

## My Civic Duty

A message to the Mafia

By John Longwell

This book is dedicated to my daughter and son  
and to the woman I love,  
without you there would be no reason  
to risk it all to live.

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## Preface

The following events may or may not be inspired by real life circumstances, however right now they feel pretty darn real to me. I will apologize in advance for my intentional ambiguity, as I'm honestly not real sure what I can and can't talk about. I'm more or less going on the principle of 'ask for forgiveness later' rather than 'ask for permission first' which I'm pretty sure would squash this book from the get go. Anyway, with my apologies and disclaimer now out of the way here is a book I've entitled "My Civic Duty: A message to the Mafia."

## Introduction

The facts, as they are, are really quite simple. I was dining in a restaurant while overnight on business in a large metropolitan city in the eastern portion of the United States and just happen to become a federal witness because of what I beheld. Is that vague enough for you? So what exactly did I see? That's a good question and one that I'm sure I'll be asked again by a federal grand jury some time in the future. My answer isn't really the crux of my story just kind of the lynchpin at the center around which the events of my life have circled for the last four years. However, so as not to leave you hanging, let me try to tell you as much as I can without raising the attention of those that would dispatch black ops helicopters or mafia hit men to my particular location. I saw some bad people and unintentionally ended up recording some of their conversation. I'll explain why I was recording in the first place a little later on, but trust me it's not all that interesting. What is interesting is the conversation I had with two federal agents the next morning at my hotel. If it's okay with you I'll go ahead and launch into my story since some actual dialogue begins here.

## Scully and Mulder

I opened my hotel door to two federal agents one sunny spring day in 2006. They showed me their credentials and I invited them in. They sat in the two uncomfortable chairs that accessorized the small cramped round table squeezed between the double bed and the window. I sat on the bed and put my shoes on, as I was just about to go down to the hotel restaurant for breakfast.

Now to protect these awesome agents, I'm obviously not going to use their real names or refer to which department of the government for which they work. In truth, I'm not absolutely clear since the bad people I saw could be involved with drugs (DEA), guns (ATF) or just good old fashioned organized crime necessitating the FBI or the Department of Justice. So I'll simply call this government agency the feds and I'll call these agents by names I jokingly referred to them by when we first met.

"So, what do I call you two, Mulder and Scully?" I laughed.

They both gave me an obligatory smile, as if they'd never heard that one before, and proceeded to explain the reason for their visit.

Scully began with an inquiry, noticing me putting on my shoes, "Were you going somewhere Mr. Smith (not my real name)?"

"Yeah, I was just going down to grab some breakfast." I replied.

"Well, we don't want to keep you from missing breakfast so would it be okay if we called room service and ordered in, our treat?"

"Works for me," I consented, not realizing this little "it's our treat" statement would be one of many to bait me in much the same way a drug dealer passes out samples to prospective drug addicts.

We ordered our breakfast and convened our first of many meetings that would take place over the next few weeks and months and years.

"You dined last night at 'Luigi's Italian restaurant (not the restaurant's actual name. Do you sense a pattern here?)"? Mulder began.

"Uh, yeah, I think that's what it's called, the hotel van driver recommended it to me." I answered and asked whimsically, "Why, do have the place under surveillance?"

Mulder passed Scully a knowing glance as if to say, "This one is going to take a while."

Scully chimed in reassuringly, "Mr. Smith, we realize you must have a lot of questions, but in order to facilitate our discussion, if you could please hold them until we're done, then we'll try to answer whatever questions we can."

I nodded and added, "Please call me John."

Mulder continued, "Had you ever been to this restaurant before last night?"

"Nope."

"And you said you went to there at the recommendation of the van driver?"

"Yes, I think his name is Vinnie (might be his actual name, I honestly can't remember), you know like Vinnie Barbarino...from 'Welcome Back Kotter'"? I answered.

Neither one responded.

"A little before your time?" I asked. "Uh, never mind. Sorry. Please continue."

Mulder continued. "Were you aware this restaurant was located in a notoriously heavy crime area of the city?"

"Well, Vinnie said that part of town was a little sketchy, but I just told him sometimes that's where you had to go to find the best places to eat. Other than that I didn't really think much of it. I guess that's the country boy in me, always trusting and never wanting to think the worst about things or people. Was I being naïve?"

"I wouldn't say that." Scully reassured.

"So, prior to Vinnie's recommendation, you'd never heard of or been to 'Luigi's Italian restaurant'?" Mulder clarified.

"Correct."

"We see from our *surveillance* footage" (he emphasized the word 'surveillance' since the cat was now out of the bag, and continued) "that you entered the restaurant at 3:10pm and left a little before 9pm." Mulder glanced at the tablet PC in front of him that obviously contained the surveillance notes.

"Yeah, that sounds about right." I confirmed.

"Why were you at the restaurant for so long?"

"Well, when I have these long layovers I like to find a nice place to just go and chill out. I like to people watch and so I decided to go for happy hour and stay for dinner and just observe the locals in their natural environment." I explained. After hearing the words coming out of my mouth I'm not sure I would have bought my story either, even though it was the God's honest truth.



“So you just sat and people watched for six hours?” Mulder clarified with the slightest hint of skepticism in his tone.

“Mostly, I mean I talked to the waitress a little. I think her name is Rose (Once again not sure if this is her name or not. Boy am I a self-absorbed ass or what?). And I listened to some recordings and recorded some journal entries...”

At the mention of the word ‘recording’ you’d have thought someone just through a rock through the window because both agents straightened up suddenly and simultaneously.

“Recordings!? What recordings?” Scully chimed in beating Mulder to the punch.

“Well, I’m on the road a lot and I used to keep a written journal but with the recording features on these new Smartphones it makes it super easy to just do voice recording journal entries instead. I record my thoughts and listen to them and it helps me stay organized.” I explained slowly.

“How much of the six hours at the restaurant would you say you recorded?” Mulder inquired with great interest.

“Oh, it was pretty much on and off the whole evening.” I answered. “I keep my Bluetooth in my ear so it makes it look like I’m talking on the phone when I record so people don’t think I’m some crazy guy talking to myself.”

“Clever idea.” Scully smiled admiringly.

That was only one of maybe a half a dozen times that I would ever see agent Scully smile, a by-product I’m sure of a very stressful and consuming profession.

“When were through with our interview would it be okay if we make a copy of your recording and keep the original for our investigation?” Scully added.

“Sure, but just be forewarned, my journal entries are a sure cure for insomnia so don’t listen to them while operating heavy equipment.” I joked.

Mulder even half smile at this crack. I think the ice had finally broken.

## The Testimony

Now I've watched my share of court TV, Law and Order and a hefty supply of Matlock but nothing I'd previously witnessed prepared me for my day in court. After my initial meeting with Scully and Mulder we got together every couple of months to re-hash my recollection of the night I ate at Luigi's Italian restaurant. Without coaching, I must emphasize, Scully and Mulder verified that my memory of the evening's events was keen and clear so that when I told it again to the nice people of the grand jury, nothing of importance was left out. This went on for about a six months until my day to testify arrived.

When all was said and done it was really quite underwhelming, as everyone was very courteous and well mannered. There was not a single, "You're out of order!" "Bailiff, remove this man!" or "You can't handle the truth!" in the entire proceedings. How disappointing. I was simply asked to give my testimony of the events that took place at Luigi's restaurant, confirm the men I saw dining there, affirm that I had made the recording and that it was in fact the original without any alterations. The worst part of the whole ordeal was having the jury listen to me ramble on as they played the recording in its entirety. How embarrassing! After that, they thanked me and I was escorted from the courtroom.

What I didn't know, but found out later, was that my testimony was deemed key in securing some highly sought after court orders permitting law enforcement personnel to listen in on phone calls and intercept emails and other vital communiqués of some 'bad people' currently under investigation. I was happy to perform my civic

duty and assumed my interactions with the feds were concluded. I couldn't have been more wrong.

## Unknown Number

On Friday September 26<sup>th</sup> 2008, my otherwise sound sleep was broken around 4:10 a.m. by my ringing cell phone. I turned over and noticed the caller id indicating it was from an unknown number. I answered anyway curious as to who might be calling me at this early hour. I voiced a slow and groggy "hello" hearing nothing on the other end except the "click" of someone hanging up. "Well good morning to you too." I muttered as I turned over to go back to sleep. About two minutes passed and the phone rang again. I turned over toward my night table and noticed it was again from an unknown number. I turned the volume down on my phone and muttered "fool me once" as I turned over once more in an attempt recapture the fleeting vapors of sleep.

As I drifted back to slumber land it was clear that sleep was not on the agenda for this day. My wake up call came in the form of four federal agents in full S.W.A.T. gear storming my residence. Scully entered my bedroom once the premises were secured and directed me to get dressed. She held her index finger up to her mouth to indicate for me not to speak. We all piled into a large black Suburban and drove swiftly to a remote airfield I was unaware existed in my small hometown. We made a quick transfer from the truck to the plane with my one small piece of luggage I always keep partially packed in case I have to leave suddenly for business. As it was, this business was a little more sudden of a departure than I was accustomed. It wasn't until after we took off and leveled at cruising altitude that Scully finally filled me in on the reason for our quick get-away, and why I was wearing S.W.A.T. attire, complete with Kevlar vest and attack helmet.

Scully took a deep breath and began apologetically, "Good morning and I'm sorry that we had to start your day off under these circumstances."

"Good morning." I echoed and asked with apprehensive excitement, "Where are we headed? Disneyland I hope!" I joked nervously.

Scully smiled (smile number 2) at my joke, "That would be nice but unfortunately we're going west. Have you ever been to Tucson (not the city's actual name)?"

I shook my head "no."

"We're headed to our Tucson safe house until we can clear up some things." She added guardedly.

"What kind of things?" I inquired, trying to squeeze Scully for any information I could.

Scully dodged my question by asking one of her own. "Why didn't you answer your cell phone this morning?"

I didn't even bother asking how she knew about my phone calls but just assumed that the feds were now observing everything I said and did. (One side benefit, I've pretty much stopped looking at all porn on the Internet). "I did answer the first call. I just didn't answer the second because I figured it was the same crank caller, they were both unknown numbers. What's up with the calls?"

“We were the second unknown number calling to see if everything was ok.” Scully explained. “We’re currently checking the I.D. of the first caller. When you didn’t answer we had to verify that you were okay.”

“And thus the S.W.A.T. wake up call.” I broke in finishing her sentence.

Scully nodded.

“But what’s the big deal about a phone call.” I pressed.

One of the two “escort agents” accompanying us shot Scully a look.

Scully reassured, “Its okay. John has been apprised of some of the details of this case...but...I think it’s about time we fill him in on a few more important facts.”

The agent stared straight ahead without indicating his approval or disapproval as Scully began to lay out the situation.

“John, as we told you two years ago when you agreed to help us with our investigation, we are dealing with some very unsavory and powerful members of organized crime. These people place little value on human existence, especially if it conflicts with their business aspirations. As a result of your deposition we’ve been able to gather thousands of hours of surveillance evidence that we hope will bring a host of indictments against these people. The longer we monitor these individuals the more evidence we uncover connecting other individual’s. To make a long story short, we can barely keep up with all of the criminal elements surfacing in this case and the last thing we want to do is jeopardize one of our assets.”

“Am I an asset?”

Scully paused briefly, embarrassed by referencing me in such an impersonal manner. "Yes, you are an incredible asset but also much more than that."

"Thanks," I interjected jokingly, "I have been working out."

Scully continued, appreciative of my lighthearted comment to cover her faux pas, "We've put a protection detail on you to ensure your safety and whenever we believe there's a security concern we remove the "asset" (she points to me and winks) from all points of risk until we complete our investigation and deem it safe for the "asset" to return to their dwelling. In this situation, your unknown phone call this morning raised a security concern and once we identify the caller, we'll be able to assess whether or not it's safe for you to return home."

"What kind of a security concern?" I asked, trying unsuccessfully to raise one eyebrow in confusion.

Scully shifted uneasily in her seat and started hedging when I interrupted.

"It's okay, I'll just research it online," I baited, "I'm pretty sure I have enough details to enter a decent search query like 'organized crime and strange cell phone calls.'"

"Okay, okay, I'll level with you." Scully sighed. "But don't read more into this than..."

"Than being whisked away in the middle of the night and flown thousands of miles across country?" I interrupted brusquely.

Scully paused allowing me to vent my frustration. "I can understand your frustration but please know that we're simply taking all precautions to ensure your



safety. I'll apologize for the inconvenience but not for taking actions that are in the interest of your well being."

Given this information I calmed down and quietly offered, "I do appreciate the care and protection you guys are providing. Thank you."

Scully nodded in response and resumed her train of thought. "At times a phone call can be used to verify the location of someone under surveillance. Cell phones can be triangulated and voiceprints can be verified providing an individual's exact location to people that might be looking for them or following them."

"You think someone is following me?" I asked dumbfounded.

"We're not sure but that's why we are taking these precautions. We'll find out who called you and if it's nothing you can go home. If not..." Scully trailed off.

"If not...what?" I questioned with transfixed interest.

"If not...we'll have to address the options available at that time." Scully stated succinctly. "I don't want to get ahead of ourselves, so let's just leave it there for now and wait for the results of the phone trace. Okay?"

"Okay." I reluctantly agreed. "Now, I just have one last question."

Scully looked at me with wearing patience and invited, "Sure, what is it?"

"How do these seats recline because I'd love to get some sleep?"

Scully half smiled and pointed to a button on the armrest. "Sweet dreams."

## The List

You might think the feds would be really high tech but when simple suffices you stick with simple. You see prior to "the phone call" I was a name on a list of names. This list included other people of like importance; we were simple "common assets". The list was stored as a file on a computer but also as a paper list in the top desk drawer of agents like Scully and Mulder, for quick access. After "the phone call" my name was transferred from the "common assets" list to a "crucial assets" list until my mystery caller could be identified. The "crucial assets" list was also kept as a file on a computer but access to it was limited. For backup a printed copy was stored in an office safe. Everything was safe and sound, or so it seemed.

Now it only took the feds three days to discover the identity of my unknown early morning caller. They traced the call, picked up the individual, "interviewed him" and released him with a stern warning to double check the number of the "sexy singles line" before dialing. It turns out my phone call was from a drunk divorcee' trying to find some consolation from one of the bikini clad ladies advertising a local singles phone service. With this information now in hand standard protocol would be to remove my name from the "crucial assets" list and downgrade it to the desk drawer list of "common assets". This also would have ended my short visit to Tucson. However a lot can happen in three days, just ask Jesus Christ.

As luck would have it, since bad luck is still technically luck, these three days turned out to be rather eventful in the office of a certain federal agency. In much the same vein as the movie "The Breach," starring Chris Cooper and Ryan Phillippe, some

national secrets in the form of hard copy documents found their way out of a federal office safe and into the hands of parties unknown. When this kind of security breach occurs immediate safeguards are launched to curtail further damage. The safeguard put into place, as it relates to me, was to indefinitely re-classify me as a "crucial asset." The fact that I was due a downgrade from "crucial asset" to "common asset" became moot with the theft of the "crucial assets" list. These precautions were taken to ensure my overall safety. You see the new owner of "the list" wouldn't know that I shouldn't be on the "crucial assets" list and could only perceive that I was a valuable resource to the feds. Why else would I be at the top of the "crucial assets" list with an asterix next to my name? For all they knew this might signify that I was the most important asset on the list, not merely an asset in transition, as was the reality.

After three days in Tucson I met with Scully and Mulder in what I assumed was a preparation meeting so I could return home.

"John", Mulder began. "I'm afraid we have some big news to share with you."

I listened as all of the fun and excitement was sucked out of my three-day vacation.

"After our investigation we've concluded that it will be best for you to remain under extended federal protection." Mulder declared without fanfare as though reading a press release.

"Okaaay." I said slowly processing Mulder's words. "Define 'extended' and 'protection'".

Scully chimed in, "Witness protection for as long as is necessary, hopefully just until the investigation is over."

"Like new name, new social security number and plastic surgery?" I probed curiously.

"Well definitely the first two." Scully confirmed. "But I don't think surgery will be necessary."

"And when do you think the investigation will be over?"

Scully and Mulder exchanged looks of "I don't know" as Scully answered reassuringly, "We can't really say for sure at this point but thanks to your grand jury deposition we've made a lot of headway already."

"Okay guys just level with me." I pleaded. "Are we talking months, years or decades?"

"Oh no, not decades!" Mulder exclaimed upbeat like he was sharing great news. "Most likely just a few years."

Scully saw my stunned look as I attempted to grasp this new information and interjected. "I know this is a lot to digest but we wouldn't be taking these precautions unless it was absolutely necessary."

"Why is it necessary?" I inquired numbly.

Again Scully and Mulder exchanged glances as if to see who was going to take this one.

"Come on guys!" I insisted impatiently. "Just lay out the facts. I'm a big boy."

Scully picked up the ball again and started. "Okay, this week some 'things' developed making it necessary for us to take extra steps regarding your safety."

"Things," I repeated and asked, "Connected to my unknown caller?"

"No." Scully corrected, eyeing Mulder as if to say "What?" "The caller turned out to be nothing, just a guy drunk dialing a single's chat line. The 'things' that have developed are 'classified' but of a nature requiring us to take extra safeguards regarding this case."

"Okay, now was that so hard?" I joked sarcastically.

Scully half-smirked relieved for a break from my probing.

"So where do we go from here?" I asked attempting to take a proactive step.

Mulder picked up the ball and explained, "Well, we were thinking Tucson would be a good place to relocate you."

"Since it's nice and far from the east coast?" I inquired.

"That and we have a well established program here in the southwest. Witness Protection Program." Mulder quickly clarified realizing he was speaking agency shorthand.

"Is that important?" I asked inquisitively "to put me somewhere with an established 'program'?"

"It definitely helps with the integration process into the program by being able to interact with other 'participants.'"

"Participants." I laughed. "You guys are going to need to give me a dictionary of agency terms. And how does it help with integration?"

Mulder answered, "Other participants can help you learn the rules of the program and be there for support while you transition into your new life. Mainly they can help you avoid costly mistakes that could blow your cover."

"Wow, it sounds like I'm entering spy school." I marveled.

"In a manner of speaking you are." Scully agreed. "Or learning the part for a very long play."

Scully's words would prove to be very true as I adjusted to my new life in the program. I felt like an actor preparing for a role in a theatrical production that ran for years and years on Broadway. Every time I went out in public it was like the curtain was raised and I had to be in character as P.J. Maestas (not my actual program name so as not to burn the identity of my other program associates, but the class name my jr high Spanish teacher gave me). P.J. was short for Pablo Joaquin, a nice Latino name to help me blend in to my new southwestern surroundings. I was sure no one suspected I wasn't from here with my blond hair and blue eyes. I never thought my three years of jr high and high school Spanish would come in so handy. Yet no one spoke the kind of Spanish I learned in school, instead it was a strange mixture of Spanish and English. It was called Spanglish and it was filled with lots of slang like you'd hear on the soap operas on Spanish TV. I became proficient enough to order off a Mexican menu and find "el bano" but that was about it.

Life in the program didn't become real until I met a girl and was at a loss of what I could and couldn't tell her. Divorced for over ten years and I meet the love of my life while living a lie, what timing!

## The Program

For those in it and for those who regularly refer to it the Witness Protection Program is simply called “the program”. The official acronym is WITSEC, short for Witness Security but I’ve already abided by enough government regulations for a lifetime, so I’ll call it what I want. The people in the program are called “participants” by the powers that be that put them there. This is a subtle way of letting the “participants” believe they actually had a choice in the matter. As if “die or join Witness Protection” is really much of a choice. The only real upside is that you get to leave all of your debt behind with your old life, except for student loans, as those are like cancer and follow you to the grave.

Life in the program is like learning the part to an elaborate play. The role is your life if you had amnesia and can only vaguely remember bits and pieces of your past. The real focus isn’t on what’s behind but on what lies ahead. Participants are “strongly encouraged” to develop new interests, new skills and especially new relationships, since most all of your former relationships also died with your old life. Most new relationships formed are with other program participants. This is the easiest and safest way to successfully play out your new life because the people you meet share the same vulnerability. Everyone’s kryptonite is his or her fear of being exposed. Participants relate to one another with a kind of Cold War *détente*, you don’t expose me and I won’t expose you. It worked for the United States and Russia for nearly half a century so I guess that’s why the feds incorporate it into the program.

Participants are members of a very elite little club that few join and even fewer get to leave. Usually membership is for life or you forfeit your life and are thereby able to cancel your membership. The club has strict rules and few if any real perks or benefits. Drinking is allowed (it's almost mandatory in some chapters) but illegal drugs are forbidden. Although, I don't think the feds would put you in jail and risk blowing your cover if they caught you smoking a little cannabis. The feds actually exercise a little more tolerance with some member's "personal weaknesses" in order to keep peace among the ranks. Some of the "personal weaknesses" endured by the program managers include: shoplifting, small time gambling, prostitution and in one case I heard about, grand theft auto. The program has its own form of judge and jury to keep order among its members yet as with any system there are many members that learn how to work it to their own advantage. "Blackmail" is such a dirty word when "creative leveraging" really does aptly describe how some participants have learned to work the program to their benefit. If a new participant is fortunate enough to meet a seasoned program member with such skills they can certainly color themselves lucky. Suffice it to say, the day I met Red I could have accurately introduced myself as Lucky Maestas.

Red was the wife of Tom Donally (once again not sure if this is his real name, although he looked Irish to me the one or two times I met him), a man high up in the Department of Defense whose actions over the last twenty years earned him a price on his head. Tom's involvement stretched from Lebanon to El Salvador to Afghanistan.



He was a very valuable asset to the DOD but in order for him to continue his work his wife opted to go into the program. With Red's whereabouts safely hidden, Tom was free to play mad scientist on the international game board of the world. Red and Tom got together from time to time but mostly his career consumed him and frightened the hell out of the enemies of America.

Red took me under her wing and quickly taught me the ins and outs of the program; in addition to sharing a few tricks of the trade she'd developed herself over the last twenty years. The program was like a world within a world. It had borders and currency and a language all of its own. There were principalities and rulers and alleys and hidden passageways. There was a right way and a wrong way to do things and certain people that you just never addressed. Underneath it all I learned that if you wanted something, just like in the real world, where there was a will there was most certainly a way. Red gave me insight and a hope that the world I was entering wasn't the end to life, as I knew it. This was just a new chapter and a new season to take hold of and live with the same zeal and gusto I'd lived my former life. The sad truth was, however, that until now I don't think I'd really ever lived life with real zeal or gusto. Yet as they say, better late than never.

## The Transition

A moving company loaded up my things with the tender loving care of an Australian rugby team or so it seemed as I unloaded the mangled and less than square shaped boxes some weeks later. Prior to my belongings arrival I was given a \$300 stipend to buy basic necessities. I was staying in a furnished apartment that reminded me of an airline crashpad, but it did have satellite television, so at least that was an upgrade from my seven channel former life. I was told that I would need to find work and that an occupational assessment person would be coming by in a few days to help. I envisioned a grown up version of my high school career counselor. Who knew maybe Mom would finally get that doctor or lawyer she'd always wanted for a son.

They say there are no free rides in life and I'm here to tell you that also goes for life in the program. Witness Protection is a government funded pretend world with real world expenses and the feds expect each participant to bear their fair share of the financial burden. Participants are highly encouraged to find jobs but not just any job as it must be a job on the approved employment list. You see what you do isn't as crucial as how you do it. Participants must blend in to their community and not draw attention to themselves so obviously news anchors and Hooter's hostess jobs are frowned upon. A job with no public interaction, night shift hours and employment where one works alone is the preferred criteria. The feds take some of your past work experience into account but usually participants just end up learning a new skill set. This is what happened to me.

Sally, my occupational assessment coordinator came on Monday of my second week in captivity, as I was now calling my new life in the program. Sally ran me through a series of skills test, all of which we conducted on her laptop. I scored high on the English, Vocabulary, Grammar and Spelling sections. My Math proficiencies weren't quite as stellar.

After three hours of testing we finally took a break at which time I asked Sally, "So have you guys ever just asked your test subjects what they wanted to be?"

Sally looked at me and asked, "What do you want to be?"

"A space cowboy." I answered with a smirk.

"That's why we don't ask." Sally smirked back smugly. "I'm actually going to pull up a list of jobs we can plug you into in this area, so in a limited way you will be able to choose what you want to do."

"Cool." I replied with a sense of surprised anticipation about my new unknown career prospects.

"Now, the list takes into account your previous jobs and skills along with the results from this morning's assessments and narrows them down based upon your program's restrictions and requirements." Sally explained.

"What restrictions and requirements?" I asked curiously.

Sally referred to a notebook that I assumed had my restrictions and requirements listed. I was starting to feel more like a corrective contact lense and less like a career applicant.

She saw me trying to peek at her list and then put it down on the table so we could both see as she explained the particulars. "As a stage one program participant the chosen job should be low profile and flexible in case a transition to another location is necessary. Ideally the chosen job should have transfer potential so a similar position can be resumed in another city if needed. We have the best luck when we pair you with two part-time jobs instead of just one full-time job. The variety helps keep you focused while you go through the integration process. Also if one job doesn't work out you still have the other to fall back on.

"That makes sense." I commented. "So what's on the list?"

Sally hit a few keys on her laptop and a list of seven jobs popped up on her screen.

1. T-shirt silk screener.
2. Night custodian for an office building.
3. Vehicle transport driver for Rental Car Company.
4. Logistics Database supervisor for package delivery company (twilight shift).
5. Proofreader for technical writer's firm.
6. Bulk newspaper delivery person (pre-dawn shift).
7. Unload and load trailers for a distribution company (swing shift).

"I notice most of these jobs entail me working at night?" I observed questioningly.

“Yes, that’s to fulfill the low profile requirement. These jobs are a lot easier to fill because not many people can handle working the 10 pm to 6 am shift. Also, they generally have a higher turn over so if you did need to move to a different location, your resignation wouldn’t seem out of the ordinary. Do any of these jobs look like something you’d like to do?”

“Honestly, no.” I uttered less than impressed than asked. “How many can I try?”

“All seven if it comes to that but we hope maybe only three or four.”

“Well, I could probably do the database job pretty easy since I know my way around the computer.”

“Yes, you scored high on your PC proficiency.” Sally agreed.

“The rental car transport job sounds pretty fun, what does it entail?”

Sally clicked on the rental car job link and read: “Deliver rental stock to branch locations around the metropolitan area and sold inventory to purchase locations around the state. Must have professional appearance, good interpersonal communication skills, the ability to follow directions and operate a manual transmission vehicle.”

“That sounds very doable.” I observed.

“So, database supervisor and delivery driver?” Sally confirmed.

“Sure, why not?” I affirmed.

“Okay, I’ll set up your interviews.”

“Oh. I still have to interview for the jobs?” I asked with surprise.

“It’s more of a formality so we don’t draw any attention.” Sally reassured.

"Oh, so these guys don't know I'm in the program?" I inquired.

"Heavens no!" Sally exclaimed. "To them you just come highly recommended from a government job placement service."

"Gotcha." I nodded.

"We have a very high placement record." Sally beamed.

"I'm sure you do." I mused at her occupational placement pride.

"I'll set up the interviews and call you later today." Sally said as she closed her laptop. "Do you have a cell phone?"

"Not anymore. They took mine when they moved me here." I said disgruntledly.

"Oh well, you should be issued one soon." She said reassuringly. "Just stay by the apartment phone for the time being."

"Okay. I just have a few errands to run today but I should be home sometime tonight." I joked.

Sally looked at me in horror and slowly responded. "You're not supposed to leave..."

"I'm just kidding." I laughed as I patted her on the arm sympathetically. "I'll be here. I don't really have anywhere else to go. Guess I'll watch 'The Deadliest Catch' marathon on Discovery."

Sally frowned, then sighed as she realized I really was joking about leaving the apartment. "Okay."

*"No sense of humor."* I thought to myself.

## The Jobs

I was contacted by a job placement service on the first Saturday in October, 2008 and told to report to a warehouse at 2:30 am on Sunday night (more accurately Monday morning, very early Monday morning). My boss, Ryan, was a young guy, probably in his late twenties. He introduced me to my other boss, Chase, who was younger still, probably in his early twenties. I was the old guy in the room quickly approaching forty. Chase showed me the two computers and the programs I'd be using. My job was basic data correction. I caught on pretty fast and got quicker and more proficient as the days and weeks passed. I came in at 2:30 am for the next couple of weeks until Chase and Ryan felt confident I had a good grip on my job responsibilities. After that they told me I should come in a couple hours earlier so that I could have all of the corrections completed before they arrived. This began my illustrious new career working in the wee hours of the night. I learned the joy of staying up late and sleeping in late. I lived in an older neighborhood and I'm pretty sure all of my neighbors thought I was disabled or home bound since they never saw me leave my house. I got used to waking up to the midday news at noon and going to work when Letterman and Leno were just wrapping up their shows.

I ended up getting both the database and the rental car transport jobs. Sally was right, the variety of work responsibilities did help me stay busy as I slowly adapted to my new life and surroundings. I worked only two days a week as a vehicle transport driver for the rental car company because I typically worked ten-hour days. I'm not sure what Sally said to my new employers but she managed to get me job duties that

allowed me to work pretty much by myself. Most drivers deliver cars around town to the rental branches but since Sally wanted to keep me as low profile as possible I got the out of town deliveries (apparently these were the most sought after trips among the pool of delivery drivers because I got a few snide comments from some of the veteran drivers).

“Apparently it’s not what you know but who you know.” I heard one of the older drivers comment as I headed to my brand new Ford Fusion.

This job was actually a lot of fun. I basically got paid to road trip all over the state delivering sold inventory to car dealers. The cars were purchased in near new condition as most vehicles had less than 35,000 miles on them. I road tripped in style driving brand new SUV’s, luxury sedans and stylish two-seater sport coupes. I listened to my podcasts, books on CD and my old 80’s tunes I’d downloaded to my MP3 player. I quickly got to know this southwestern state, which only two weeks earlier I’d never imagined I’d visit, yet alone live in. The time on the road was very relaxing and it gave me a chance to think about my new life as it was unfolding.

Mainly my thoughts turned to my kids. Fortunately both were already grown and out of the house attending college in different parts of the country. In the beginning Scully and Mulder told me it was best not to mention anything about my involvement with the investigation. However, since that time a lot had changed. Scully said it would be best to break the news to the kids in person. We decided to get together during fall break, which was just a few weeks away. I normally looked forward



to seeing the kids but under these circumstances I was nervously dreading our encounter. "Dear God give me strength!"

## Dad's News

On the third weekend of October I met the kids in San Diego for what they thought was a spontaneous fall break getaway. Neither one knew where they were going until they got to the airport and called me so I could tell them which airline to check with about an E-ticket. I told them to dress for warm weather, a welcome change as it was already getting chilly where each attended school.

My son, Michael, was the first to arrive in San Diego. I told him a man would be holding a sign with his name on it. He thought I must have pulled out all of the stops and hired a limo. I guess he was partially correct since the standard issued government Suburban is really the Lincoln Town car of the SUV class of automobiles. Mulder wasn't thrilled to be playing chauffeur but Scully wasn't due to arrive until later that afternoon. She was charged with picking up my daughter, Roxy, who was flying in from the east coast. When Mulder dropped off Michael at the hotel he told him to go to room 237. I opened my door to a very beach ready Hawaiian shirt wearing scraggily bearded bright eyed boy (or young man I should say).

"Nice Bermuda shorts." I laughingly complimented. "By the way, Don Ho called, he wants his shirt back."

"Don who?" Michael asked confused as he gave me a hug.

"Never mind, get in here." I motioned pushing my son onto the bed.

He got up and whistled, "Nice view." As he looked out the window.

"I know. Not bad eh, oceanfront and everything. You should see the sunsets." I agreed.

"Sunsets? I was talking about the bikini beauties on the beach." Michael mused.

"Oh yeah, they're beautiful too." I said slowly.

"Remember Dad, not all of us are dead from the waist down." Michael poked playfully.

"Funny." I poked back, a little too burdened by the heaviness of my impending news to fully appreciate the natural beauty of San Diego.

Roxy arrived a couple of hours later as Scully escorted her to our room. Michael was having a go at boogie boarding since the hotel was right across from the beach. I gave Roxy a quick hug, as she was not big on physical displays of affection, but she held on a few seconds longer as if she could sense the anxiety hanging over our gathering. I conferred briefly with Scully confirming that she, Mulder, the kids and I would meet later on after dinner.

As I closed the door Roxy gave me a questioning glance and inquired, "That's not the new girlfriend is it? Oh my God, you brought us here because you're getting married on the beach. How romantic!"

"No, no, slow down there matchmaker. She's not my girlfriend and I'm not getting married on the beach. I wish." I trailed off.

"Then what's going on?" Roxy eyed me curiously.

"There's nothing going on. It's fall break and I haven't seen you or Mike in months." I partially lied, since it was true that I hadn't seen either kid since July.

"Oh pleeease! You're a horrible liar." Roxy bemoaned, and then drew back her protest. "Okay. Whatever. It's your life. I'm sure you'll tell me when you're ready won't you Daddy?" Roxy hugged me as if to draw the news out of me.

I hugged her back suppressing a tear trying not to break my silence. I wanted to enjoy at least a final dinner with my children in this false normalcy until I broke the news to them.

Roxy let me go and walked a few steps away until she abruptly turned and asked, "You're not dying are you?"

"No." I responded immediately. "*At least not that I knew of.*" I thought to myself as I began to poke holes in the program's imagined impenetrable security.

"Good." Roxy offered as she lifted her bag onto the bed and unzipped it in one motion. "Wait a minute..." She froze, causing me to stop simultaneously. "I don't have to share a bed with stinky feet do I?" She questioned with concern.

I laughed relieved and assured, "No, Mike and I will share this room. You have a king size bed all to yourself in the room adjacent to ours."

Roxy opened the door and surveyed her room and critiqued, "Not bad Father. This may turn out to be a decent weekend after all."

I smiled thinking to myself "*I sure hope she feels that way after our meeting with Scully and Mulder.*" "Why don't you get settled in Honey." I suggested. "I'll go get stinky feet, er I mean Michael, and then we'll go and have dinner."

"Sounds great, I'm just going to check my email and go on Facebook. Let me know when we're ready." Roxy answered.

"I will..." I trailed off as the thought struck me *"Is it okay for her to post on Facebook?"* I then quickly asked, "Oh Roxy, you brought your Mac. Can I borrow it for a little while? I left mine at home, didn't think I'd be needing it, but it turns out I need to answer some emails myself."

"Sure, no problem." Roxy answered as she handed me her MacBook. "I think I'll take a shower. Call me on the room phone when you're ready. My phone is dead and I forgot my charger. By the way, how come you don't text anymore?"

"Oh, I had to order a new phone. Mine fell in the toilet." I lied, halfway impressed at my own quick thinking. "I wanted the new Android model but they're backordered so it'll be like another week." I added.

"Oh, cool. I thought you forgot about me." Roxy pretended to wipe away a fake tear.

"Not in a million years!" I hugged her again before she closed the door.

The kids and I had an elegant and expensive dinner but I didn't care since I wasn't paying. Even if I was I'd still have insisted the kids order whatever they like since I felt like this was my last meal before my execution.

"So how's school?" I asked both kids.

"It's good." Roxy offered first. "But tell me again why I want to be an electrical engineer?" She asked lightheartedly.

"Because you're great at math and as a girl in this field you'll make a lot of money so you can support your Daddy so he can retire early."

"Oh yeah, I forgot. Thanks for the reminder." She smiled playfully.

"What about you music man?" I asked Michael.

"It's okay, but I'd rather play music than learn about it." Michael groaned.

"I know what you mean. When I was going for my English degree I much preferred creative writing to grammar and verb conjugation." I agreed. "Do you like your other classes?"

"Most of them, but I dropped Philosophy though because it was just stupid. I picked up Anthropology and I like that. My other classes are pretty cool. I really like public speaking." Michael beamed.

"Nice." I commented. "I think you'll do well in that class. You've always been good in front of an audience."

"How's your lobster, Rox?" I turned to my daughter and asked.

"Delicious." Roxy smiled dipping a big pink and white leg in simmering butter.

"So when you gonna spill the beans?" She asked changing the subject.

"What beans?" Michael asked dumbfounded.

"Haven't you noticed how weird Dad has been acting since we got here?"

"Nah, I figured that was just old age, plus Dad always acts weird, don't you remember our childhood?" Michael joked in mid chew of Filet Mignon.

"Thank you." I said to Michael. "I think?"

"No, not regular weird. I mean like evasive weird, like he's hiding something."

Roxy clarified.

"Well, he's been wearing those baggy shirts to hide the family curse." Michael smiled patting his little growing potbelly as I laughed.

Roxy rolled her eyes wearily and uttered, "Never mind."

"No, all joking aside, I do have some news to share." I conceded.

"See." Roxy pointed at her brother in victory.

"What!?" Michael asked mocking his sister indignantly.

"After dinner." I stated solemnly.

"Tell us now." Roxy bounced in her seat like popcorn in a popper.

"After dinner." I repeated slower and softer.

"Okay." Roxy surrendered sensing my unease.

"Dessert anyone?" I invited trying to lift the somberness that had settled over the dinner table.

"Sure thing." Michael accepted unfazed by the conversation. "Death by chocolate."

*"That would be a nice way to go."* I thought to myself. "Rox, anything for you?"

"No thanks, I'll just pick off the boy's plate."

"No way! Get your own." Michael protested.

"Whatever!" Roxy volleyed back. "You'll eat three bites then complain that it's too rich and that you're full."

Michael was about ready to protest again then changed his mind as realization descended upon him. "Yeah, you're right. I do do that." After a brief pause he giggled saying, "I said do do."

"You're such a child." Roxy observed.

"You're the child." Michael volleyed back egging on his sister. "I love you." He smirked.

After dessert we went back to my room. As Michael opened the door he glanced back to Roxy and me and said softly, "Uh, there's some couple in our room."

"I know." I said calmly. "Just go in."

Roxy gave me a sideways glance of wonder.

"Just go in and have a seat and I'll explain." I assured.

Michael bounded on the bed landing on his stomach then groaned, "Oh, I shouldn't have done that. I think I ate too much."

As Roxy shut the door, Scully and Mulder stood in order to greet the kids.

"Kids, this is Scully and Mulder. They are federal agents."

Scully and Mulder shook hands with the kids as I continued the introductions.

"This is my daughter Roxy and my son Michael.

"Wow feds!" Michael exclaimed. "I knew that gun-running would catch up with you someday Dad." He laughed to himself.

"Be quiet." Roxy admonished her sibling.

"I was just joking." Michael pouted ever so slightly, finally sensing the somber tone of the meeting.

"Well, have a seat everyone. Does anyone need any water?" I offered.

Mulder shook his head no as Scully replied, "I'm fine, thanks."



Roxy shook her head no, remaining silent, while Mike jumped up from the bed and reported, "I gotta pee," as he ran into the bathroom.

"Thanks for the update." I chuckled knowing Michael was always good to help melt the tension of any situation.

We all waited a few awkward minutes while Michael used the restroom, all eyes upon him as he exited the bathroom and sat down.

"What?" He asked, noticing everyone staring. "You didn't have to wait for me."

Ignoring his comment I began. "Well, I'm not quite sure where to begin."

I paused as Roxy interjected. "Well, you could start by telling us why Scully and Mulder are here. Are you in some sort of trouble?"

Scully quickly answered reassuringly. "No. Your Dad hasn't done anything wrong." She paused momentarily waiting for me to continue.

"No please." I deferred not knowing what to say anyway and thankful for the assist.

"Your Dad is a witness to a federal investigation..." Scully continued until Mike broke in.

"Cool. Did you see somebody get killed or something?"

Roxy glared at her brother impatiently. "Let Scully talk Michael."

"Oh, sorry." Michael apologized.

"No problem." Scully resumed calmly. "Your Dad saw 'something'." She said slowly for effect. "But its best if we not get into the particulars. Your Dad has been helping us for a little over two years..."

Roxy and Mike glanced at me in disbelief wondering how I could have kept this news from them for two years.

"We assumed your Father would just testify then go on with things as usual but some changes have transpired over the last few weeks." Mulder explained carefully.

"Changes?" Roxy questioned.

Mulder picked up the baton and answered. "Yes, about three weeks ago it became necessary for us to establish extended security pre-cautions."

"What does that mean?" Roxy demanded fearfully.

"Witness Protection." Michael stated insightfully.

"Exactly." Scully confirmed.

"Wow." Michael observed slowly like a stoner watching the smoke rise after his first bong hit. "So someone is trying to kill you?"

I looked at Scully and Mulder for an answer having never asked the question so directly myself.

"We haven't confirmed that yet." Mulder jumped in trying to move the meeting along.

"What have you confirmed?" Roxy asked pointedly.

"We've confirmed that there may be a threat against your Father and until we know for sure one way or the other it's necessary to institute safety protocols as a precaution." Scully explained.

"Well, how long until you know one way or the other?" Roxy pressed.

“Unfortunately, we can’t give you a specific time frame.” Scully answered empathetically.

“Can you ball park it for us?” Michael chimed in.

Mulder turned to Mike and stated without emotion, “It could be indefinitely.”

“Like for the rest of his life?” Michael exclaimed in amazement.

“Well, we’re hoping it won’t be that long.” Scully offered. “We hope we’ll either verify or nullify the credibility of the threat or that the investigation itself will progress to a place where protection is no longer necessary.”

“I hear a lot of ‘ifs’ here.” Roxy observed with concern.

“You’re right, Roxy. There are a lot of unknowns. I wish there weren’t but that’s what lies before us. We’ve brought you and your brother here so we can help you both learn how to best support your Dad and safely interact with him.”

Roxy cut Scully short as she realized, “Oh my gosh! You’re already in hiding aren’t you? That’s why you stopped texting.”

Scully continued, impressed by Roxy’s intuitiveness. “That’s correct. Your Father was moved to a protected location three weeks ago.”

“What about the house?” Michael chimed in curiously. “What about my room?”

“The house is going to be rented out until your Dad can return and re-occupy it or if he wants it can be put on the market and sold.” Mulder offered.

“Really?” I responded with surprise. “I didn’t realize that was an option. Cool.”

Mulder continued. “The contents of the house are en-route now to your Father’s new location.”

"Where's that?" Michael questioned.

"Well, that brings us to some of the things we'll unfortunately be unable to disclose." Scully explained softly.

"What?" Roxy protested.

"For your Father's safety it will be in his best interests that you not know where he is or how to get in touch with him directly. You'll be able to stay in contact through a special number we'll give you and through arranged visits like this one."

"So no Facebook posts I assume?" Roxy stated with disappointment.

"Correct. Social media is too easy to trace through user IP addresses." Scully confirmed.

"Can't you guys disguise his IP address?" Michael asked.

"Not consistently." Scully answered. "Internet security is just too dicey to take a chance."

"What about texting?" Michael added.

"Same risks, so unfortunately no." Scully offered apologetically.

"So what will you do Dad?" Roxy said finally addressing me.

"Well, I already started a couple of new jobs." I started then stopped checking to see what I could share.

"Just don't tell them where you work or get too specific." Scully clarified.

"Okay. I work with computers managing a database and I deliver sold cars to dealers."

"Drug dealers?" Michael asked with devious wonder.

"No, car dealers." I laughed as Roxy and I both rolled our eyes. "That's not too specific is it?" I looked at Scully.

She nodded her head in approval and gave me a thumbs up.

"Boy, talk about supervised visitation." I sighed.

"It won't always be this way." She assured. "It just takes a while to learn what you can and can't talk about."

"I hope so," I stated exasperated, "because this sucks."

Scully and Mulder answered more questions and gave the kids information on how to contact me. We concluded our time of family and feds around 9:30 pm. After they left Roxy hugged me and began to sob.

Michael excused himself to the restroom mumbling, "I'm sad too Dad but I gotta drop a deuce. Sorry."

I waved him on and hugged Roxy until she let go and sat down on the bed beside me.

"How you doing with all of this Dad?" She asked with compassion.

"I'm doing all right. My jobs are helping me to process and adapt to my new surroundings."

"Can you at least tell me what state you're in?" She pried.

"No, probably better not honey." I chided sympathetically, then offered, "It's in the south."

"Redneck south or snowbird south?"

"Snowbird." I confirmed.

"Thank goodness. All I need now is for you to start saying ya'll." Roxy joked for the first time since dinner.

"No worries." I assured her. "And at least I don't have to endure any more snowy winters for a while."

"If I guess it than technically you didn't tell me right?" Roxy continued fishing with determination.

"Honey, please." I begged. "You know I'd tell you if I could but it's just best if you didn't know."

"Okay." Roxy surrendered reluctantly.

"I bet he's living in Miami." Michael guessed as he exited the bathroom.

"Why Miami?" Roxy inquired.

"Because Mulder kind of looks like Horatio from CSI: Miami." Michael explained.

"You know he's really not from there?" Roxy corrected.

"Who, Horatio or Mulder." Michael asked puzzled.

"Neither." I concluded their silly meandering conversation.

"So is it Miami?" Michael pressed.

"Maybe, Maybe not." I evaded. "But can we please change the subject?"

"Okay." Michael conceded reluctantly like his sister, then asked priming a new topic, "So, you packin'?"

"Packing what?" I asked curiously.

"A piece, a glock, a gun, whatever you want to call it." Mike uttered.

"No!" I answered in surprise. "Why would you think that?"

"Well...if someone was trying to kill me...I'd be packing." Michael said slowly and empathetically.

I considered it for a moment then asked somberly, "Do you think I should? And I wonder if I'm even allowed?"

"Might not be a bad idea." Roxy offered to my surprise. "And I don't see why not, it's not like you're a felon."

"Hmmm..." I pondered. "I'll look into it."

"I bet you could even get a conceal carry permit." Michael suggested.

"Maybe." I responded as I rolled over my kid's input.

"Just don't kill anyone you're not supposed to." Mike cautioned. "Course if you were in prison than at least we'd know where to go visit you. On second thought, kill whoever you like." He smiled mischievously.

Roxy smacked him on the arm for his comment to which he added laughing, "Do me a favor, and start with her."

They both rolled on the bed laughing until I jumped on, tickling them both.

Our weekend ended too quickly but I felt much better now that both kids were in the loop about my situation. On Sunday we all flew back to our prospective parts of the U.S. to resume life as usual, whatever that was supposed to entail.

When I got home to my apartment the phone rang.

"Hi Daddy." Roxy beamed through the phone. "I just wanted to make sure this system really worked."

"Hi honey." I said as tears filled my eyes. "Where are you?"

"I have a layover in Chicago. My flight doesn't leave for another hour so I just called to hear your voice. I miss you already." She admitted softly.

"Yea, I miss you too. Rox."

"So when we getting together again?" She asked.

"How about Thanksgiving?" I suggested.

"Sounds great," she agreed, then asked pragmatically, "So who's paying for all these flights?"

"Not me." I shrugged. "I guess the taxpayers, but if that's the case, guess I am paying."

"Well, it's about time we get something worthwhile for our tax dollars." Roxy joked.

"I know, huh?" I agreed.

"Can we go anywhere?" Roxy inquired.

"I'm not sure. I'll have to ask Scully and Mulder."

"If we can we should go to San Francisco or Seattle." Roxy suggested.

"That would be fun." I consented.

"Course if stinky feet gets his way we'll be at Disneyland." Roxy feigned disgust.

"Yep, he does love Space Mountain." I observed.



“Okay, Daddy, just wanted to say ‘hey’. I’m gonna get some coffee and start some Calculus homework I’ve been avoiding all weekend. Love you.”

“Love you too. Bye.” I concluded.

“Bye,” she echoed as she hung up the phone.

I sat down on the couch and cupped my head in my hands and sobbed unsure of how I would manage with these restrictions. I quickly jumped up and decided to shake off the looming depression with a beer and a shower. “I can’t let this thing get the best of me.” I stated defiantly. “I won’t let it.” I opened a beer and uttered, “Do your magic oh wonder elixir and make all the bad stuff go away.”

## Packin'

Michael's whimsical question, "Are you packin'?" didn't seem so funny the more I thought about it. I mean I was in witness protection for a reason. As far as I understood it, witness protection was a decision of last resorts used only when circumstances truly required it. Scully and Mulder weren't telling me everything either because they couldn't or because they simply didn't know. It seemed my whole induction into the program was based upon fairly vague reasons but reasons serious enough all the same to take extreme measures to protect my life. It seemed only fitting that I act in kind and take my own precautions for my personal safety. If I was undecided prior to this train of thought, I was more than convinced by the time I reached my concluding meditations.

The next day I called the contact number Scully and Mulder left with me. Someone, I'm assuming a federal agency switchboard operator, connected me to somebody's voicemail. I left a message and twenty minutes later Mulder called me back.

"What's up?"

"I was just thinking that I'd like to start carrying a gun." I stated meekly.

There was silence on the other end for a minute to which I inquired, "Hello? You still there?"

Mulder paused then stated matter of factly, "Yeah, I'm here...I have to be honest with you. I don't think carrying a gun is such a great idea."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Carrying a gun is a good way to get innocent people killed." Mulder began.

"I carry a gun because I know the good guys from the bad guys. If you carry a gun you're going to start thinking everyone's the bad guy. You'll become suspicious of the mailman and the UPS guy. That suspicion will just feed ongoing paranoia and that is something you do not need. When it comes right down to it, if someone really wants you dead you'll probably never see the bullet coming."

"Wow, that's very re-assuring." I sighed heavily.

"That's if they could find you." Mulder said trying to back-peddle a bit. "They can't find you though, that's why you're in the program. You have to hunt for elk before you kill an elk, that's why it's called hunting and not killing. Hunting is the hardest part. You need to trust us. We're very good at what we do. We can keep you safe, you just need to let us do our jobs."

"Okay, well thanks for getting back with me." I said graciously feeling like I was imposing on his time.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" Mulder asked mechanically.

"No. I think you scared me enough for one phone call." I jested only half kidding.

"Okay, well the moving truck should be arriving this week with your stuff. When it arrives we'll be moving you to your permanent safe house."

"No more apartment living?" I questioned excitedly. "And I was just getting used to my downstairs neighbor's nightly coughing routine."

Mulder again ignored my silly comments and questions and reported, "We'll give you a call when it's time to coordinate the move."

"Hey, did you find anyone to rent my house?" I inquired curiously.

"I'm not sure. That's handled by a different department." Mulder stated without interest.

"Could you find out?" I pressed.

"I'll look into it." Mulder answered shortly. "Anything else?"

"No, that's it. Thanks." I concluded.

"Okay, well I've got an appointment." Mulder hung up, not bothering with the inconvenience of modern pleasantries like "good-bye."

"Man, he has the bedside manner of a crocodile." I muttered to myself as I hung up the phone.

A half an hour later the phone rang again, this time it was Scully.

"What's up my federal agent friend?" I questioned lightheartedly.

"Hello." Scully responded with considerably more warmth than Mulder. "So, are you used to your new name yet?"

"It's growing on me." I replied then asked, "So, did Mulder tell you why I called?"

"No, I haven't talked to him. I just heard your message on the voicemail. I guess he forgot to clear it after you two talked. Is everything okay?" She asked with concern.

"For the most part, I just told Mulder that I wanted to start carrying a gun."

"Oh, I'm sure that went over well with Mulder." Scully offered sarcastically. "Did he give you his little speech?"

"The one about hunting and killing?" I conferred.

"Yep. Elk or Deer?" Scully laughed.

"Elk. And he told me a gun wouldn't do me much good anyway since I'd probably never see the killer's bullet coming." I reported.

"Oh he did not say that?" Scully asked mortified.

"Yep. He was very re-assuring." I joked.

"Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry. Mulder can be such a dork." Scully apologized.

"That's okay. It felt like a father son talk and my dad has been dead for fifteen years so it was kind of nice in a weird kind of way." I assured.

"Well if you want a gun and help getting your concealed carry permit, just say the word." Scully offered.

"I have a gun, or at least I had a gun. It should be in my stuff they packed." I offered.

"What caliber?" Scully asked.

"I have a Walther P-22." I answered.

"Well, if you want a gun for protection I think we should get you something with a little more stopping power." She stated knowingly.

"What like a 357 or a 44?" I asked.

"Hold on there Dirty Harry." Scully replied with amusement. "I was thinking of something more along the lines of a 9mm."

"Is that what you carry?" I inquired.

"You betcha, standard issue." Scully confirmed.

"And how do I go about getting a concealed carry permit." I asked curiously.

"That varies from state to state but since you're in the program you'll have to go through a different process. And the nice thing about the permit we'll help you get is that it's legal in whatever states permit concealed carry because it will be federally issued, not state issued." Scully explained.

"Sweet. How does that work?" I asked.

"Typically you go through a background check and then attend a training course. You'll still have to qualify like everyone else by passing the target test, the psyche evaluation and both the oral and written exams. These will just be administered by someone like me since we can't have you going to the local authorities who might blow your cover if they ran your fingerprints." Scully shared.

"So could you do it?" I asked.

"Sure if you're really serious." She answered.

"You bet, I've thought it over and I really want to pursue this." I confirmed.

"Okay, the next time I'm in town I'll bring some guns and we'll go shooting. You've got to practice if you're going to pass." Scully instructed.

"What do you think Mulder will say when he finds out?" I asked.

"It doesn't matter," Scully said matter of factly, "You still have your right to bear arms, even if you are in the program."

"Cool." I commented. "Good old first amendment."

"Second." Scully corrected.

"Yeah, that's what I meant. I was just checking to see if you knew." I poked.

"Sure you were." Scully smiled as she signed off. "Good-bye silly man."

"Good-bye." I answered. "Now how hard was that?" I muttered to myself.

## Burly Brian

Through Scully's help I was able to obtain my concealed carry permit. The next thing I needed to do was purchase my own glock since I'd been borrowing one of Scully's for practice and the certification process. She told me the real fun began when I did the research to find a gun that fit me best. It's like finding a good woman; you've got a fire a few rounds before you know she's the one. I told her that sounded like something her Dad must have said or that maybe secretly she liked girls. She confirmed it was the former but joked that she'd had a few offers to the latter. I thanked her and went hunting for my new nine-millimeter girlfriend.

I met Brian at the Big Bang gun store and shooting range that allowed you to test the weapons before purchasing, which seemed like the best plan to me. Brian was an ex-marine, and fairly recent veteran of the first Iraq war fought under President George Bush Senior. His bulging right bicep held the slogan Semper Fi with the matching crossed marine armaments proudly displayed on his left arm. Brian was the iconic military man that you might see in posters from World War II. His physique, chiseled chin and six-foot one statuesque frame screamed all-American, yet he was as meek and mild as Clark Kent himself.

Brian quickly caught on that I was a gun store virgin and rendered aid without giving away my secret to the over-testosteroned owners of the establishment. He helped me at the gun range and taught me what each part of the gun was called and how it functioned. I couldn't have had a better teacher, nor realized that I'd be gaining such a true friend. After testing a half a dozen glocks I chose one that seemed to fire



the most reliably for me. I left with the gun and seven hundred and fifty dollars lighter in my wallet. I offered to buy Brian dinner for helping me with my purchase, but he insisted on treating me instead, not believing I had any money left over after my expensive day. He was right and I was humbled all the more.

We both had steaks and a bloomin' onion at Outback and slowly circled in on a fact we both had been growingly suspecting about one another. Those in witness protection have a kind of non-homosexual gaydar when another unknown program participant is around. Brian and I skated around the topic for about forty-five minutes until I slyly asked the question.

"So, what's your program Brian?" I was going to veer off into a discussion about physical fitness if he didn't take the bait, which would obviously be a relevant topic given his robust muscular frame.

Brian looked at me sideways for a moment before answering and repeated, "My program? Well, I've been a part of this 'federal' program for a while." He emphasized the word 'federal', to bait me back.

Taking the bait I answered, throwing all caution to the wind, "Really, that's interesting. I just recently joined a federal program myself. It's okay, but a little restrictive."

"You're telling me." Brian volleyed back, fairly certain we were both talking about the same thing. "That's the worst part about 'the program', it always feels like you have someone watching you over your shoulder."

"Are they now?" I inquired, half joking, half not. "Maybe there's a bug in this candle." I jested as I lifted the cover from the red candle on our table.

"No, they don't use those kind of bugs anymore, they just inject them directly into your forehead." He joked tapping the side of his temple.

"So, what are you in for?" I asked boldly diving in headfirst. "Or are we aloud to tell?"

"Tell what?" Brian asked suddenly seemingly guarded, than broke reassuringly as he smiled, "Government witness for an ongoing investigation of some pretty bad stuff going on at the higher ranks of our navy. What about you?"

"*So that's how you play it*", I thought to myself, "*keep it general and vague*", I can do that as I answered, keeping the game moving. "What about me?" I asked with a puzzled look, pausing just long enough to make him sweat before continuing, "I'm actually not sure why I'm here. I gave a deposition before a grand jury pertaining to an ongoing investigation that I assume is about organized crime and I thought that was the end of it. Apparently there is some credible threat against me, I just don't know from whom?"

Our mutual honesty and transparency was refreshing and thrilling at the same time. It's like we were playing a game of truth or dare where telling the truth was the dare. It was like bunging jumping with no bungee. I wanted to hug this guy, but was afraid my masculinity was already in question from my earlier ignorance at the gun store and because I'd ordered a Mojito with dinner.

Brian broke the barrier of wonder by thrusting his burly arm out introducing himself again, "Brian Howard."

"Pablo Maestas, but just call me PJ." I shook his hand with my own firm grasp. "And might I say, it's damn nice to meet you."

"Likewise. It's been a long time since I've been able to talk to someone on the inside." Brian relayed. "I used to have a good buddy, but his cover got blown and they transferred him somewhere up north."

"Sorry to hear that." I offered.

"Stuff happens." Brian observed, "Some bad, but mostly good. Like meeting you."

"Well, I'm truly in your debt today my friend." I gushed appreciatively.

"Don't mention it." Brian dismissed. "You going to be okay to drive after that?"

Brian pointed to my umbrella drink and smirked with a sideways smile.

"Yea, I keep waiting for the alcohol to kick in, but it hasn't happened yet." I laughed. "I should be fine."

"So, do you go to church?" Brian asked boldly.

"You bet, but I haven't really found one that feels like home yet." I confessed as our mutual Christian brotherhood warmed me even further.

"Well, why don't you come with me tomorrow morning? There's a group of about ten guys that get together from eight to nine for fellowship and prayer." Brian invited.

"That sounds awesome. Where's it at because I'm still learning this city?" I agreed.

"If you want, I can just pick you up?" Brian offered.

"Works for me. Than maybe I can look at that muffler on your truck afterwards. I think its dying of cancer." I joked.

"Cool, you a car guy?" Brian inquired.

"I've worked on a few from time to time." I said trying to stay modest, as I usually always spout out this next fact way too often.

"Yea, you working on any right now?" Brian asked with genuine curiosity.

Taking my cue, "Well, I'm restoring a 67' Camaro." I baited.

"No freaking way!" Brian gushed excitedly. "Can I see it?"

"You bet. Just follow me to my house." I answered.

"Deal. Let me hit the head." Brian said in manly military fashion.

"Beats him saying I gotta go to the John." I thought out loud.

## Back to School

In addition to my two part-time jobs I did some freelance work as a web designer, a skill I'd begun developing before my new life in the program. I liked the work because I could do it from home and it appealed to the perfectionist in me. One wrong keystroke in an entire page of code and your web page may not display. Finding and fixing these kinds of problems kept my mind busy and consumed endless hours of time, two problems that seemed to never go away. I decided to take my web development chops to the next level by enrolling in an online university where I could receive a Bachelor of Science in Web Development and Web Design in only twenty-six short months of schooling. Now who could pass up such a deal? Not me.

In truth, I was hoping I would run out of days in the program before I ran out of classes. This sadly did not happen. I ended up graduating valedictorian but could not attend the ceremony and lacklusterly received my degree and certificates through the mail. I drank a beer in my kitchen by myself to celebrate. Yippee!

While attending school, I'd done some volunteer work building and maintaining a website for a fledgling non-profit that was just coming into its own with the hopes that it might someday turn into a paying gig. As luck would have it, with degree in hand, I landed my first paying freelance job as a web designer. And now we're off to the races.

I couldn't really market myself outside of my immediate city because I wasn't allowed to travel without permission from my federal handlers. This put a serious crimp in my hopes of landing a big client and working remote from the beaches of Hawaii. In

the end, I started marketing my skills to other non-profits and churches that needed help bringing their organizations into the new millennium. It was on one of these encounters that I met Samantha.

## Love and Lies

I met Samantha through a couple who hired me to build and maintain a website for their business. Samantha was living with Paul and Jeanette because she'd just ended a relationship with a guy she'd been with since high school and now had nowhere else to go. Samantha was a strong willed Hispanic woman who seemed too wild to tame. Who knew I had horse whisperer skills for hot young Latina chicas?

Sam and I got "set up" through the matchmaking powers of Paul's mom, Carol, and a business associate of Paul named Stan. Stan and Carol concluded that Sam and I should end our single streak and give love a chance. After talking to Sam, Stan called me to see if I'd be interested in getting to know her.

I told Stan "Duh? She's gorgeous! But does she know I'm almost forty?"

Stan answered, "Yeah, she doesn't care. She thinks you're funny."

"Good thing." I commented. "She's going to need a sense of humor especially if she ever sees me naked someday."

I asked Stan if Sam had any concerns about my age because Sam was twenty-nine. At that time my kids were eighteen and nineteen. My daughter told me I could date younger women as long as they were at least ten years older than her. I was cutting it pretty close because my daughter and Sam's birthdays were only six days apart. This meant for six days a year my daughter and Sam would only have a nine-year age difference. In reality, this didn't become an issue since I never told her I had kids. This would be my first lie, or omission, of many in my relationship with Samantha.

How do you build a relationship with someone when you can't be entirely honest? It would be one thing if I worked for the government and had a security clearance and my significant other knew from the get-go that there were parts of my life I couldn't discuss. Yet it's hard to make this argument when you're getting to know someone and you can't even answer basic questions like 'where did you grow up?'"

My two program friends, Red and Brian, advised me to just keep things friendly and don't get too involved. This is much easier when your friend is a guy and you can just play pool or watch the ball game together. Guys only start feeling weird around other guys when they start asking a lot of personal questions. After a while the question "are you gay?" ultimately surfaces. I'd actually thought about pretending to be gay just so I could hang around with Sam without worrying about our relationship advancing. However, I've seen too many movies to know that this plan would eventually backfire and I'd find myself on a date with a real gay man that Samantha had set up because she thought we'd make a cute couple. I couldn't bear the thought of breaking hearts on both teams so in the end I just tried to keep the lies to a bare minimum.

In order to keep track of my lies I actually wrote them down. Boy, I hoped Sam never found this list. Here is a brief overview of my falsehoods:

Lie: I had no children.

Truth: I had two kids; a college aged son and daughter.



Lie: I was from Nebraska.

Truth: My parents were from Nebraska.

Lie: I drove a semi-tractor trailer coast to coast for fifteen years but stopped and moved to Tucson because of health problems.

Truth: I used to be a bi-vocational pastor for over fifteen years and drove a semi-tractor trailer for three years (in addition to other odd jobs like lumberjack, airline employee and T-Shirt silkscreener) and stopped to move to Tucson for health problems, namely someone was trying to kill me.

Lie: I'm thirty-five.

Truth: I'm forty. (Hey, I got a new social security card and birth certificate, might as well shave off a few years in my favor).

Lie: I have no living extended family.

Truth: My Mom, older sister, brother-in-law and niece are all alive and well.

Lie: I'm allergic to tomatoes.

Truth: I hate tomatoes but no one really bothers to remove them from my food unless they think the tomatoes might kill me.

Samantha called me on that last one when we ate at Taco Bell and I forgot to order my soft taco without tomatoes. She freaked and thought I was going to die from an allergic reaction. She got pretty steamed when I didn't and especially when I told her the reason why. I can't wait to see how she'll respond when I tell her I'm not really thirty-five and that I have two grown kids. Yea that should go over a little easier than "Hey, I was just kidding about being allergic to tomatoes. Heh, heh."

Lies, lies, lies. I kept running over them and through them like tracking dog crap all over my relationship. I hated having to hide the truth but Scully gave me a reality check when she said, "Hide the truth or let her attend your funeral or worse you hers." This statement came at the end of my most recent talk with Mulder and Scully when Scully stayed behind for a little heart to heart.

"John, I know program life is difficult enough without us regulating your romantic life on top of it, but please trust me when I say you need to exercise extreme caution."

I listened intently as Scully began.

"Personal relationships take a heavy toll in this business. And don't think just because you're not carrying a badge and a gun that you're any less in this business."

"There's one difference though." I interjected as Scully paused for my input.  
"You chose this business whereas this business chose me."

“Point taken.” Scully agreed. “But whether you jump in the pool or fall in, the reality is the same...”

“We get wet.” I finished her statement.

“Exactly, and regardless of the reasons, you are here now and you need to move with caution and wisdom in order to avoid drowning.” Scully paused for a moment relaxing her posture ever so slightly as she uttered with a more empathetic tone. “I don’t normally get personal but I want you to understand the real life and death risks involved with this business.

About twelve years ago when I first joined the agency, I was married to a civilian (that is a non-agency person). Josh, my husband, worked as a plumber and supported me wholeheartedly as I pursued my career. He endured the lengthy undercover assignments and endless vague answers when he asked about my day. This went on for years as our life together dwindled down to a small schizophrenic reality where my alter ego played wife. My marriage to Josh was amazingly unfair to him and there were times I prayed he’d have an affair just to punish me for making my career so central and for making him so inconsequential. When we finally did get away to work on our relationship things went from bad to horrible.

Due to a mole in my unit, names of agents working on my joint task force were leaked to a Latin American drug cartel. All thirty of us on the task force ended up with prices on our heads. Josh literally got caught in the crossfire and took a bullet intended for me.”

"I'm so sorry." I offered Scully as she continued with tears in the corners of her eyes.

"Ever since then I vowed never to let this business get personal. Loneliness is a small price to pay for the peace of mind knowing that all of my loved ones are safe and secure." Scully concluded.

"I understand what you're saying, but I can't just stop living all together. Without people like Sam in my world, what's the point in protecting my life?"

Scully offered a half-hearted smile and said, "It's ultimately your decision. I just want you to make it knowing the full cost and consequences that may be involved. Just be wise and careful because if you don't hide the truth be prepared to have her attend your funeral, or worse, you hers."

Scully's words hung with me long after our conversation ended. I recalled her somber reminder every time my heart ached when I hid the truth from Sam. I kept telling myself I was doing what was in everyone's best interests. I tried to convince myself this was true but in truth I wanted desperately to confide in Sam and let the chips fall where they may.

I walked this tightrope for three years almost losing my footing on more than one occasion. I kept trying to find faults or a legitimate reason why Sam and I shouldn't be together but the more I searched the more I knew this was the perfect girl in the most hopelessly imperfect situation.

## Busted

When it seemed the program would be my life forever I received an email from Scully that sparked new hope for my future. The subject line read: Busted. The following snippet from an article in *The Guardian* was embedded into the body of her message.

In a devastating blow to the organized crime families of the northeastern U.S., more than 800 FBI and police officers made the largest roundup of Cosa Nostra bosses and soldiers in U.S. history. Some 127 mafia members and their accomplices were charged. (*The Guardian* Thursday January 20, 2011).

I wasn't sure how to feel about the headlines because I'd purposely kept myself ignorant about Scully and Mulder's case, trying instead to focus on building my new life with Sam.

Scully's message below the article read: "I wanted to send this your way to show you what your efforts have helped us accomplish. However, don't read too much into this because the trial is just beginning and will be ongoing for years to come. I just wanted you to see that real progress is being made and to thank you again for your continued faithfulness to this difficult course. I'll keep you updated if anything new develops."

I appreciated Scully's email and recognized that she truly was trying to communicate with me as much as security would allow. The headline didn't bolster my hopes or dash them. I'd settled into kind of a numb existence in many ways where I rarely felt the highs or lows of emotion anymore but just maintained a fluid even attitude toward life in general. I guess it was a coping mechanism but it was also proving to be a point of challenge in my relationship with Sam.

Samantha was always very patient with me allowing me to share my thoughts in my own time. Lately, however, she was voicing her frustration and lamenting that unless I opened up more and let her get to know me we would probably be approaching an impasse in our relationship. I made excuses saying that my past divorce made it difficult for me to trust someone again (which in part was true) but also raged against my longing to burst the floodgates of all I was holding back and share every last detail of my life and existence with her. It pained me to no end to continue my lies to her when everything in me yearned to come clean.

I hugged her tight and whispered, "Thank you for your patience. Please hang in there. Eventually we'll get to where we're going."

Samantha laid her head on my shoulder and squeezed me back in agreement and affirmation.

I didn't deserve this amazing girl and she most certainly deserved someone much better than me. I sure hoped the trial would nail everyone that

needed to be nailed and especially the guys that had it out for me. I had to encourage myself with the very words I'd spoken to Sam. "Hang in there, Pablo (or John, or whoever the hell you are these days), eventually we'll get to where we're going."

## The Audit

The ripple effect of cost cutting, especially in government, is about as slow and arduous as it gets. But ever since the collapse of all things financial, beginning in the fall of 2008 (coincidentally, the same time I went into witness protection, which on a side note is an ongoing inside joke I have with my kids, I tell them, "See what happened, I go into hiding and the whole world goes to hell in a handbag.") the government has been forced to tighten its belt and re-examine every penny spent. WITSEC (Witness Security) was not immune from this federal scrutiny and conducted an in-house audit.

The audit reviewed overall spending but focused mainly on individual program participants and the deemed necessity of them remaining under federal protection. Unlike a tax audit by the IRS, scrutinization of Witness Protection Program participants can have life or death consequences. In the summer of 2011, my name was chosen for mandatory review and possible removal from federal protection. Scully and Mulder were contacted regarding my case and this is the conversation that took place not long after.

Scully and Mulder contacted me in July of 2011 and asked if we could meet for dinner. I invited them to a barbeque at my house, but they insisted we meet somewhere in public. Such insistence tipped me off that something wasn't quite right in the land of the "safe and the hiding." We made plans to eat at the Olive Garden. It wasn't Luigi's but hey, it was still Italian, and I'm a sucker for sticking with a theme.



Dinner began with Mulder ordering a round of beers for everyone.

"Am I to take it that you're not on the clock?" I inquired with a smile.

"Damn straight!" Mulder barked with the grunt of an off duty marine.

"Yes," Scully chimed in as she took the first swig of her beer, "This conversation is off the record."

"Cool, we haven't done one of these in..." I stopped and pondered, then continued, "...Well, never."

Our conversation was momentarily delayed as the server came to take our order.

"Really, alfredo sauce for the breadsticks?" Mulder nagged. "Didn't you just have a blood clot and a stroke?"

"A blood clot, yes." I answered clarifying, "A stroke, no, or not exactly. The results were inconclusive. The doctor said it could have just been a migraine brought on by too much stress."

"What's the matter, scenic drives in 2012 SUV's too much for you?" Mulder joked slamming his empty beer mug down on the table.

"Looks like he's in rare form tonight." I muttered to Scully.

"Oh, he's just letting off some steam." Scully defended softly. "We both are."

"Wow, sounds like you two are the ones that are stressed. What's been happening, that you can talk about at least?" I inquired.

"Oh, we'll tell you anything you wanna know." Mulder snarled, raising his hand to get the attention of our server.

"Within reason." Scully added. "Calm down Jethro." She said patting Mulder on the shoulder.

"Yea, three more beers, please." Mulder asked as the server came over.

Scully began sharing in a more hushed tone than before. "There have been some discussions by the bureaucrats that oversee the funding for the program and your name has been brought up."

"Why? I don't have any money?" I both asked and stated with whimsical concern.

"Now that's funny." Mulder commented, obviously feeling his buzz, "Good one."

"Sorry." I apologized to Scully who couldn't help but smirk a little.

"I think that's why I look forward to seeing you. Even after three years you still haven't lost your sense of humor." She reassured before continuing.

"Your name has come up because the powers that be are considering discontinuing your federal protection."

"It sounds like you don't think that's good news?" I inquired seriously.

"It's hard to say." Mulder chimed in, suddenly sober, "We don't actually know if there is a credible threat against you."

"Say whaaaaat?" I mimicked the line from the Minions of the movie "Despicable Me."

"That's what we need to talk to you about that's off the record." Scully clarified in hushed tones once more. "Remember in 2008 when you got that phone call...?"

"You mean the phone call that started my life in paradise? How could I ever forget?" I asked sarcastically.

"Well, there's more to that story than we previously told you." Scully continued.

"We got robbed." Mulder blurted as he plunged his head in his second mug of beer.

"There was a security breach." Scully translated. "A document with your name and some other asset's names pertaining to this case was stolen from a safe in one of our federal offices."

"You're kidding." I uttered in disbelief. "This is a little too 'Mission Impossible.'"

"God's honest truth." Mulder slurred as he held up three fingers "Scout's honor."

"Was it ever recovered or was the perpetrator ever found?" I asked using my best CSI lingo.

"Perp-eh-tray-tor," Mulder repeated to himself as Scully and I exchanged glances as if to say, "I think we just lost him."

"No, it was never recovered and no one has been named as of yet." Scully answered.

"Wow, that's a little unsettling." I commented to no one in particular.

"You're telling me. And it's not the first time. Tell him what happened to you Scully when you were on the DEA task force." Mulder nudged excitedly.

"I've told him the story." Scully answered, "Let's try to stay on topic if we can."

"Yes sir, boss man." Mulder saluted Scully sloppily as he finished his second beer.

Scully ignored her obviously inebriated partner and continued, "The breach occurred during the first couple of days you were in Tucson, prior to your enlistment with the program."

"Enlistment? I don't remember talking to a recruiter about that." I couldn't resist.

"Eh, that one was only so-so." Mulder judged as he twisted his hand back in forth rating my joke.

"Your name had only just been added to that list." Scully continued, ignoring us both. "Once the identity of the caller was revealed as a non-threat you're name was supposed to be removed from the list. Unfortunately, it was stolen before the list could be revised to reflect this truth."

"So, what's so important about this list?" I asked with confusion.

"The list contained the names of important assets vital to our case. Witnesses, collaborators, informants, you name it, they were on it." Mulder explained with surprising clarity.

Scully nodded in agreement.

"Holy crap. So whoever has that list thinks I'm an informant or a witness or something." I uttered as eerie enlightenment fell upon me.

"Possibly." Scully affirmed.

"Do you guys think the mob has the list?" I asked not really sure if I wanted to know the truth.

"We honestly don't know." Scully answered blankly.

"Well, have any of the other people on the list been threatened or killed?" I pressed with urgency.

"Hell, they've all been threatened, that's why they're all in WITSEC." Mulder hissed.

"None have been killed." Scully clarified. "But the list is really only a confirmation to whoever has it of people they may have suspected as being an enemy. All of the assets on the list are fine because, like you, they were put under federal protection almost immediately once the breach was discovered."

"But unlike them, I'm not their enemy." I pleaded.

"I don't think the mafia really cares one way or another. To them you're just a name on a list, and at the top of the list." Mulder spewed without restraint.

Scully smacked Mulder on the shoulder and chided, "Mulder! Behave."

"At the top?" I questioned.

"It doesn't mean anything." Scully said calmly. "You were just the last one added to the list because of what happened with the phone call. You were at the top because your status was only 'temporary crucial' until we researched the phone call."

"But the mafia doesn't know that." I corrected.

"Exactly." Mulder confirmed. "That's why you're in the program."

"So I'm in the program because of a perceived threat against me." I stated for clarification. "In reality, there may be no threat at all. The mob may just look at my name and go 'John Smith who?'"

"Or the mob may look at your name and not want to take any chances."

Scully added to balance my understanding.

"Bullets are cheap my friend." Mulder muttered out loud.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked in alarm.

"I'm just saying." Mulder cut off Scully when he saw her about to correct him. "The mob have put a price on people's heads for a lot less. That's why you're in federal protection." He emphasized again. "At least for now."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" I asked, my voice even more shrill now than before.

Scully raced to answer my question, "The feds are trying to save money by getting federal protection removed from participants they deem as no longer needing federal protection. They've reviewed your case and are pushing for

your release because of the very same things we're discussing. They say a perceived threat doesn't warrant federal protection, but I disagree."

"So, have they made a decision?" I asked completely numb by now.

"Not yet, but they will soon." Scully warned.

"So what do I do?" I uttered feeling helpless.

"Write a book." Mulder instructed.

"About what?" I asked.

"About your life in the program. You're still probably recording those stimulating journal entries aren't you?" He poked playfully.

"Yeah, but I'm not sure I'm following you." I said blanking slightly blushing.

"Well, it's like this." Scully said with a weird look of secrecy on her face.

"You may have to work the system, by exposing the mechanics of how it works."

I looked at Scully and Mulder who were both staring at me intently and urged, "Go on."

"If you were to voluntarily ask for release from federal protection and your release was approved, and then later on a viable threat against you was confirmed, you could re-enter the program." Scully began.

"But if you get booted from the program and someone threatens you later on, you're basically screwed." Mulder added bluntly.

"It's like the difference between resigning on good terms and being fired, at least in the eyes of the bureaucrats." Scully explained.

"Okay, I understand that part, but what were you saying about writing a book." I asked with growing curiosity.

"Well, that's another idea Mulder and I were more or less just spit balling about." Scully began with embarrassed reluctance.

"Come on, the cat's out of the bag now." I urged.

"Okay, it's like this." Mulder took the ball, obviously the right amount of buzzed now to both communicate and want to communicate. "If you know how the system operates you can leverage it to your advantage. Hell companies do it to their employees all the time by threatening to reduce benefits and making them take early retirement. The government, or at least the part of the government we work for is no different. The one thing we value and guard above everything else is our secrets. That's why it's taken nearly five decades to release the notes and documents pertaining to the Kennedy assassination. Anyone that could or might be implicated, embarrassed or questioned about those events is either too senile or dead to care anymore. You don't even have to expose anything, just give the credible threat that you can expose something, that's got enough teeth to bite 'em where it hurts."

I looked at Scully for her take as she confirmed, "That's actually a pretty good explanation."



Mulder smiled at Scully as he raised his third mug of beer in a cheers sign, both of us wondering when and from whom he'd obtained his third mysterious beer.

"So what do I write about?" I asked with overwhelmed wonder.

"What are your journal recordings about?" Scully asked.

"Well, just my experience being in the program mainly." I thought out loud.

"Then use that." Mulder cheered.

"But what if I reveal something I shouldn't?" I asked with concern.

"Like what?" Mulder asked. "You privy to any big secrets we don't already know about?"

Scully took a drink from her second beer as she looked on with no obvious objections to her partner's question.

"Well, not really." I answered.

"We've already told you enough stuff off the record tonight to give you the leverage you need." Scully stated.

"Really?"

"Heck yeah!" Mulder chimed in agreement. "Like I said, the system doesn't like it when you lift up her skirt and show the world her pretty white panties."

"But what if I can't get the book published?" I asked, thinking the process through.

“Who cares? Irrelevant.” Mulder steamed forth. “It doesn’t have to be published to be effective. It just has to be read by the right people, and that’s already guaranteed.”

“How?” I asked, wondering about the mechanics of this plan.

Scully finished her second beer and said, “Drink up,” motioning toward my still half full first mug and continued. “As a program participant and even as a former program participant, if you decide to get out, your actions will continue to be monitored. It’s not like you’ll have a surveillance team on you like before, but your actions and whereabouts will still be under observation. If you write a book, or even try to write a book, especially if it’s about the program, your manuscript is sure to be read by the powers that be. And once it’s written how are they going to know that you haven’t already sent a copy to Matt Lauer or Charlie Rose?”

“They won’t, will they?” I stated questioningly.

“No way!” Mulder chimed in. “Once you’re out of the program federal resources are no longer focused in your direction. You could buy uranium and it would take them a week to find out where you hid it. (Well, maybe not a week,” he thought out loud, “but at least a few days.) You see if you create just a little bit of controversy, you’ll have just the right amount of attention that you need. Squeaky wheel, my man. Squeaky wheel.”

“Well, in theory, that’s how it could play out.” Scully added, covering her butt.

"Hmmm." I said out loud. "That's a lot of stuff for an 'off the record' conversation."

"That ain't nothing." Mulder slurred sloppily, sloshing a fourth mysterious mug of beer.

"Easy there." Scully raised her mug and clinked Mulder's, "We just want to help our friend, not incriminate him."

"Point taken." Mulder clinked her mug and mine in agreement.

"So what do I do first?" I asked hesitantly.

"First you need to sleep on what we've talked about." Scully instructed. "Then, if you seriously want to get out of the program, you call me and we'll get the paperwork started."

"Do you think I'll be safe?" I asked meekly.

"Have we let you down yet?" Mulder asked proudly.

"No, I mean if I decided to leave federal protection."

"John, we wouldn't be talking to you 'off the record' unless we were willing to do our part to see this through, in or outside of the program." Mulder answered in an uncommonly reassuring tone.

"That's good enough for me." I stated confidently.

"Sleep on it." Scully directed again. "If you still feel the same in a few days, then we'll get the ball rolling."

"Okay." I conceded. "Thanks."

"For what?" Scully asked, "You're the one that has to write the book."

"Not necessarily." I interjected. "I can provide the basic substance of the book, but I have someone in mind that I think would be perfect to tell this story."

"Do what you have to." Mulder coaxed. "But if it ever makes it to the big screen I want Mel Gibson to play my part."

"I'll see what I can do." I promised. "Oh and..." I looked at Scully as I spoke, "Thank you both for everything. I couldn't have survived this long without you."

Scully nodded here head in a silent "your welcome".

Mulder answered loudly, "You got that right. And you're welcome. It's what we do."

Scully and I both looked at each other and laughed as I concluded, "I'm not sure he'll survive the night unless we call him a cab now."

"Astute observation." She agreed and pulled out her cellphone to call a taxi.

## The Decision

I did as Scully recommended and took a few days to mull over the idea of leaving the program; and by mull I mean pray to God for wisdom and ask Burly Brian for his thoughts as well. God's response was a little subtler than Brian's initial take. God left me with a sense of quiet peace while Brian got in my face and told me to really think it through.

"I have, Brian." I began, trying to expand his understanding of the situation. "The truth is, they may boot me from the program regardless. If I get out voluntarily, however, I have a chance of getting federal protection in the future."

"Is that what Scully and Mulder told you?" Brian examined.

"Yeah, well 'off the record.'" I verified.

"Okay, but what's the deal with the book?" Brian continued to probe.

"Well, I've been thinking about that too. Their point in me writing the book was to expose the system, kind of a Steven Soderbergh slant. I was thinking of more of a direct approach where I don't actually bite the hand that has fed me, or more accurately, protected me these last three years."

"What do you mean?" Brian inquired intently.

"My whole reason for being in witness protection is because of a misunderstanding. My name should never have been on that 'crucial assets' list. I don't now, nor have I ever in the past posed a threat to organized crime." I explained.

“Well, you did offer testimony to the grand jury about who you saw at the restaurant and gave the feds a recording of some of their conversations.”

Brian offered elucidating the facts for me.

“Sure, there’s that.” I downplayed his response, “But it’s not like I did it with malice or intent. And that’s the very point the book should make. It will be a plea for mercy and understanding.”

“From the mafia?” Brian asked in disbelief. “You know ‘mercy’ and ‘understanding’ aren’t words real synonymous with the Cosa Nostra. I think they’re more comfortable with terms like ‘relentless’ and ‘unsympathetic’.”

“What choice do I have then?” I asked Brian throwing my hands up in the air. “If I get out of witness protection I’m fair game.”

“It’s not like you have to go back to your old identity. Just keep living as Pablo Maestas.” Brian offered.

“What kind of a life is that?” I asked beleaguered. “First the feds take my real life and now they’re threatening to kick me out of this crappy one they’ve forced me to live. If I can’t be safe in a secondhand world than I’d rather take a chance and be free in the real world.”

Brian contemplated my words for a moment and then conceded, “Do what you gotta do man. And whatever I can do to help, just name it.”

“Thanks.” I accepted appreciatively and offered minimizing the momentum a little, “Chances are no one will even take this serious.”

"You'd be surprised." Brian predicted. "People are pretty open these days, plus fiction's got nothing on reality. Have you seen some of these 20/20 and Dateline NBC shows? They're right out of a John Grisham novel."

"True. Guess we'll just have to wait and see." I surmised.

After my talk with Brian I called Scully and asked her to begin the process of releasing me from federal witness protection. She said she would and told me she'd contact me in a few days. In a week's time the paperwork was submitted, reviewed and approved, a freaking world record for a government agency. It would take time to process my information in the system and issue me documents for my old identity. Until then I was free to enjoy a restriction free life as I had three years before. I could now call and text anyone I wanted. I could travel anywhere at anytime without having to first check with my handlers. It was a very invigorating feeling, like being set free from prison.

The first one I called was Roxy. Fortunately she still had the same cell phone number. "Hey girly, guess who this is?" I asked excitedly.

"Dad?" She asked with electrified surprise. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm out." I shouted, my voice ringing through the speakers of Roxy's car.

"You're Dad's gay?" Roxy's friend sitting in the passenger seat asked softly.

"Is that Cami with you?" I asked, hearing her comment.

“Yes, Daddy. Cami and I are going to dinner. What are you talking about and where are you?” Roxy uttered in a flurry of questions.

“I’m in Tucson and I’m out of the program.” I answered excitedly.

I heard brakes screech through the phone as Roxy’s tone changed, “Are you serious? When? How? Are you coming home?”

“Well, it just happened and I’ll share the whole story with you when I see you.”

“How about this weekend?” Roxy suggested.

“It’s a date.” I agreed. “I’ll book a flight and text you the details.”

“Awesome. I can’t wait to see you. Bye Daddy, I love you.” Roxy said as she hung up.

“Love you too. Bye Cami.” I signed off.

“Bye. Mr. Smith.” Cami answered with confusion, then asked. “Was your Dad in some kind of treatment program?”

“Something like that.” Roxy laughed as she answered.

Next, I called Michael, but as was usual with him he didn’t answer. Michael always preferred texting to talking. So I decided to send him a text instead. I wrote, “Hi Son, this is your Dad. Call me at this number when you get a chance.”

“Funny. Who is this really?” Michael texted in response.

“Call me and find out, Stinky Feet.” I baited, using his nickname.



My phone rang a second later, "Dad?" Michael inquired hesitantly.

"Hi Son." I greeted. "How's it going?"

"How's it going with you? Are you supposed to be calling me?" Michael asked with concern.

"Everything's fine. I'm out of the program." I explained.

"Are you freaking serious?" Michael gasped. "That's sweet. Did they kill the guys that were trying to get you."

"Not exactly. I'll tell you all about it when I see you. What are you doing this weekend?" I inquired.

"Nothing I can't change." Michael affirmed.

"Let's go see your sister." I offered.

"Sounds great!" Michael agreed.

"I'll buy the ticket and text you the details."

"Werd." Michael consented.

"Uh, werd back at you." I responded awkwardly, "Love you son."

"Love you too Dad." Michael returned before hanging up.

Next I called my old buddy Zane, a.k.a. my Sage. I call him my Sage because years ago he and I used to have deep conversations about life and love and the pursuit of happiness while smoking cigars, sipping sauvignon and soaking in my hot tub. I always seemed to share my woes and troubles with

Zane and his advice was usually consistently sound. Over the years since my incarceration into the program I'd heard that Zane had returned to somewhat simpler pursuits. He didn't really work; well in the way one receives a weekly paycheck and a yearly w-2. He did a lot of 'odd jobs' while cultivating a greener existence. One gift he did have was a penchant for prose. Zane could write like no one else I knew, and he was just the kind of person I needed to help me tell my story.

"Zane." I greeted, as he answered my unfamiliar number.

"Whose this?" He asked in an early morning stupor, although it was approaching 3 pm his time. (Zane didn't necessarily keep business hours).

"It's Pab...I mean, it's John." I fumbled, not used to using my given name.

"Dude. Where the hell are you? Did you fall off the freaking globe?" Zane asked in typical semi-annoyed fashion. "How the heck are you man?"

"I'm good. I've been away. It's good to hear your voice. I was wondering if you might like to get together. Actually, I was wondering if I could hire you to do some work for me?" I expounded.

"What kind of work?" Zane asked curiously.

"I'd like you to write a book for me."

"For real or for fun?" Zane inquired.

"For real. For money, and off the books of course, if you'll pardon the pun." I clarified tweaking the deal to sweeten the offer.

"How much?" Zane dug.

"Not sure. How much is fair?" I volleyed back.

"How many pages?"

"I guess maybe a hundred or so, no more than two hundred I imagine." I ventured.

"\$500." Zane bartered.

"Deal." I agreed.

"What's the book about?" Zane finally asked.

"Oh you're going to love this..." I began.

I explained the crux of the story to Zane, who thought I was pulling his leg for the first twenty minutes of my explanation.

"You're telling me you've been in witness protection in Tucson for the last three years?" Zane repeated dumbfounded. "I thought you were just being a dick and changed phone numbers without telling me."

"Well, it was a pretty convenient way to legitimately ignore you for a couple of years." I joked.

"Funny, not." Zane responded. "So, when do we get started?"

"I thought I'd first send you my journal recordings and some basic plot points so you can get an overview of the story. Than after you get familiar with the main theme we can get together and hash over the specific direction and finer details to include. How does that sound?" I asked.

"Sounds like you've got things pretty organized as usual." Zane observed. "Send it my way and I'll look it over."

"Great." I commented. "Do you still have the same email address, the green-paupers yahoo account? If so, I'll just send you a link and you can download a zip file with the recordings and documentation."

"Yep, same one." Zane confirmed.

"All right. I'll get started on pulling all of my notes and thoughts together and email it to you in a few weeks. Thanks for your help. I really appreciate it." I uttered gratefully.

"No worries. See ya later." Zane concluded casually and hung up the phone.

The decision to leave the program was now in the works as well as my plans to craft my message to the mafia. In the meantime I was eager for my reunion with the kids. The last thing I had to do was break the news to Samantha about the truth of who I was and the lies of who I wasn't. I was afraid to imagine how she'd respond and even more reluctant to face a future that didn't have her in it. I decided to rip the Band-Aid off in one swift motion.

"Hey babe." I greeted as Samantha answered her phone. "I was wondering if you had time to get together? Awesome, I'll be right over."

## No More Secrets

Samantha greeted me at the door with her usual hug, kiss and beautiful smile. "Hi honey, I've missed you." She said as she embraced me for a long minute.

"Me too." I offered with an obvious heaviness hanging over me.

"What's on your mind?" She asked intuitively, always able to read me like a book.

"Sit down, I need to share some things with you." I said as I sat on Samantha's sofa with her.

"Sure." She complied obediently.

I shared my tale as she sat in silence for the ten minutes it took me to relate my life's story spanning the last three years. When I finished I waited for her response.

She looked at me closely trying to read my expression then inquired, "This isn't a joke is it?"

"No, it's the God's honest truth, and what I've been longing to tell you since we first met." I expressed as genuinely as I could.

"I believe you." She began. "It's just a lot to take in at once."

"I know. I'm sorry and I'm so sorry for not telling you the truth earlier." I apologized.

"How could you have told me the truth earlier. You were in witness protection. Isn't the whole point of that to keep your former life a secret?" She asked rhetorically.

"True." I agreed, minimizing my input so Sam could process this new information. "But I appreciate you understanding all the same."

"Oh, I understand." Sam reported. "That doesn't mean I'm happy about it or won't be super pissed at you later for lying to me for all these years. I mean I told you from the beginning that as long as you didn't lie to me our relationship would work. Now I come to find out that everything about you has been a deception. A legitimate lie but a lie none the less." She related as empathetically as she could muster.

"Would it be best if I gave you some time to process?" I asked as sensitively as possible.

"Do you want to leave?" Sam inquired blankly.

"No, I don't want to go. I just want to do what's best for you right now." I responded.

"I don't think being left alone while I process the fact that my boyfriend's been lying to me for the last three years is what I need emotionally right now."

"Okay, I'll stay. Are you hungry? I can make us some dinner." I offered.

"That would be nice." Sam consented softly.

I made chicken soft tacos, while Sam sat on the couch and sewed and watched an episode of Grey's Anatomy on DVD. These were productive

activities for her while she processed my big news. We ate dinner in silence while the doctors on the screen told each other lies and slept with their colleague's significant other's behind their backs. I thought to myself "*How do these morons get away with this?*" After dinner I cleaned up and did the dishes. Sam finished her sewing and suggested we go for a walk to help our food digest.

While on our walk she asked me in passing, "Do you love me Pablo...or John or whatever your name is?"

"Yes. Absolutely." I answered absorbing the tension of her comment. "The only reason I didn't tell you the truth is because I didn't want to put you in harms way."

"I can appreciate that and how hard that must have been for you." Sam offered simply yet sweetly. "Thank you."

"Is there anything else that you haven't told me yet?" Sam pressed.

"Yes, there are a few more things, I just didn't want to overwhelm you with everything all at once." I began.

"You're not married are you?" She asked quickly.

"No, I'm not currently married, but I was married a long time ago, as I told you when we first met. What I didn't tell you is that we had two kids."

Sam's eyes went up in surprise.

"They're both grown and in college now. I have a daughter named Roxy and a son named Michael." I explained.

"Grown kids." Sam repeated as she absorbed this new information.

"How old were you when you had your kids?"

"That's the other thing I need to come clean about, I'm not actually thirty-seven. I'm forty-two."

"Forty-two." Sam repeated again. "Why did you lie about your age? You even lied on your driver's license." She observed.

"I guess, just because I could. No real other reason. I figured if they were going to give me a new life I might as well shave off a few years from the old one." I offered sheepishly.

Sam smiled ever so slightly at my revelation and replied, "I guess I probably would have done the same thing. So, guess you bagged yourself a young one, you dirty old man." Sam smiled mischievously.

"I guess I deserved that one." I acquiesced meekly.

"So that makes us thirteen years a part, not just seven." Sam commented as she did the math in her head. "So what year were you born, 70'?"

"69'." I corrected.

"You realize were separated by two decades?" Sam pointed out relishing the moment.

"Uh, yes I did realize that." I answered softly.

"Oh, and how long have you known about this interesting fact, because I've only known for say..." She paused to glance at her watch. "Five minutes now."



“I’ve known for a while.” I played along, realizing I owed her all the good-natured ribbing she wanted to deliver, and even some mean-natured ribbing if it came to that.

“Hmmm. That’s interesting.” She mused, smiling to herself as we scaled her driveway putting her hand into mine as we finished our walk.

## The Brain Trust

I flew Zane in the first weekend of August 2011, so we could spend a couple of days in a brain trust meeting hashing through details for the book. Zane reminded of Dr. Gregory House, from the TV medical drama "House", clad in a blazer under which he wore a vintage t-shirt emblazoned with some obscure but trendy logo. He always carried a three day growth of whiskers, not quite a beard and not quite five 'o clock shadow. He carried a full set of dark brown hair that was neither long nor short just kind of mid-haircut length. Instead of a cane he was always accompanied by a wonderful smelling cigar that never seemed to shrink shorter than five inches so he could always pull it out of his mouth and blow a large cloud of white smoke whenever he needed to dramatically illustrate a point.

Zane plopped down on my couch as I handed him a glass of my finest six-dollar Australian Cabernet. We wasted no time and dove right into our discussion.

"I call this meeting of the Brain Trust to order." I stated officially.

"Second." Zane chimed in.

"The motion is carried. Any old business?" I asked carrying the charade a little further.

"Uh, yes." Zane raised his hand. "I'd like to request an official inquiry as to why our honorable chairman has missed the last three years worth of meetings."

“The request is denied, moving on to new business.” I countered whimsically.

“I demand reparations!” Zane pumped his fist in the air as he blew a cloud of white cigar smoke overhead smiling devilishly.

“So, what are your overall thoughts about the book?” I asked switching gears to the topic at hand.

“First of all, I still can’t believe you were in, I mean I guess still are in, witness protection.” Zane offered in amazement.

“Well, on paper I’m no longer in the program. It will take a while to officially process all of my documents but in essence I am free.” I clarified.

“I guess my first question is how technical do you want this? I mean are we talking Tom Clancy accurate or more generalized?” Zane inquired.

“The latter.” I answered. “I don’t want the focus to be on the program; God knows I’ve given enough attention to this thing as it is. In fact it would probably be best if we minimize as many details as possible so that I don’t expose anyone other than myself. I’ve met a lot of stand-up people through this experience and the last thing I want to do is put them in harms way.”

“So obviously change the names and locations.” Zane thought out loud. “And possibly take a little creative license with some of your friend’s background stories?”

"That sounds like a good idea. What they did and where they're from isn't as important as who they are and more specifically how important their impact has been on me personally." I agreed.

"What about Sam?" Zane studied as he swirled his wine in the bowl of the glass and took a sip.

"I've been wondering if I should include Sam at all..." I began. "...As I don't want to do anything that will remotely put her in jeopardy. Yet she has really been the driving force of my life for the last few years and I think the book would be lacking and hollow if I exclude her. Let me think about how I can best include her and I'll get back with you."

"Sure thing." Zane complied. "That brings us to your family."

"We can include some details about the kids but obviously no real names or locations. The impact of this on them is important to highlight since they were the only ones I could tell." I explained.

"Are you serious?" Zane uttered, again awestruck at my life realities from the past three years.

"Yep, I told the extended family I moved to Australia to work with the Aborigines since the kids were grown and I had nothing tying me down here. The feds even sent some letters for me with an official Australian postmark." I shared.

"Crikey Mate." Zane uttered in his best crocodile hunter impression. "So what about Scully and Mulder, can you even talk about them? I mean they're

federal agents, isn't there some kind of gag order or nondisclosure thing in place forbidding you from discussing their business?"

"I don't think so. I mean once again I'm not going to use they're real names, thus the Scully and Mulder monikers, but the reality of the situation is I was their business so I'm really only exposing myself. Plus, they've never really discussed anything with me that didn't pertain to my own situation. The other stuff they did share was public knowledge anyway. If anyone was so inclined they could do a little research on the web and learn the same kind of stuff." I assured.

"All right, that's good information." Zane complimented lifting his empty wine glass toward me and pleading like Oliver, "More, may I please have some more?"

"Why certainly." I said grabbing his glass. "And how about I fire up the grill and throw on some steaks?"

"Now you're talking." Zane rubbed his hands together hungrily. "That's the John I remember."

We switched venues to the back patio where I started the grill and began marinating the meat and preparing the sides. I tossed a spinach and hard-boiled egg salad, stuck it in the fridge to cool and topped off our wine glasses again before joining Zane on one of the metal patio chairs.

"So how did Sam take it when you finally came clean?" Zane inquired with a look of pained preparation.

"She actually took it a lot better than I expected." I began. "She's amazingly resilient. In some ways nothing has changed at all. She still calls me PJ, she says it stands for Pastor John now, since I'm no longer officially Pablo Joaquin."

"Did she know you were a pastor before?" Zane asked.

"No, one of the other 'clarifications' I've had to make. Now she says she's nervous around me because she thinks I'm going to be offended by how she talks or acts. I told her not to be nervous because I've always been offended." I said jokingly. "No, in truth things are going really well. I think her family is the ones that are having a harder time, but I don't blame them, this revelation is a lot to take in."

"She's Hispanic right?" Zane inquired.

"Yeah, Spanish and Mexican I think, why?" I asked curiously.

"They're probably just telling her, I told you, you shouldn't trust whitey."

Zane laughed then added. "Man, the steaks smell good."

"Funny." I mused as I got up to check the grill and flip the steaks, brushing on more marinade.

"I'm actually glad these changes are happening now because I wasn't sure how much longer I could continue lying to Sam without our relationship crashing." I said with an air of relief. "If I lost Sam I think I would have asked for them to move me to another city because it would just be too hard to live here without her in my life."

“When do I get to meet her?” Zane asked, “She sounds like an awesome girl.”

“I told her we might get together tomorrow night for dinner, depending on how much we get done with the book.” I answered.

“Well, then let’s get a move on.” Zane urged cracking the whip. “If you could state the theme of this book in one or two sentences what would you say?”

I thought about his question for a minute as I went in the house to grab the salad and some plates. As I slid the screen door shut behind me and set the plates and salad down on the picnic table I stated. “This book is a message to the mafia. I’m sorry that in the course of doing my civic duty I mistakenly got on your radar. Please call off the dogs and let me live my life because I am not a threat.”

“Cool, that’s some good stuff and I think we might even have our book title in there. We should call it, ‘My Civic Duty: A Message to the Mafia’.” Zane illustrated.

“I like that, it’s kind of catchy.” I said admiringly.

“So the whole point of this book is to get the mafia to forget you?” Zane clarified.

“Well, the whole point of this book is to get my life back, but a life where I’m not always looking over my shoulder.” I explained.

"Don't you think writing a book is a little counter-productive, I mean the whole point is to get off their radar and a book kind of shines the spotlight right at you." Zane offered.

"No, I know what you're saying." I answered. "And I've thought it through a hundred times. I could just try and live in the shadows and stay off the radar as much as possible, but without federal protection I'm pretty much back on the radar whether I want to be or not. I figure if this is where I'm at I might as well walk down the middle of Main Street and hold up a white flag. If someone lights my flag on fire then it will just be me that burns. But if I don't at least make an effort and I try to live my life with my kids and Sam, then who is to say that more people won't get hurt in the future? I just can't take that chance."

"That makes sense." Zane shook his head in agreement. "You're in a difficult place my friend."

We worked late Friday night, all day Saturday and Sunday afternoon, taking a break Sunday Morning to go to church. Sunday evening rolled around and we both felt confident we'd accomplished enough to call it quits around 5 pm and have dinner with Sam.

"Nice to meet you Sam." Zane said as he greeted Samantha.

"Same here." Sam said as she shook his hand looking at me commenting, "He does look a little bit like House."

"I'll take that as a compliment, I think?" Zane said in my direction.



"Oh, definitely." I smiled at his indecision.

"So we going out or are you cooking?" Sam inquired.

"Actually neither." I answered. "Zane has offered to make us dinner tonight. Well, in truth he's graciously agreed to my request that he cook. I've been dying for him to make me his grilled mango salmon."

"Ooh la la, sounds very fancy." Sam said impressed by our guest chef.

"I haven't made it in a long time, so let's hope it turns out okay." Zane uttered humbly.

We all chatted in the kitchen while Zane and I cut up the bell peppers and prepared the fish. Sam looked on taking it all in and then offered. "It's strange to see PJ with other friends."

"What do you mean?" I asked curiously.

"Well, I've only ever known you around your Tucson community, it's just interesting watching you interact with Zane because you two seem more like brothers than friends, and that's new for me."

"I guess I never really thought about that. There's going to be a lot of new things to behold and embrace as we move forward and mix my two lives together." I contemplated out loud.

"Yep, it's definitely a new chapter." Sam pondered than asked changing gears. "Speaking of chapters, how's the book coming?"

"I'll let the author answer that one." I yielded to Zane.

“Sure put me on the spot.” Zane said half-joking. “Honestly I’m really pleased with what we were able to accomplish. John has given me a lot of great details and together we’ve been able to design the basic framework for the story. I’m sure I’ll have a lot of little questions once I begin putting it all on paper, mainly about the individual characters, but I feel like have a good vision for where this book is headed.”

“Awesome.” I observed. “I wasn’t sure how far we’d really gotten this weekend, but if you’re satisfied than that sure puts my mind at ease.”

“Well, writing a story like this is a little different than writing one of my own because I have a more direct line of thought to follow. It’s fiction but it’s also nonfiction. It’s kind of a fictional biographic documentary.” Zane explained.

“Is that even a real literary category?” I probed.

“Well if it wasn’t before, it is now.” Sam interjected.

“That’s right. We’ll blaze our own path if none exists.” Zane agreed.

“I have to tell you, I’m not a big seafood lover but that salmon smells delicious.” Sam admitted.

“It doesn’t taste fishy at all.” Zane said reassuringly.

“Perfect.” Sam declared.

We sat and ate and drank wine until the sun set over my rooftop. It was so refreshing finally being free to enjoy all of the friends in my world. I was even more determined than ever to get my message out and secure the foundations of my new life. I wasn’t doing this for just me I was doing it for Sam, my kids, my

friends and my future. There was too much at stake to stop now, I just hoped my message would reach the eyes and ears for which it was intended, the mafia.

## A Message to the Mafia

I'm not sure if writing this book has cast me onto the radar of those that would seek to settle a score. I'm hoping none perceive me as anything. I'm hoping I fade into history as an irrelevant footnote. I want to live my life without the fear or worry of what I may encounter around the next corner. I'm hoping the mafia will have bigger fish to fry than to worry about a silly little minnow like me. I'm hoping, but I do not know. My simple request is to 'please call off the dogs, if there are any barking after my scent. There isn't enough meat on these bones to even bother.' Please go your way and I'll go mine. Thank you.

## Epilogue

This book has been written as a hunting expedition, for as my friend Mulder once said, "In order to kill an elk you must first hunt for elk." Please don't get me wrong, I'm not seeking to kill anyone (least of all be killed myself), but I am hunting for one specific person to read this book. For this small audience this book, even though wrapped in a package of fictional details, is a serious work of non-fiction with a singular message. I hope this story finds you and that you read it and receive my plea. To all others that read my story it will simply be a work of fiction. Yet as you read it may you be the wind that carries my tale or the sea that washes my message ashore to the recipient for whom it is intended.

In writing this book I potentially expose myself to the very people from which I have been hiding. I make myself vulnerable and yet that is the chance I have to take in order to take back the life I want to live. I feel as though I am betting it all on one roll of the dice. I don't know if the dice will be friendly to me or take me for everything I am. I'm simply betting on the truth that you'll never gain anything in life unless you're willing to give everything in life to get it.

I hope some day when I'm old and gray to pull this book from the shelf, dust it off and peer upon it as a reminder of the steps I took that will hopefully be seen as courageous and bold and not merely hasty and foolish. I don't know what the next chapter of my life holds for me as it is yet to be written. I just know what it has taken for me to literally write these chapters thus far. I pray they are read leaving me to write many, many more. Thank you for reading and may God bless you abundantly.

From the Author,

John Longwell