own curiosity, why did five police cars show up for a girl that had been missing for less than an hour?"

"When the headmaster, Mr. Stuart, called," Sam said, almost in a whisper, "and when he told the desk sergeant the name of the missing girl, five squad cars were at the school in under a minute."

Val whistled.

"Who's the girl?" CJ asked.

"Remember, you didn't hear this from me," Sam continued quietly, "and anyway, I'm guessing it'll all be on the news by noon if not sooner."

"So who is it?" Val repeated.

"Isabella Jacobs."

"*I know her,*" Jake said louder than he should have, "*she's in my class!*"

"Then I guess you also know who her dad is," Sam said.

"*Martin Jacobs,*" Val whispered.

CJ asked: "Isn't he the..."

"Yeah," Sam said, "the mayor!"

Chapter 2: *A stroll in the park*

Sometimes CJ Birchfield would have to wrestle with his moodiness. Today he was losing the match, having a new low, feeling like a lost dog in a downpour. After the incident on Monday, Mr. Stuart had emailed all the parents informing them that school would be closed for at least the remainder of the week. So as he moped in his bedroom, he gazed from the window toward Bow Bridge in Central Park, admiring the autumn foliage, and wishing he could be among the people lolling away the sunny October day. His brother Jake had hauled his laptop, books, and other study material from the bedroom and into the dining room so he could get his work done – or avoid doing it – without interruption, and CJ was grateful to be alone.

Märta had finished the dusting and vacuuming, and was in the kitchen preparing lasagna that would be held in the refrigerator until time for baking that evening. It would be CJ's job to put it in the oven about an hour before his parents arrived home, make a salad, and make sure the table was set for dinner. But right now, eating was not on his mind.

A variety of facts contributed to CJ's misery. First, because school had been canceled and he and Jake's movements had been restricted, he had been unable to meet with his friends in person. Although he had had a few facetime conversations, it wasn't the same. And even though the Birchfields' penthouse apartment was large, it wasn't so large that his spoken thoughts would not be overheard if he expressed them on the phone. He was living like a prisoner in a gilded cell; everything was nice enough, but it didn't suit the young teen to be cooped up like a thug in one of Detective Samuel's cells.

It wasn't actually true that CJ and Jake couldn't go out of the apartment. All they had to do was ask their mom or dad or Val, and one of them would take them where they wanted to go, and bring them safely back home. The excitement of this kind of fun ended about as quickly as it started as it did with the orchestrated trip they took the previous evening to see the Rangers play. It was fun, CJ thought, but fun with a collar and leash around your neck.

Additionally, of course, CJ was still very uneasy about the whole thing that had happened at school. Val had laid everything out in detail for CJ's parents on Monday evening on the day it happened, and the brothers sat in on the briefing. Val even asked Jonnie to get Märta to come back to the apartment so she would be as informed as the other family members about the incident. Val wanted everyone to understand the gravity of the incident.

Now peering out his window, CJ remembered the discussion of events clearly. After Val and the boys had rendezvoused with Sam Samuels at the bagel shop and Sam shared what he had known about the disappearance, they left and headed back to the apartment. By that time Märta had returned from her errands, and Val told the boys to go up to the apartment and stay put for the rest of the day. He called Märta and told her that under no circumstance was CJ and Jake to leave the apartment until further notice. He also had a short chat with Mr. Grabowski, the doorman, and asked him to keep a lookout for any uncommon characters dressed in black, especially any driving a new black Ford F-250 pickup. He told both Märta and Mr. Grabowski to call him right away if anything abnormal appeared on the scene. Finally, Val told CJ, the brother allowed to have a phone, to call him immediately if he saw

anything of concern. “Sure,” CJ said, but then thought there wasn’t much chance of that with he and Jake being confined to the apartment.

Märta had returned to the apartment around 6:00 p.m. Monday evening and prepared sandwiches and snacks for the family meeting. The doctors had cancelled a couple of minor last minute commitments and Val picked them up at their offices. The three of them arrived back at the apartment around 6:45. After Jonnie and Scott had stowed their coats and bags and settled into their home, everyone came together in the living room. Since the weather was rather mild, the terrace doors were opened to allow fresh air to circulate into the penthouse apartment. Märta brought the food into the living room, placed in on a sideboard, and everyone helped themselves to a sandwich, chips, and a drink, then found a seat.

Val started his overview by saying that on Monday he had gone back to the precinct station to find out as much as he could. Unfortunately, he said, there wasn’t much information anyone could give him besides what Sam had already told him and the boys. When he left, he went back to the Dewey Academy to see if he could learn anything else there. He found out that the police had just departed after spending most of the day there, and that Mr. Stuart, the headmaster, wasn’t in much condition to talk to anyone anymore about the bizarre event. Stuart told Val that the mayor himself had been there most of the morning and had drilled him relentlessly with questions about his daughter’s disappearance. “But what could I tell him,” he had said to Val, “I have absolutely no idea about what happened!!!” The mayor left, he said, but not before implying that he could ruin the headmaster’s career if his daughter was not found soon... and found safe.

Val said that there was one other thing he wanted to do at the school, so he asked Mr. Stuart if he could talk to Mrs. Clevenger, Isabella's music teacher. The headmaster told him that the teacher had gone home after the police finished questioning her, and that anyway, she wasn't in any shape to talk to anyone else about the matter, even if there was anything else she could tell anyone. "OK," Val had said, "but would you mind if I just took a quick look around the area where everything happened?" Stuart was hesitant in his initial response to Val, but then relented, pointing him in the direction of the classroom from which the girl had left before she disappeared.

Val reported to the family sitting around the living room that he had walked down to the music classroom noticing as he did that the school was completely empty. He traced the steps he assumed the girl had taken from the classroom down to the girls' bathroom, noticing as he did all the classroom doors along the hallway and the exit door at the end. He didn't think it likely that the girl had gone into any of the classrooms because the doors either would have been locked before school started, or the teachers or their assistants would have been in them. He walked down to the end of the hallway and took a close look at the exit door. He was just beginning to open it when he noticed the sign on it: "Emergency Exit: Alarm Will Sound When Door Opened."

As Val had returned to the school's office, Mr. Stuart, who was apparently mentally and emotionally exhausted, was locking up and getting ready to leave for the day. "I appreciate the chance to look around, thanks," Val said. "It's okay," Mr. Stuart responded. "Did you see anything helpful?"

“I don’t think so,” Val said, “but I was wondering about the emergency exit door at the end of the hallway. Has that alarm been tested recently?”

“Yeah,” Mr. Stuart responded, “about two hours ago. The police checked it and it works fine.”

As he was concluding his report to the family, Val had added a couple of more pieces of information. The first was that he had talked again briefly to Sam Samuels and found out that Sam had been assigned to lead a team with two other detectives to work the case. “He’s a good friend,” Val said, “I’m sure he’ll reach out to me if there are any new developments.”

The second bit of info was more ominous: the police had not been able to locate the black F-250 pickup or its driver. “You’ve got everybody from the mayor on down saying that truck needs to be found,” he said, “and not one of New York’s nearly 40,000 cops have seen a trace of it. First you have a girl who disappeared, now you have a whole damn truck that seems to have gone poof!”

After the meeting, the boys’ father laid down the law. At least until the girl or the driver was found, the boys were not to go anywhere out of the apartment without him, their mom, or Val. No argument; no discussion; and no logical dispute would be considered.

CJ turned away from his bedroom window, went to his bed and lied down. Thoughts kept swirling around his head so much that he couldn’t let them go. What could have happened to the girl? Where could she have gone? Who could have nabbed her? How could they have gotten out of the building? How come nobody heard anything? Who was the guy with the glasses in the pickup

truck? Why did he leave when the cop came up to him? Where did he go? How come no one had been able to find him?

As CJ mulled over his thoughts, bored by his stay-at-home schoolwork, Jake left the dining room with the contents of his backpack spread out on the table and walked down the hallway back to the bedroom he shared with his brother. “What are you doing,” he said when saw CJ doing nothing, lying on the bed with his hands behind his head.

“I’m shoveling snow. What’s it look like?” CJ snapped.

“Don’t be such a turd,” Jake said. “I’m just asking. Anyway, I’m stuck here too but at least I’m not acting like a jerk!”

“Just shut up,” CJ said. “It’s not that hard for you. When you’re someone my age things are different.”

“Yeah. Like what are you? Thirty or something?”

CJ yanked the pillow from under the back of his head and hurled it at Jake who brushed it away in mid-air.

“So when do you think we’re going to be able to get out of here?” Jake asked his older brother.

“I have no idea. Dad said they had to find the girl first. Or the pickup truck. So ... who knows. We might have to be here the rest of the year.”

After a few minutes of silence, Jake said, “You know, that girl was a little weird.”

CJ lifted himself up into a half sitting position. “You mean the one that disappeared? Why do you say that? Did you know her very well?”

“Some.” Jake said.

“So why do you say she was weird? What did she do?”

“Not too much,” Jake said, “but you could tell she was...I don’t know...she was like really quiet sometimes and sometimes she would just start cryin’ for no reason. And not loud or anything ... just ...real quiet like. Once Miss Barnett asked if she wanted to go to the office and she didn’t say anything, she just got up and walked out of the room and didn’t come back until it was time to go home.”

“Huh,” CJ said, showing some interest. “So what do you think happened to her? I mean ... her disappearing.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure about one thing,” Jake said.

“What?”

“Nobody took her.”

“What makes you say that?” CJ asked. “You think she just disappeared on her own or something?”

“I don’t know,” Jake responded. “Maybe. I mean maybe it was like Mr. Samuels said. You know. Just poof ... disappeared into nowhere. Anyway, I think something like that happened. But I’m almost definitely sure no one took her.”

“That’s insane.” CJ argued. “People don’t just disappear into nowhere. Everybody’s gotta be somewhere. I’m here. You’re here. Everybody’s somewhere. At least if they’re alive, that is.”

“I don’t know,” Jake said back. “Just look at the facts. Nobody saw anything. Nobody heard anything. Nobody found any clues or anything. And, anyway, like I said, she was pretty weird. So if we’re being logical, it makes most sense that she just disappeared into...wherever.”

“Yeah,” said CJ, “except that’s impossible.”

“I don’t know,” Jake said quietly.

On the day CJ turned 13, his parents gave him an iPhone 11 for his birthday along with a long list of rules on how to and how not to use it. CJ had been asking for a phone since he was ten, informing his parents that most kids in his class had one and that he was old enough and mature enough to use one. First, they said, they didn’t care what the other kids did, and second, they said, he was fairly old and very mature, but third, they said, he would have to wait. So the discussion ended at that point.

But when he turned 13, Scott and Jonnie said that the time had come that he could have a phone and, that anyway, the advantages of him having one probably outweighed the disadvantages. Since he had been given the phone, from what his parents could tell, CJ had used it responsibly, and more importantly, it had not come to dominate his life like they saw happening with many kids his age. At least when they told him to leave it alone, he’d do it without an argument.

One of the things on the “OK to do list” was to call either parent, or Val, or Märta, if there was ever a real need to do so. “Don’t be dumb about it,” his dad had said, “but when you need to call, go ahead.”

So it was on this extremely frustrating and boring day, when both CJ and Jake felt they were dying from being literally pent up in the penthouse, that Jake convinced CJ to give Val a call to come get them out of there. “I don’t care where we go,” Jake had said, “but we’ve gotta get outta here.”

Val’s phone had rung three times before it went to his voicemail. CJ spoke to the recording: “Hi, Val. Me and Jake... I mean Jake and I... anyway, we were wondering if you could take us out of here. We don’t care where. Please call me when you get a chance. Thanks. Goodbye. This is CJ.”

The boys had waited for 30 minutes without hearing back. “Should I call him again?”

“No, he’d call if he could,” Jake said. “We should ask Märta if we can just go across to the park for a little while. Maybe she wouldn’t mind.”

The boys found Märta finishing her kitchen chores and cleaning up. “Hi, guys. Want me to fix you some lunch? We have some nice cold cuts and cheese in the fridge. Or I could warm up some soup if you’d rather that.”

“Actually,” CJ said, “we were wondering if you wanted us to go to the market to pick up something for you, if you need anything for dinner or anything.”

“Well I really don’t, and anyway you heard what your dad said. You two can’t go out without him or Val going with you.”

“Come on Märta,” Jake pleaded, “we’re sick of being stuck in here. There’s nothing to do and we really want to get out of here.” The open terrace doors were letting the brilliant sunshine and the fresh fall air drift in.

“Why don’t you give Val a call and see if he can pick you up and take you to lunch somewhere.”

CJ said, “We tried. He doesn’t answer. I left a message but he hasn’t called back.”

“Oh,” Märta muttered. “Well, let me see if I can get one of your parents. Maybe we can go for a short walk in the park, but I’m going with you.”

Märta first tried Scott, got his voicemail, and left a message. Then she tried Jonnie with the same results.

“Listen, I know you two don’t like this set up, but it’s for your own good. Your folks are just concerned about your safety. I mean, if it were up to me...”

The boys could sense Märta’s softening. “C’mon” Jake said, “We’ll be back in less than an hour.”

“Okay. Thirty minutes max and I’m going with you.”

Once across the avenue and in the park, Märta and the brothers crossed West Drive and strolled toward the Lake, heading for Bow Bridge at a very leisurely pace. The day was one made for cameras and it was a perfect antidote to the boys’ forlornness. The leaves showed magnificent autumn colors of amber, yellow, brown, and golden hues; and the air was feather-light with just right feel of delightful chilliness to it. None of the trio spoke, but just walked together soaking in the freedom of their temporary excursion.

As they walked through the Sheep Meadow and neared Terrace Drive, Märta turned to her left to inform CJ that this would have to be a short trip. She had

not heard back from either parent and while she didn't think a brief outing into the park would be a big deal, technically she knew she was violating Scott's stay at home order. And she was feeling more and more uncomfortable about it.

It was exactly at the moment she was having this thought, as she was looking to her left toward CJ, that she noticed the gleaming black F-250 pickup parked on Central Park West, about 250 yards away. As her throat tightened, Märta managed to say, "Guys, let's head back home. I'm not sure this is a good idea."

"C'mon, Märta, we just got out here," Jake whined.

"No...come on...I'm serious...let's go!" Märta said haltingly as she looked at the truck.

Then she heard Jake spew: "*Holy crap... CJ!!!*"

Märta thought Jake had also seen the vehicle and she was ready to tell both boys that they all would be fine and just needed to get back to the apartment building right away. But then she saw the brothers weren't actually looking toward the truck at all; they were both focused about 90 degrees away from it, looking northeasterly in the direction of the bridge. Their attention was locked on the man dressed in black wearing mirrored sunglasses who was returning their stare back to them with an ominous grin on his face.

Märta felt her breath leave her but then she gained enough composure and, grabbing both boys, she pushed them in the direction of their home. "*Let's go!!! Now!!!*" she demanded.

As they began fast-walking back toward the apartment building, Jake couldn't help but look back at the bizarre figure. "*He's following us,*" he said, "*I think he's gaining on us.*"

Märta was doing all she could to keep everyone moving, but she wasn't sure if they would make it back to their building before the man caught up. The distance wasn't too far, but the pursuer was making progress. As she was assessing their chances and trying to accelerate the pace, Märta heard CJ exclaim, "*Screw this!*" as he stopped and spun around to face the man in black.

"*CJ!!!*" Märta screamed, but the boy did not respond. "*CJ, no...don't...let's go!!! Please!!!*"

Märta and Jake stood side by side watching as CJ started slowly taking steps in the direction of the man who had been stalking them. As Jake started to follow his brother to confront the menacing character, Märta grabbed his arm to hold him back. Then, at that very instant, a blurred figure sprinting as if in a 100 meter race rushed past Märta, Jake, and then CJ, running at full speed on a bullet's trajectory toward the follower. As the pursuer became the pursued, he turned and moved quickly into the crowd standing near Cherry Hill, disappearing from sight.

Val came sharply to a halt and looked quickly all around, but could not see the man he had honed in on. It seemed, he thought, that another disappearance had occurred. Not seeing his target, he instantly surmised that his best option was to drop back to provide security for Märta and the boys, so he hastily returned to where the three nervously waited.

Val did not hide his anger. *“What the... what exactly is going on here??? You two were not to leave the apartment!!! Your dad made that clear!!! Märta, what are you and these two doing here???”*

Märta, still shaking, looked down and cleared her throat. “Umm...”

Then Jake spoke up. “We’re sorry, Val. We thought we could slip out without Märta seeing us, you know, just to get a little air. So we left while she was making lunch. We weren’t going to be gone long. She... she’d just come to find us when we saw that guy. Sorry. Really.”

Still agitated, Val spoke rapidly, “Well I’d just heard CJ’s message when I decided to drive over. I was heading up to the apartment when Mr. Grabowski said you were over here. When I saw you walking really fast toward the building, and saw him following you...” his voice trailed off. Then, with more thought, he continued in a calmer voice. “I’m afraid you gentlemen are going to have to tell your dad about this and I’m sure he’s not going to like it.”

“Yes sir,” the boys said together, their heads hanging down.

Then Marta quickly looked at Val and blurted out, “Hey Val, we almost forgot... look!” She turned in the direction to where the truck was parked and Val followed her gaze.

“Holy...” he said. *“C’mon!!!”*

The foursome walked together quickly across the grass in the direction of the pickup. When they were fifty feet away, Val ordered the group to stop. As everyone else kept their eyes on the truck, Val slowly rotated three hundred and sixty degrees, carefully surveying the area and looking intently at

everyone within view. Then he said, “OK, all of you wait here, I’m going to take a closer look.” Looking directly at CJ and Jake, he added, “*I mean here!*”

Val walked slowly up to the pickup and looked through every tinted window into the cab. Then he took his handkerchief out of his inside coat pocket, wrapped it around his hand, and tried to open the driver’s door. It didn’t budge. He did the same thing with the rear door, but it too was locked. Finally he walked to the back of the truck bed and looked at the license tag. “Bingo,” he said, as he reached in his side pocket, pulled out his phone, and hit a button.

“Hey, Sam,” he said, “I’ve got the black truck.”

In less than one minute seven police cars converged around the F-250 with lights flashing as Val, Märta, and the boys kept their distance. When Val saw Sam among the uniformed officers he called out to him and the detective came running over. After Val told Sam that he had seen the driver less than five minutes earlier, Sam radioed all the officers in the vicinity with a BOLO for a man dressed in all black and wearing mirrored sunglasses somewhere in or around Central Park.

While Sam waited for the police tow truck to arrive, Val escorted Märta and the boys back to the apartment. Val gave the boys one last warning, and then returned to the park to rendezvous with Sam and help as much as he could with the search.

Val led Sam to the location in the park where he had seen the driver of the truck, and where he had lost him. They figured that he would have to be on

foot now and would be recognized sooner or later, unless he was intentionally trying to avoid recognition by changing his appearance, which at this point seemed like a safe bet.

Val and Sam returned to Sam's car as the tow truck was hauling away the pickup truck. They both knew that the truck would be searched thoroughly for clues and checked for fingerprints. Whatever could possibly be learned from the truck about the driver, it would be learned as soon as humanly possible.

As they sat in Sam's car, Val spoke first. "This is all really strange, Sam. The girl disappears and then the guy and the truck virtually disappear for three days and then he shows up here just exactly at the same time that the boys and Märta are walking in the park. Like he knew they would be here. And then it's like he's disappeared again. Strange is the only word for it."

"Yeah," Sam agreed, "but you're only seeing half of it. The mayor has gone totally ballistic about the whole situation. I mean, who can blame him. Anyway, what you're seeing on the TV news every night is after he's had a couple of Xannies so he can get in front of the cameras without going to pieces. Might be the toughest case I've ever been on. I can't turn up one clue or piece of information about what's happened, and the guy on my butt about it is at the top of my line of bosses. I'm running out of moves."

"So where do we go from here," Val asked.

"We just have to hope that truck tells us something. And hope *it* doesn't just disappear."

When Märta and the boys returned to the apartment, after being able to regain her normal state of composure, Märta called Scott and left a message that she needed to talk to him when he had a few minutes. She was going to leave the same message on Jonnie's voice mail, but to her surprise, Jonnie answered right away.

"Oh, Jonnie, uh...Hi. Umm...first, the boys are here and they're safe... we're all safe. Uh... but, there was a little bit of an incident this afternoon and I want to talk to you and Scott about it when you get home tonight. I'm planning to stay over."

"What happened?" Jonnie ask.

"Well...really...I'd like to wait and talk to you when you get home. You and Scott. We're all here and everything's fine, so don't worry...but really... I'd just like to talk to you in person when you get home."

Jonnie wanted to press Märta for more details, but realized she was already 45 minutes late for her last appointment of the day and it sounded as though Märta didn't want to get into more of a discussion just now. "OK," Jonnie said, "I'm not sure what Scott's schedule is for the rest of the day, but we'll be home as soon as we can. It doesn't sound like this is something we should rush through."

Over the years that Märta had been a part of the Birchfield family, there were numerous times when it was more convenient for everyone for her to stay at the apartment overnight. For this reason, the smallest of the four bedrooms had been designated as hers, and she kept a few changes of clothes and a set of personal necessities in its bathroom. It made situations like the one she

was in now much more doable, even though her bedtime tonight would be preceded by a very uncomfortable conversation.

As she now reflected on the afternoon's events, Märta became more and more upset. She realized that not only had she allowed CJ and Jake to get into a dangerous situation, completely disregarding their father's explicit direction, but she had been dishonest about it. When Jake told Val that it was his fault that they had gone to the park, Märta did not give the correct version to Val, leaving the brothers to take the blame. So much was happening so fast, and her moral compass was in such a spin, that she simply let the matter rest where it landed. But she knew she had been wrong to do so. Misleading Val that way had, from Märta's point of view, been a terrible mistake. But if she were to mislead the Birchfields in the same way, it would leave her terribly shamed. So Märta had decided not only to inform them about exactly what happened, but accept responsibility for her decision and its aftermath. Her only consolation was that the boys were safe. But she was not looking forward the evening and she feared what consequences might ensue because of her actions.

Sequestered in their bedroom, the boys were not sure how their parents would respond to their afternoon misadventure and what consequences might be in store. Still, the adrenaline rush they had experienced just a few hours ago far outweighed their guilt or concern about what would happen next. They nearly came face to face with the mysterious man in black, almost

had to test their courage, and may have witnessed another disappearance ... the Sunglasses Man himself. Altogether, quite a harrowing set of events.

They shared an extreme eagerness to learn what Val had found out from Detective Samuels, but decided not calling him at this time was probably, all in all, the best decision. They knew that Val would be talking to their parents and that sooner or later they would get an update on where things stood.

It was not often that Jake expressed his admiration for his older brother, but CJ's actions this afternoon had been extraordinary. "Were you actually going to try to fight him?" Jake asked while sitting in the middle of his bed, his legs crossed.

CJ pushed himself away from his desk and looked into space. "I don't know," he said. "I didn't like running from him like a scared rabbit. I didn't like Märta being afraid like that. I didn't really know what was going to happen, but it just sorta felt right to stop and... I don't know...maybe just watch him or something. I didn't really know what I was going to do."

CJ shifted the subject, looked at Jake, and continued. "Tell me more about the girl, Isabella. What was she like, I mean, besides weird sometimes?"

Jake spoke a little softer than he usually did. "Yeah, she was kind of different. Not bad or anything. It was just like she was sad. You know, like something wasn't very good."

"But see, that seems strange to me," CJ said. "I mean, if your dad's the mayor of New York, things ought to be pretty good. Don't you think? The mayor is like the boss of the whole city. Why wouldn't you be happy about that? Why would you be sad or quiet or whatever? Something just doesn't seem right."

“Yeah. I know,” Jake agreed, “but she really was that way. I have no idea why, but she was.”

CJ pondered the situation, letting his thoughts roll around in his head. After a few minutes he said, “Do you think that the way you said she was, I mean, the way she was acting, had anything to do with her disappearing? Do you think there might be some connection?”

“I don’t know,” Jake answered, “I don’t see what one thing has to do with the other, but who knows. She was definitely not happy about something... I mean that’s the way it seemed to me. And I guess she actually did disappear.”

“What if there was some kind of a connection?” CJ said. “What if she *knew* she might disappear, or what if she was scared about it? What if she heard like somebody telling a secret, and she knew they would try to take her? Or... what if she ran away because she was *afraid* of somebody???”

“But how could she have done that?” Jake countered. “Besides, every policeman and policewoman in the city’s been looking for her. If she ran away, she did a really good job of it.”

The boys continued their discussion, speculating as to what might have happened and developing numerous possible hypotheses and scenarios about Isabella’s disappearance. Ultimately it was CJ who concluded that if they had more facts, they might be able to come up with some better ideas, and then they could check them out, as much as possible, one by one. With this plan in mind, he asked Jake if there was anything else about the girl that was unique, uncommon, interesting, or unusual. “Besides being quiet and a little whiny,” he asked, “what else about her was... different?”

Still in his cross-legged sitting position, Jake leaned forward with his head supported by his two cupped hands under his chin and thought. After a minute or so he said, “Nothing I can really think of. I mean, she never really wanted much attention from anybody. In fact, she was kind of embarrassed when anybody even looked at her. Like when she was the first one to come to school with...” Then it came to him and he continued: “I don’t know if this is important or not but...”

“*What???*” CJ demanded.

“When we started school, you know, last month... well she was the only kid in our class who came with her *own phone*. At first she was showing it to a few girls, not like everybody, but just to a few of her friends, and then everybody wanted to see it. She got red about it.”

CJ thought this over as he started to develop a plan. “Maybe we should try to find out more about the phone. I wonder if she had it when she disappeared? I wonder who she talked to on it? If she didn’t have it, then where is it now? I wonder if the police found it?”

“Alright,” said Jake, “we need to try and find the phone.”

“Yeah,” CJ agreed, his mind still wondering. “Umm... listen,” he said to Jake. “Why don’t we try to figure some things out before we talk to mom or dad about this. Or Val. I don’t want them to be worry about what we’re doing... or telling us not to do something.”

Jake nodded.

As Märta had predicted, the evening moved from one uncomfortable feeling to another. The doctors had arrived home, and unexpectedly, Val came in with them. Märta should have realized that Val would fill them in about the afternoon's events on the drive home, but her thoughts had been so wrapped around her own confusing situation, that she had not. But as they came off the elevator and into the apartment, Märta realized that Val had probably laid everything out for them including the lie from Jake that she had let him believe.

In the second family meeting in less than a week, there was a general silence until everyone was gathered at the dining room table and the lasagna and salad had been served. And then Jonnie, who said with her eyes to Scott *let me handle this*, started on the boys.

"First," she said, "I'm happy you're both safe. More than happy. But, you are *NOT* allowed to fragrantly disobey a direction from your father. Something terrible could have happened. I don't know what...but we're just extremely fortunate that Val was there. Who knows what would have happened if he didn't show up! But it's not just about that...you disobeyed your father! For you to slip behind Märta's back and ..."

"Um...Jonnie," Märta started.

"Hang on, Märta," Jonnie said. "...and to..."

"But, Jonnie...they didn't."

Jonnie, mildly stunned, looked quizzically at Märta. "Val told us what happened. He said Jake told him they had gone behind your back and..."

Märta was ashen as she spoke with a lump in her throat. “I know what Jake said. And I let Val believe it. But it’s not the truth. I’m so ashamed.”

“*Well...what is the truth then???*” Scott asked Märta abruptly, drawing a quick glare from Jonnie.

Märta looked at Scott and then back to Jonnie. “The boys asked me if they could go to the park. At first I said ‘no.’ Then I tried to call you, both of you, and when I did, I got your voice mails. So I said to the boys that I would go with them but we’d only go for a short walk. Thirty minutes or so, then back. And you know the rest.”

Märta stopped speaking and felt the chilly silence around her as all eyes in the room were on her. Then she continued. “I guess Jake didn’t want me to get in trouble, but I shouldn’t have let him get away with what he told Val, and I’m sorry I did what I did and I’m more sorry that I lied about it.”

No one said anything for a full minute until Scott spoke very slowly, carefully controlling his voice. “When I told CJ and Jake to stay in, I knew something very strange was happening and I was afraid that they could be in danger. I didn’t know what, how, or why, but today made things clearer. Whoever the stranger is who keeps showing up, well... obviously he is potentially dangerous.”

Scott stopped and carefully considered his next words. “What you did, Märta, was not only in direct contradiction to what I told the boys not to do, but as it turns out, it was extremely risky. I’m really not sure how we go forward from here.”

“But dad..” CJ started.

“Just hold on, CJ.” Scott said sharply. Then he continued speaking to Märta. “So Jonnie and I are going to have to talk and then we’ll see what’s going to be.”

Märta sat silently, tears beginning to form in her eyes.

Then Jonnie spoke. “It’s good that you told us what really happened.” She looked at her husband as she spoke to Märta. “Scott and I will have to think about this whole thing.”

“Yes, of course,” Märta said. Then she got up from the table and walked down the hallway into her bedroom, shut the door, and did not reappear that evening.

Scott, Jonnie, Val, and the brothers finished their dinner in silence. After a while, Val spoke up. “Just before I picked you two up,” he said to Scott and Jonnie, “I got a call from Sam. I don’t know if this is surprising or not, but they haven’t been able to find any prints on the truck. They’re using the plate and VIN to try to track down its origin. Should know more by tomorrow or Friday.”

The room fell back into silence and stayed that way until CJ’s phone buzzed as a text came in.

Scott, still irritated, looked at CJ as CJ looked at his phone. “You need to turn that off at the dinner table,” he muttered, “or leave it in your room.”

CJ sat silent, staring at the phone and then at his father, then around at everyone else in the room, and back to his father. “Yes sir, but...you should

probably look at this.” He handed the phone over and watched as his father’s face contorted into a grimace.

Scott read the message CJ had received in a trembling whisper: *“Do you like it where you are? I can take you to another place for a better time.”*

Chapter 3: *Mr. Mayor*

Dr. Scott Birchfield was happy to be home for the evening as his day had not been particularly pleasant. Of the three recovering patients he had seen that day, one was progressing better than anticipated; one was holding her own; and one was very iffy. Scott would not be making rounds to see patients this weekend, but had asked the on-call partner to call him about the status of each of the three patients. These routine concerns ... and several other issues ... had brought Scott to his apartment study, where he'd helped himself to a generous pour of Lagavulin, sank into his thickly stuffed brown leather chair, and propped his feet up on the ottoman.

Although this particular Friday had earned a hearty TGIF resolution, it was but the capstone to a week that had been about as depressing and worrisome as Scott could remember. It was just five days ago that one of Jake's classmates, a young girl who happened to be the mayor's daughter, had disappeared seemingly off the face of the earth. And still no one knew what had happened to her. And that event ... for whatever reason ... seemed to have drawn his sons into its orbit in some inexplicable and mysterious way. They now had experienced three encounters with an extremely strange character who was currently the subject of a police search related to the child's disappearance. In the most recent encounter, they had nearly come face to face with him in Central Park and who knows what would have happened if they'd actually made contact. And in the evening of the same day, his older son, CJ, had received the most unnerving text, one that may or may not have been related to these other events.

Scott sipped his scotch and continued thinking. What was even more disturbing, he thought, was the issue of his sons' disobedience and the subsequent dishonesty of Märta, the family's trusted long term au pair. Although she had ultimately told him and Jonnie the truth about what had happened, the slight and brief episode of deceit chafed him considerably.

The doctor took yet another sip of his drink and dwelled on this last issue. The boys could be easily handled with a tongue-lashing and a loss of privileges, but Märta presented much more of a dilemma. Punishment did not seem to be a viable path; certainly he couldn't ground her. And dismissal ... well ... he didn't know. It might be easier to get rid of one of the boys or divorce Jonnie than to fire Märta, he thought, but she had made a serious error in judgment, and he felt he had to do something about it.

Scott's attempt at relaxation and his deliberations were interrupted by his buzzing cell phone. Although he wanted and needed this time to himself and his thoughts, he had to take the call because it was not common that Val Esposito would contact him at nine o'clock on a Friday night.

CJ and Jake had more or less avoided their father's anger for the past 48 hours. During that time his medical duties had taken him away from home and they found themselves in their isolated world, making a minimum effort to stay on top of their schoolwork while spending most of their time reviewing, analyzing, and synthesizing the facts of events they were alternatively calling the "disappearing girl case" and the "sunglasses man mystery." Certainly in their mind, the two issues were inexorably linked together.

They spent a great deal of time making notes of what they thought to be relevant facts, looking for information on the internet, and creating, discussing, underlining, discarding, and re-creating hypotheses about the case.

Four central issues were spun around during every discussion: the girl herself and her strange behavior; the man with the sunglasses -- who he was, where he came from, and what he might want -- and especially why he was apparently interested in them; the girl's phone and what had happened to it; and how the girl could have disappeared from the school with no one seeing or hearing anything, and not a single physical clue being found.

In the meantime, during breaks from their thoughts about the case, they would engage with Märta as she sullenly went about her household chores. They tried as much as they could to offer her a mixture of contrition and comfort. Jake felt especially bad as it was he who had tried to cover up for her when he spoke to Val regarding their presence in Central Park; and in the process had ultimately caused an emotional quagmire to develop between Märta and his parents, especially his father. So, off and on, CJ or Jake would say to Märta, "it's not all your fault," or, "we started everything," or, "he'll get over it." But nothing they said could lift her from her gray funk. She would just look at them with her sunken red eyes and offer an unconvincing, tight-lipped smile.

As they continued to sort through the facts of the case, the latest issue the brothers had investigated was Isabella's father, Mayor Martin Jacobs. Their investigation took them into a complicated and difficult-to-understand world

about which they had little knowledge: politics. They learned that Jacobs had been mayor for two and half years, was fairly popular among New Yorkers, and was considering a run for governor at the end of his current term. He kept his private life relatively private except for social or political events, which he almost always attended with his wife, Elana Jacobs, Isabella's mother. The most interesting finding about the mayor, the brothers thought, was that he was pretty much a self-made man. He had grown up in relative poverty, but through his own efforts had done quite well, ultimately graduating from the City College of New York and Columbia law school.

It was this particular issue they were discussing when their father walked into their bedroom. Without a word he pulled the wooden chair from under Jake's desk, spun it around and sat down on it backwards, leaning forward on his folded forearms that rested on the back of the chair. The boys, getting a whiff of the scotch on their father's breath, knew the time had come.

"Well boys," he started, "what do you have to say for yourselves?" One brother murmured a few "ums" and the other cleared his throat, but Scott continued slowly, not letting them respond to his rhetorical question. "Do you two think that it is no longer necessary for you to obey me when I tell you something to do or not to do?" The boys stayed quiet as their father continued. "Do you think that when I say something that is meant to keep you safe and out of harm's way that you can just ignore me?" The boys kept their eyes down. "And do you think that it's just fine to try to dupe someone else to play along with you, and then to be utterly misleading about what happened when someone asks?" The boys remained silent.

“CJ, you’re the older brother, you should know better. What do you have to say about this?” He waited for a reply.

“Dad,” CJ said quietly and continued, his voice strained, “we made a mistake. More than one, really. And we know what we did was wrong. Very wrong. So ... sorry.”

Scott moved his eyes to the other brother. “Jake, what do you have to say?”

“It’s like CJ said. We were wrong. ‘Specially me. We shouldn’t have done what we did, and also, I didn’t want Märta to get into trouble. She was just trying to be nice. Anyway, I’m sorry too.”

A long silence passed as Scott glared at his sons. “Well,” he said, “you both deserve to be punished. But ... punishment is something that should change the way you act and I’m going to guess that you two are not going to pull something like this again. I think now that you’ve seen how this whole thing has hurt everyone ... me, your mom, yourselves, and especially Märta ... maybe you’ll think twice before you pull a stunt like this again. Do you agree?”

“Yes sir.”

“Yes sir.”

“OK,” the father said, “then we’re finished with this issue.” He stood up and turned to go out the door but stopped before he left. “Oh, one more thing. We’re going to the police station in the morning. Val called a while ago. He’d talked to Detective Samuels. They want you two to talk more about this guy you’ve seen, the one with the sunglasses. They’d like to go over everything you can remember about him. Val will pick us up downstairs, so be up and be

ready to go at eight sharp. Oh, and, Val said that Mr. Samuels told him the Police Commissioner himself was likely to be there. Try to get a good night's sleep."

With that, Scott left the boys and headed back to his study.

There was little hope that the boys would get much sleep. If they were going to be talking to the Police Commissioner they wanted to have their thoughts organized and their questions ready. So after they had their showers and a little pre-bedtime nourishment, they settled down in their room to discuss what they hoped tomorrow's meeting would be about. They could share what they knew about the girl, about the man in sunglasses, about the text CJ received, and about their theories related to all of these matters. And they would try to get information about the other issues -- like Isabella's phone, the truck, and whatever might have been found inside the truck -- to help fill in some the gaps in their own deliberations.

As they talked, CJ made notes. The conversation continued until about 1:00 a.m. when CJ noticed that Jake was no longer responding. Looking up from his writing pad, he saw that his brother had had enough for the night and had slipped off into slumberland. CJ picked up his phone and for about the hundredth time looked at the text that had arrived two nights ago. What did it mean? he thought; and why was it sent to him? Was it related to the disappearance of the girl? Did the man in sunglasses send it?

Knowing no answers would come tonight, CJ set the alarm on his phone, turned off the light on his bedside table, and tried to join his brother.

As their father had directed, CJ and Jake were up and ready to go early Saturday morning, dressed in flannel shirts, jeans, and light jackets and carrying backpacks. As was planned, Val had picked up Scott and the boys in the Navigator and drove everyone to the station, arriving just before 8:30.

There was little happening at the precinct station when the group arrived to discuss the case with Sam Samuels and perhaps others. They checked in at the front desk saying they were there for a meeting with Detective Samuels, and were directed by the desk sergeant to have a seat while he called the detective. Sam walked into the station foyer about five minutes later, and after shaking hands with his friend Val, did the same with the brothers and then Dr. Birchfield. The visitors then followed Sam into a conference room so their discussion could commence.

After sitting down around the conference table, both CJ and Jake retrieved writing pads and a pens from their backpacks to review their notes and questions and add to them as the meeting progressed. Sam offered everyone coffee from the Keurig machine, but only Val accepted, helping himself to his second cup of the day. When all were settled, Sam began the discussion. "Well I've got some information to share about the Ford pick-up truck we hauled in then I'd like to get some additional information from you folks. It seems like..."

But before he could get very far, Sam suddenly broke off his report as the door to the conference room banged open. As the group looked up, Police Commissioner Walton Evers flew into the room along with one of his aides.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said, looking back over his shoulder toward the door he had just walked through. “We had to swing by city hall and...”

At that moment, much to the surprise of everyone in the room, Mayor Martin Jacobs rushed through the door with an additional two aides, looking like a man who was running for the finish line, but running on near-empty.

The mayor and the commissioner were not in their usual business dress, but had on more casual clothing suitable for an autumn Saturday morning. Both men were in their early 50s, physically trim, and were clean shaven except for the morning’s stubble. Clearly, though, neither had had enough sleep the night before. As true politicians, both men worked the room with forced smiles, shaking hands with everyone, and trying to memorize their names.

After the latecomers had found seats and the others retrieved their own, Commissioner Evers took charge of the meeting from the detective and spoke up. “First, Mr. Mayor, I think I speak for everyone when I say that we’re all terribly sorry about what’s happened to your daughter. And I’m sure you know that it goes without saying that the NYPD will continue to do everything in it’s power to find her and return her safely to you and your family.”

“Thank you, Walton,” the mayor said. “I don’t know if you can imagine what this has done to me and Elana. This last week has just been hell on earth. So ... yeah ... I hope you and your team will be successful. You have to be!”

Evers continued, looking at the mayor. “Mayor Jacobs, Detective Samuels here is the lead detective on the case,” he said as he looked at Sam. “He can bring you up to date on the latest developments that I know you’ll want to hear about. So... Sam, why don’t you take it from here.”

Sam Samuels pulled his chair up closer, folded his arms on the table and looked at the commissioner and the mayor. “Yes sir, be glad to. But if it’s okay with you and the mayor, it might be helpful to hear a little from our guests here,” he said, looking toward Val, Scott, and the two brothers. “I think they have some background information that might be helpful, and then I can fill you in from there.”

Evers looked at the mayor, and the mayor spoke: “Whatever you think, detective, I just need to get some answers about this as soon as I can. There’s nothing more important to me right now. And we all know time is of the essence.”

“Yes, sir,” Sam said, fully understanding the mayor’s message. He then looked at Val. “Gentlemen, this is Val Esposito, whom you just met and next to him is Dr. Scott Birchfield, whom you also just met...”

The mayor cut Sam off and looked at Scott. “Dr. Birchfield...now I remember... it’s a pleasure to see you again. I don’t know if you remember, but we met at a fund-raising event a couple of years ago. I think it was for the new children’s wing in the hospital. Anyway, I hear about you and your work from time to time. I’m not sure why you’re here this morning, but...”

Scott started to respond, but Sam tried to re-focus the discussion. “Well, Mr. Mayor,” he said, “Dr. Birchfield’s sons ... CJ and Jake ...” he said looking at the boys, “and Mr. Esposito have some information that may be relevant to the case. I suggest we let Val begin.”

“Of course,” the mayor said.

With that cue Val began describing the series of events that had started Monday morning as he drove the boys to school. He told about the man in sunglasses tail-gating them in the F-250 on the way to school, about them arriving at school only to learn that the school was being closed, and again seeing the same man at the school, apparently just before he drove away. Val explained how, because of his concern for CJ and Jake, he had called Detective Samuels and then he and the brothers had visited with him that same morning. He explained how from Sam he had learned about the girl's disappearance. Then he told the mayor about how he'd returned to the school to get more first-hand information and a view of the scene.

Val continued his report, talking about how Märta and the boys had seen the man again in Central Park on Wednesday morning, and how the man started to chase them before he had arrived on the scene and chased him away. Val said that Märta had then pointed out the parked truck which led him to call Detective Samuels. Samuels and several uniformed officers in squad cars arrived almost immediately followed by a police tow truck, Val said. While the pick-up truck was being taken to the police vehicle recovery compound for investigation, officers searched the park for the man in sunglasses but without any luck. Finally, Val told the mayor and the others about the text that CJ had received that same evening while they were all gathered in the Birchfield's apartment.

“So,” Val ended, looking at the mayor “it’s been a very strange and difficult week for the Birchfields as well as for yourself and your wife, sir. But it seems like the guy in the sunglasses is in some way involved. Possibly the kidnapper.”

Mayor Jacobs sat silently and without expression for a short time, looking at Val. Then he moved his attention to the Birchfields. “Well,” he said, “I can see that you guys and your parents have had a pretty tough week too.”

“Yes sir,” the brothers said together.

“I wonder,” the mayor said, “if you could tell me a little more about this guy you’ve seen...what is it?... three times now? And, uh...CJ, what exactly did that text say?”

CJ looked at his father for an okay and his father nodded at him. Then CJ started to explain again what they had seen. His report was pretty much the same as Val’s, but not quite as crisp. His voice made it evident that the man presented a menacing image, one that CJ would not soon forget. When he shifted the topic to the text message, CJ first quoted it from memory, and then said it was not possible to say for sure who had sent it, but he felt like it was the sunglasses man. He also said that his father told him not to respond to it.

The mayor spoke to Commissioner Evers and Detective Samuels, and while he did, rotated his head around the room so his aides would be included in his question: “Isn’t it possible for us to trace where that message came from?” he asked them all, but no one in particular.

Everyone looked at each other and then at the mayor. Then one of the mayor’s assistants spoke up. “We can find out about that, sir. If it came from a burner, it might be hard to trace, but, like I said, we can see what we can do.” The mayor’s aide looked at CJ, “I’ll need to borrow your phone from you for a while if that’s okay.”

As CJ handed over his phone, Jake picked up the conversation. “Mayor Jacobs, sir, I don’t know if you know or not but Isabella is in my class. Our desks are not too far apart.”

“No...I didn’t know that,” the mayor said, “or maybe I did and I’d forgotten. What’s your name again?”

“Jake, sir, Jake Birchfield. Anyway sir, I remember that Isabella had her own phone, which I think is kinda cool, but, I guess I’m wondering ... I mean CJ and I were both wondering... if she had her phone on Monday when she... you know.”

For a moment the mayor sat quietly in thought and then put two and two together and grabbing the edge of the conference table, he bolted upright and looked directly at Jake. “*What the...? Are you thinking maybe she got a message too? Like your brother? Before she disappeared?*” He spun around and looked hard at the police commissioner and his aide, and then at Sam Samuels.

“*Has anyone tried to look at Isabella’s phone records or her text message records?*” He demanded to know. “*Do I have a fifth grader here that’s smarter than my whole goddam police department???*”

Sam spoke, “Excuse me, sir, but no one informed us that your daughter had a phone, so...”

“*Well why didn’t you ask???* You’re supposed to know about these kinds of things!!!” the mayor blurted, his anger and frustration at a boil.

“Yes sir,” Sam said. “If you’ll give me her number, we’ll get right on it.”

The mayor grabbed his own phone, pushed a few buttons, and wrote his daughter's phone number on a pad of paper sitting on the table. He slid the pad to Sam.

"I want to hear from you by the end of the day about what you find out! Understand!!!"

"Clearly, sir." Sam responded.

With that the mayor stood up followed by Commissioner Evers and the aides, and started to exit the room.

"Uh, sir...there's one more thing," Sam said, "if you have another minute. It's about the pick-up truck. It might be important."

The mayor stopped in his tracks but remained standing. "What about it?" he asked.

"Well...it's a little strange, sir, actually more than a little," Sam said. "The truck was absolutely clean. There not only were no fingerprints, there was nothing: no sign that a human being had ever been inside the truck. Not even any bits of clothing, hair, food, drink or anything. Just like the thing had just rolled off an assembly line. But that's not the strangest thing," Sam continued, "we traced where it came from. The truck literally disappeared off the lot of a dealership in Lebanon, Kansas two weeks ago. And there's one more thing. It was a brand new truck. Had just arrived in Lebanon from the factory. And when we found it, it had close to 10,000 miles on the odometer!"

Earlier that cool autumn morning, about ten minutes after Scott, CJ, and Jake had gone downstairs to catch a ride with Val to the police station, as she sat on the terrace outside her bedroom, Jonnie Birchfield's cell rang. Like Scott, Jonnie was off for the weekend and had decided to sleep late and enjoy the silent apartment while her sons and husband were in the meeting at the police station, but she could not. This was because, again like Scott, Jonnie had a lot on her mind. So instead of fluffing her pillow and going back to sleep, she had arisen from the comfortable king size bed at the same time as Scott, saw him and the boys off, and was now enjoying a second cup of coffee.

When she looked at her cell and saw who was calling, Jonnie knew the issue was important, and immediately answered. Then she told Märta, the caller, it would be fine for her to come over as she had asked. She also told her that she would be the only one home and sensed that Märta was a little relieved. After hanging up, she walked down the hallway and into the kitchen, and started a new pot of coffee.

When it was necessary, Märta would stay over for the weekend, but as the boys had grown older and more independent, she usually spent her weekends in her own apartment in Queens, engaging in various social activities with her own circle of friends. Jonnie knew what Märta wanted to discuss ... or she thought she did ... and decided it was probably better that she come over when Scott and the boys were not home. Märta had left the apartment Friday afternoon around 2:30, her usual time, and so had not seen Jonnie since her early arrival at the apartment that same morning. During that time, not being exactly herself, she had said little to Jonnie, and almost nothing to Scott.

Although she usually used the subway when not being ferried by Val, Märta traveled this morning by taxi so she could arrive at the apartment by 9:00. As Jonnie had thought, Märta was somewhat relieved that Scott and the boys were out. Jonnie knew that the conversation would be a continuation of the one that began on Wednesday evening, and like the earlier discussion, this one would be difficult. Although Marta was close to both Jonnie and Scott, she had always been more comfortable conversing about more sensitive issues with Jonnie alone.

When she arrived, Märta exited the elevator and entered the apartment, heard Jonnie clinking around in the kitchen, and walked in to meet her.

“Hi,” Jonnie said with a weak smile on her face. “Coffee?”

“Sure,” Märta said, “thanks.”

The two women doctored their own cups of coffee and then Jonnie said, “Want to sit in here, or out on the terrace?”

“This is fine,” Märta said, “if it’s OK with you.”

“Yeah, sure, of course,” Jonnie said. “So what’s on your mind?”

Märta opened her purse and pulled out an envelope. Typed on the outside was only one line: “Dr. Scott Birchfield and Dr. Johanna Birchfield.”

“What’s this?” Jonnie asked.

“It’s my resignation,” Märta answered. “I’ve decided to go back to Sweden.”

“*What??? But why??? You can’t!!!*” Jonnie said, extremely upset.

“I think it’s for the best.” Märta said. “I made a very serious and dangerous mistake by not following Scott’s direction. And then I didn’t tell Val the truth

about it. I don't think it would ever be possible to regain Scott's trust ... or his respect. And I don't blame him for that. So, I think for everyone, it's best if I resign and return home."

Jonnie sat stunned and silent. Then she spoke as if talking to a younger sister. "Listen, Märta, you made a mistake. People make mistakes all the time. But they don't quit! They learn from them and then they move on. I know you've learned from this incident...I know nothing like this will ever happen again. Please...listen to me."

"But I put the boys in danger," Märta responded. "They could have been hurt...or worse. I didn't know how bad the situation could have been ... I was stupid and I don't deserve to be in this family!"

"Okay ... look ... yes it was a bad decision and yes, Scott was angry, and so was I for that matter," Jonnie said, "but you *are* part of this family. And we can't let you go, not like this, just like we couldn't let CJ or Jake go. You belong in this family and this family needs you!"

Tears glistened in Märta's eyes and started to roll down her cheeks. "But Jonnie, I've never felt so bad ... I just don't know how I can go on this way ... how we can."

"Look," said Jonnie, "go home, rest up, do something fun. Let me talk to Scott. Please. Come back Monday morning and let's get everything settled then." She picked up the unsealed envelope and handed it to Märta. "And take this with you," she said.

The email was sent to the parents of all the students of the Dewey Academy, arriving Saturday morning simultaneously in the inboxes of both Scott and Jonnie. It was the second email sent by the school that week; the first being the one that was sent out Monday evening saying the school would be closed for the rest of the week and explaining why.

As a family, the Birchfields had very mixed feelings about the content of the email which stated that school would resume as normal on Monday morning. The boys were excited to be able to go back, but Scott and Jonnie were much less sanguine about the decision. Isabella Martin had not been found nor had the driver of the mysterious pick-up truck. The first fact had been alluded to in the email, which said the “case is still being investigated,” but nothing was said about the truck or the sunglasses man, facts that, although known by the Birchfield family, were still being kept confidential by the police.

The email to the parents explained that the school administration remained concerned about the situation and were working closely with the police to resolve it, but that there was also concern about the impact of lost school days. To be extra cautious, the message stated, three armed security guards would be posted at the school starting Monday to better assure the safety of the students, faculty, and staff. The NYPD had also told Mr. Stuart, the headmaster, that police patrols would be in the proximity of the school throughout the day.

That early afternoon, after returning from the meeting at the precinct, sitting around the kitchen table having sandwiches and soup for lunch, the family discussed the situation. Scott summarized his and Jonnie’s thoughts about

the matter. “The school plans to open on Monday, but your mother and I really are not comfortable with that decision. We still don’t know what happened to the mayor’s daughter, and the rest of it is just way too strange. Anyway, it seems to us like there could be some danger surrounding the school.”

Then CJ said, “Well, one thing’s for sure, Mayor Jacobs and Commissioner Evers are going to be on top of this whole thing. They’re probably going to have cops all over the place at school next week.”

“Well the email said the school was going to have extra security guards there,” Jonnie said, “and the police *did* say they would be patrolling the area. But there’s still just so much we don’t know. What do you think, Jake?” Jonnie said, pulling her number two son into the conversation.

“I don’t know. I guess it’ll be okay to go back. I don’t think anybody really knows. But I guess we’ll be okay.”

“You don’t seem to be very sure,” Jonnie said to Jake. “Are you not worried about this whole thing?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Jake said without elaboration.

After sitting silently during this exchange, Scott offered his opinion. “Well, if your mom agrees, what I think we should do is have Val take you guys to school Monday morning like always, but then I think he should stay there to kinda keep an eye on things. Maybe he could float back and forth between your classrooms, you know, and just sorta sit in for the day...or maybe a week. Could make it safer for everybody. I could give Mr. Stuart a call.”

CJ protested vehemently. “*Dad, c’mon...don’t do that!!!* We don’t want Val sitting there watching us as school!!!”

“What do you think, Jake?” Scott asked his other son.

“No. I don’t think I’d like it either. Anyway, I don’t think it matters ‘cause I don’t think anybody’s going to kidnap us.”

“Why do you say that?” Jonnie said.

“I don’t know. I just don’t think anybody will.”

Jonnie looked at Scott as she spoke to him as well as her sons. “So maybe another idea is that we’ll just ask Val to stay in the vicinity of the school. He can let the police know he’ll be there just as a precaution. He doesn’t actually have to sit in your classrooms. Is that better?”

“Yeah. That’ll be fine,” CJ said, relieved.

“Sure.” Jake said.

The meeting at the precinct station earlier that morning provided CJ and Jake with new information but it was information that did not make any sense and was not particularly helpful. As they sat in their bedroom after lunch, they enumerated what they had learned. There were four relevant points and CJ wrote them down in his notebook as they voiced them:

1. Isabella may or may not have had her phone with her when she disappeared, but her father did not know where the phone was now.
2. She may or may not have received a message like the one CJ received. That was not known but might be found out.

3. The truck came from a place call Lebanon, Kansas, but nobody knew how it disappeared, how it got to New York, why it looked like no one had ever been in it, or how, after being gone for about two weeks, it went about 10,000 miles from Kansas to New York.

4. There was still no sign of the driver of the truck, even though he had been seen three times by the boys during the past week and all the cops in New York City were looking for him.

“Anything else?” CJ asked Jake. “I think that about covers it.”

“Yeah,” Jake said, “except for maybe one other thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Well ... you know ... the mayor,” Jake said.

“What about him?” CJ said.

“He’s like ... really ... I don’t know ... like really, really mad.”

“Well, yeah,” CJ said, “his daughter’s missing, she’s been kidnapped or something. Of course he’s mad. He wants the police to find her. So he’s pretty ... POed.”

“Well, if *you* were missing,” Jake reasoned, “mom and dad and me, we’d all be real worried and scared and all. But I don’t think we’d be mad. But the mayor ... it’s like he’s about to bite somebody’s head off. I mean, I guess that’s not really a fact, but it kinda seems important. Or maybe just interesting, to me anyway.”

CJ looked at his brother. “Hmmpf,” he said. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

The brothers reviewed the key points they had noted and decided there was only one they could delve into more at this time: the one about where the truck came from. So CJ opened up his laptop and googled Lebanon, Kansas. Then he looked at the Ford dealership located there.

“There’s not really much about the place that seems real important,” he commented to Jake. “Just looks like a small town. Don’t know why anyone would steal a truck there to come to New York. I mean, why didn’t they steal it from here or New Jersey?”

Jake was silent for a few seconds then he said. “I don’t know.” Then he added, “I wonder if Kansas people are real clean, or something. Also, maybe they like to drive a lot ‘cause, you know, Detective Samuels said there was nothing in the truck but somebody had driven it 10,000 miles.”

CJ, ignoring Jake’s last comments, was continuing to look on the website about Lebanon, Kansas. Then, all of a sudden, he burst out: “*Holy Crap!!! Man ... that’s weird!*”

“*What???*” said Jake.

“Look at this!” said CJ. “This place ... Lebanon, Kansas ... it’s exactly in the middle of the country. Look...there’s a plaque and everything. It is exactly right in the middle of the United States! Why would someone want to steal a truck from some place right in the middle of the country and then drive it 10,000 and then come to New York???”

Jake hunched over CJ’s shoulder to get a better view of the computer screen.

“Go to google maps,” he said. “Get directions from Lebanon to here.” They watched as the route appeared on the screen. “Now get directions back to,

let's see, Los Angeles, California.” They kept watching as the path was laid out on the map. “Now go from Los Angeles let's say to Houston, Texas. Then go to...I don't know... some place in North Dakota. Now go to Atlanta, Georgia and back to New York City.”

“*Look!!!*” CJ practically yelled, “*it's almost 10,000 miles!!!*”

Jake said, “Whoever... or whatever ... stole that truck from Lebanon, Kansas drove it back and forth across the country before coming here. Least that's what I think.”

“I think you're right,” CJ whispered. “But why?”

“I have no idea,” Jake said, “but now I'm pretty sure about two things.”

“What?” CJ said.

“I already said the first one: Isabella disappeared but nobody took her.”

“And what else,” CJ asked, very interested in his younger brother's opinion.

“Nobody's ever going to find the driver of that truck.”

It was nearing 6:00 p.m. and the brothers had spent the remainder of the afternoon developing hypotheses about how all the pieces fit together. They had considered stopping their quest for a solution so they could play their video games, but neither could drag himself away from the mystery that had come into their lives.

When CJ and Jake heard the buzzer from the lobby ring, they assumed dinner had arrived. It was fairly common for the family to send out for a couple of large pizzas on Saturday evening, so the boys assumed one of their parents

would soon stick a head in their bedroom and announce that dinner was on the table. So they weren't surprised when Jonnie peered in the door.

"Pizza?" CJ asked.

"Not yet," his mom said. "But I need you to come out here anyway. You too, Jake."

The boys looked at each other with raised eye brows, then at their mom, and then followed her into the foyer. Standing there was their father along with Mayor Jacobs. Scott had an anxious look on his face when he looked at CJ. "The mayor's come to return your phone, CJ, and ... he wants to ask you something."

Mayor Jacobs handed CJ the phone and said, "Whoever texted you used a burner. The text came from somewhere here in Manhattan, but it's not possible to know who sent it. And as for my daughter's phone, we can't find it, so she must have it ... wherever she is ... or maybe she lost it. We've tried to call her, but we get a message that it's unavailable." He took a breath and continued. "And the police just got the warrant and are still trying to look at her text messages through the provider. So we don't know about that yet either. But anyway, I wanted to bring you your phone myself."

"Sorry," said CJ, "I hope they find out something. But, what did you want to ask me?"

"Well...I want to know if you'd be ... if you'd be willing to answer the text you got on your phone."
