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THE BLACKGAARD CHRONICLES™



BOOK SIX

BISHOP'S BLOCK



PHIL LOLLAR

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The Blackgaard Chronicles: *Bishop's Block*

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For
Townsend Coleman,
the real and fictional
Jason Whittaker



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PROLOGUE ONE



THE TOWN OF ODYSSEY: FIVE YEARS AGO

Philip Glossman was elated.

Such was his joy that he fairly danced around his office as he worked to pack its contents into boxes. *I haven't felt this good in years!* he thought, and he knew the reason why. "I'm free!" he chirped aloud, and then he chuckled loudly and started humming a tune.

He had kept a low profile around Odyssey since Blackgaard's Castle had been constructed. When it burned down, he all but went into hiding. He barely

spoke at town council meetings, rarely attended social functions, and contacted no one. From the *Odyssey Times* newspaper, he knew that Blackgaard had never emerged from the conflagration; only Whittaker and that delinquent Richard Maxwell had. And yet, the police and firefighters found no evidence of Blackgaard or his wretched cat in the smoldering wreckage. They had written him off as dead, but Glossman knew better.

Still, he had a sense of relief—at first. He had done his job: conned, cajoled, and threatened in order to get Blackgaard what he wanted. “It was up to him to hold on to it,” Glossman muttered. “If he couldn’t do that, too bad. No skin off my nose!” He had done what was required of him, waded through the bog, pushed through the muck and mire, and somehow emerged clean on the other side.

The *Times* had only once published his and Blackgaard’s names together, back when the council had voted to give Blackgaard his business license. It had linked that event with Tom Riley’s barn burning, of course, since that was the reason Riley was not at the

meeting for the vote. But Dale Jacobs, publisher and editor of the *Times*, was careful to cast no aspersions. *An honest newsman*, Glossman thought with a smirk. In the paper's article on the fire at Blackgaard's Castle, Glossman wasn't mentioned at all. Yes, he had covered his tracks well.

Or had he?

Despite his initial feelings of relief, a gnawing suspicion soon developed in the pit of his stomach, and from the oddest source: the way Riley and Whittaker looked at him. He only saw Riley at town council meetings, and he almost never saw Whittaker, but when he did, the gazes of both men stayed with him and became seared into his mind, piercing his soul. He was all but certain that both men knew of his connection with Blackgaard's nefarious schemes. Neither gent ever said a word to him about it; to the contrary, they were always pleasant and polite to him. That made it all the worse. He knew their game—kill him with kindness. They were his telltale heart, working on his conscience.

After a year of this, the gnawing suspicion became a Godzilla of paranoia, raging within him until he could

take no more. He had to get out—but how? How could he get away from both Odyssey and, if he were still alive, Blackgaard?

And then, a week ago, at the end of a particularly wretched, sleepless, and tortured night, he had an epiphany. Looking over the town council agenda, he saw that a delegation of Japanese businessmen was coming to their hamlet to scope out the possibility of opening a factory in Odyssey. Suddenly, the course forward appeared to him as though it were revealed from on high. Here was the way to make himself so toxic that no one would want to get near him again.

That afternoon, he drove to Connellsville, went into the seediest joint he could find, struck up a conversation with a tableful of rather intoxicated locals, and then proceeded to bad-mouth the soon-to-be-arriving Japanese delegation in every way he could think of.

What his tablemates didn't know was that he also tape-recorded the whole thing.

The next day, an anonymous envelope containing the tape showed up mysteriously at the local TV station. When Jacobs questioned him about it back in Odyssey,

Glossman acted duly shocked and stunned, but he didn't deny that it was his voice on the tape. He suspected Jacobs didn't buy his story completely, but it was enough of a confirmation to get the editor to publish an article about it in the *Times*. Media frenzy followed, culminating in his televised statement this morning: "My comments were taken entirely out of context, and I'd like to say again, I am *not* a racist. Some of my best friends are of foreign extraction—er, extraction. However, in light of the public outcry, and so the city council can get on with more important issues, effective immediately I am resigning my chair as city councilman—a position I've served faithfully for seven years. Thank you."

Glossman chuckled. The statement was perfect politics—denying while confirming; driving the final nail into the coffin bearing his public life, yet allowing that it could, one day, be resurrected if he wanted it to be. Not that he ever would—he was free!

He couldn't pack up his office fast enough. He had already packed up his house; luggage and boxes of his belongings sat in a neat stack in his living room. Once he finished with the office, he'd put everything

except the essentials into storage, book the first flight to England, and go find—

Riiiiing!

Glossman looked at the phone on his desk and sighed. Probably another reporter. He'd tell whoever it was that his statement spoke for itself. He punched the speakerphone button, said, "Glossman here," and kept right on packing.

"Hello, Philip."

The deep, mellifluous voice stopped him cold. "Dr. Blackgaard!"

"How are you, my old friend?"

Glossman scoffed. "Friend? When were we ever friends?"

"You wound me, Philip!" Blackgaard said with mock hurt. "After all we've been through together—the ups and downs, the goods and bads, the triumphs and defeats—the one thing I held as rock solid was our friendship."

"What do you want, Blackgaard?"

"Going somewhere?"

Glossman's eyes immediately darted around the

room. He had forgotten Blackgaard's uncanny ability to know what he was doing, to track his every move. But he didn't care anymore. After today, it didn't matter. "Yeah, I'm going somewhere. I'm going *away*—away from this town, away from its people, away from this state, and away from *you*."

Blackgaard chuckled. "Oh, Philip, don't you know by now that that is impossible?"

"Not anymore, it isn't! I just *made* it possible!"

"You mean your little stunt this morning?" Blackgaard snorted. "Piffle."

"Piffle away! I'm of no use to you anymore!" Glossman nearly shouted.

"Nonsense. I'll decide when you are no longer useful. Meanwhile, I need you to stay in the area."

"And if I refuse?"

"To paraphrase a well-known Civil War general, that will be a decision you will regret but once—and that will be continually. Or have you forgotten about your past?"

Now Glossman snorted. "Really? That's the best you can do? Threaten me with my past? Well, go ahead! Reveal it! That's the beauty of my little stunt, as you call

it. I've branded myself as something far worse than anything you can do to me! So you go ahead! Tell everyone about my past! And I'll tell them about yours as well! Go on! Tell them! Tell them all!" He laughed raucously.

"Does that include Lizzy?" asked Blackgaard, his sharp baritone cutting through the noise.

Glossman choked off his guffaw. "W-what?"

"Lizzy," Blackgaard replied. "She's about a hundred feet from me. Shall I tell her now as well?"

The color drained from Glossman's face. His hands became clammy, and a cold sweat beaded on his forehead and began trickling down his back. "You're in England?"

"Why, yes!" Blackgaard intoned cheerfully. "I decided to visit my mum and see my brother in one of his little shows. I'm calling from the theater lobby. Turns out Lizzy's here as well. I can't say much for her taste in entertainment. It *is* my brother, after all."

"You stay away from her!"

"I'll stay . . . if you'll stay."

Glossman's legs were jelly, and his voice cracked. "Please! Leave her alone."

"Is that a yes, then?"

"I can't get back on the town council! It's too late for that."

"I don't need you on the council," Blackgaard replied. "In fact, I don't really need you in Odyssey—yet. I just want you in the area. Tomorrow you'll release another statement to the press, saying you'll be moving to the state capital."

"The capital? Why?"

"I've arranged for you to take a position there."

"What position?" Glossman sneered.

"Assistant to Fosdick Penrose!" Blackgaard announced.

"Who the blazes is Fosdick Penrose?"

"You really should pay more attention to your local government. He's your state secretary of transportation. He owes me a favor. You're moving up, Philip!"

Glossman ran a clammy hand through his thinning hair. "Why me?" he whined. "Why can't you use someone else?"

"Because you know the area, you know the people. You are part of their community, and you're still part of my organization, Philip. We're not done in Odyssey, not by a long shot. And I *will* need your services there again

in the future.” Blackgaard’s voice grew sinister. “Oh, yes, make no mistake, I have great plans for Odyssey, for Whit’s End, and for John Avery Whittaker.” He fairly spat out the name, and Glossman was grateful Blackgaard hadn’t used that tone when talking about *him*.

Blackgaard took a calming breath. “Meanwhile, Philip, feel free to muck about with Riley and the other yokels as much as you please. I’m sure you can find multiple ways to make their lives miserable, eh?” There was a pause, and then Blackgaard said, “So we’re agreed then? You’ll stay?”

Glossman’s shoulders stooped, and his head slumped to his chest. “Yes.”

“Say it.”

Glossman gritted his teeth. “I’ll stay.”

“Excellent!” Blackgaard enthused. “We’re going to do great things together, Philip! Great things indeed! In fact, there are a few deeds I want you to start working on right away: first, the Blackgaard’s Castle property. I want to refurbish and repurpose it, probably as some kind of store. Electronics, perhaps. I want you to find a local to run it for me.”

“I think I know someone who could do it. Not too bright nor too honest. His kid runs a gang—the Bones or something.”

“Sounds perfect! That gang could be of use as well when the time comes. Second, there’s an entertainment venue in Odyssey called the Harlequin Theater. I want you to squeeze the owner into selling it.”

“To who?”

“Why, to my brother, Edwin, of course.”

“It may take a while, especially if I’m not actually in town.”

“That’s all right,” Blackgaard replied, “there’s no rush—well, not much of one anyway. Just lay the groundwork now and be prepared to spring the trap on him when I give you the word.”

“Is that it?”

“One last thing. I want you to find someone for me. Nicholas Adamsworth.”

“I know that name,” Glossman muttered.

“You should. He was the young lad Maxwell was working with at Campbell College in the grade-changing scheme.”

“Oh, right! What do you want him for?”

“That’s my business, Philip. Just find him and periodically let me know how he is getting along.”

“Got it.”

“Good! And do remember, Philip . . .” The rich, warm baritone turned suddenly cold, sharp as a razor, and lethal. “I will be watching.”

The line went dead. A shiver ran down Glossman’s spine.

He clicked off the speakerphone. Slowly, his hand moved to his vest pocket and retrieved from it the useless pocket watch with Lizzy’s picture in the cover. He opened it and gazed at her for a long moment. He then dropped the watch on the floor, sank into his desk chair, put his head in his hands, and sobbed.

PROLOGUE TWO



CHICAGO, ILLINOIS: THREE YEARS AGO

“**W**hat is *this*?”

Special Agent Miles Filby frowned as he sat in the communications van and watched the young man and the old one laugh at him from the computer screen. “Who are these people?”

Dr. Regis Blackgaard sat next to him and gazed at the screen benignly, gently stroking Sasha between her ears. She purred in his lap. The three of them were

alone in the van. “The young one is Richard Maxwell, a former associate of mine. The older one is John Avery Whittaker.”

“Whittaker? I’ve heard that name before.”

“I’m not surprised,” Blackgaard said with faint contempt. “He does seem to get around. As for what this is, it’s the American Department of Defense computer you wanted—as ordered.”

“What does this Maxwell fellow mean—the contents are ‘erased’?”

“Richard’s statement speaks for itself.” Blackgaard cocked his head slightly. “Are you unfamiliar with the term?”

“You mean there’s *nothing* on here but this video?”

“Ah! Then you *are* familiar with the term.”

Filby slapped shut the laptop lid. “What good does a computer with no programs do us?” he snarled.

“Not much, I would imagine.”

Filby exploded. “*Is this some kind of joke?*”

Sasha winced, but Blackgaard smiled. “Not at all! It is a completed mission. I followed your orders to the letter—bring this computer to you, which I have

done.” Blackgaard shrugged. “Your orders said nothing about bringing any *programs* on the computer.”

Filby stabbed a finger at him. “You took them, didn’t you? You’re keeping them to sell yourself!”

Blackgaard shook his head. “Afraid not, though your American contact tried mightily to persuade me to do so.”

“Where *is* Phillips?”

“Fleeing for his life, I’d say. He is a traitor, after all. Perhaps he’s with Pinky.”

“We’ve recovered Pinky. He has been . . . reassigned.”

Blackgaard’s eyebrows raised. “Has he now! Good for him! I know we didn’t get along at first, but we ended up working very well together.” He frowned. “Too bad we can’t partner on my next assignment.”

“*Next* assignment?”

“Why, yes,” said Blackgaard earnestly, “for European Security. I am *in*, aren’t I?”

Filby snorted so loudly he nearly choked. “You think I’m going to bring you into the ESA after the way you botched this assignment? Why on earth would I do that?”

At that moment, Blackgaard’s cell phone rang. He

set Sasha gently on a nearby counter and held up a finger to Filby. “Hold on one moment. I need to take this.” He retrieved his phone from his coat pocket, flipped it open, and put it to his ear. “Blackgaard . . . Ah, Hakim! How lovely to hear from you! What’s the latest? . . . Uh-huh! . . . Mustafa has agreed—Red Scorpion will meet with me! Well, that is good news indeed! Please hold for a moment.”

He punched the hold button on his phone, snapped it shut, and reached for Sasha, stroking her fur. “You know, Filby, I keep wondering why you had an asset who was on the take and you didn’t tell me about it. I mean, I’d hate to think you’re so incompetent that you didn’t *know* Phillips was going to double-cross you. But if you *did* know . . .” He locked eyes with Filby. “Why would you keep something like that to yourself?”

Filby said nothing, just glared at him.

After a long moment, Blackgaard waggled his phone. “Well? Hakim is waiting. Do I meet Red Scorpion as an agent . . . or as an independent contractor?”

The muscles in Filby's jaw twitched, and his lips pressed thin against his teeth. At last, he jerked his head away and snarled, "Fine! You're in!"

Blackgaard smiled, flipped open his phone, and said, "So sorry to keep you waiting, Hakim. Tell Mustafa I will be honored to meet with him and Red Scorpion as soon as possible."

PROLOGUE THREE



CONNELLSVILLE: TWO YEARS AGO

Nicholas Adamsworth was unhappy.

This wasn't a surprise; unhappiness was his usual state.

As he lay on the bed in his room at the Campbell County Juvenile Detention Center in Connellsville, Nicky, as he liked to be known, pondered the few times in his life when he had actually been happy.

He could count them on the fingers of one hand.

The first was a few years back, when he worked at the college with Eugene Meltsner during the summer. He had been chosen to participate in a special program in the computer department at the college due to his superior intellect, only to become the lackey of that scoundrel Richard Maxwell, who had gotten him involved in a grade-changing scheme. Eugene was put in charge of computer security and treated him kindly—he even made the job fun. “Until he discovered just what Richard had me doing,” Nicky muttered.

To his amazement, Eugene had tried to correct Nicky’s malfeasance. Eugene had even tried to protect him at the hearing on the matter by the college’s board of directors, taking the blame for Nicky’s actions onto himself. Nicky remembered thinking at the time that he couldn’t let that happen, so he confessed everything to Mr. Whittaker, who was a board member and relayed the confession to the rest of the board. Thanks to Eugene and Mr. Whittaker, he was put on probation at the college rather than sent back to his group home. “Dodged *that* bullet,” he said smugly, but he sincerely recalled that outcome as making him extremely happy.

At least for a little while. After the fall semester, the program's funding ran out, and he went back to the group home after all.

Before that, though, came the second time he could remember being happy—when he went on an adventure in that invention of Mr. Whittaker's, the Imagination Station. That one didn't start out so well either, Nicky recalled. He ruined a computer program Eugene had spent weeks developing for a class they attended at the college, and Nicky was terrified of what Eugene would do when he found out. "He'll kill me, Mr. Whittaker! He'll kill me!" he remembered exclaiming and smirked.

He wanted Mr. Whittaker to let him hide out at Whit's End, but instead, the old gentleman had him test a new Imagination Station program. It was a story from the Bible (which, he found out later, most of them are), and in it he helped a slave named Onesimus escape from his master, Philemon, and a Roman centurion named Flavius. He and Onesimus ended up in the house of one of the greatest figures in the Bible, the apostle Paul.

There wasn't any specific moment in the adventure that made him happy—it was just the overall experience

and the realization that the adventure was more than just a history lesson. It was also about his returning and apologizing to Eugene, just as Onesimus had returned and apologized to Philemon. Nicky did that, and Eugene graciously forgave him, much to his surprise. Yet it wasn't surprising at all when he really thought about it. Something about there being more to an Imagination Station adventure than what happened on the surface (again, he later learned they were all like that) filled him with a sense of satisfaction he could only describe as *joy*.

Unfortunately, that was the last time he'd had any association with either Eugene or Mr. Whittaker. It was as though they'd forgotten about him completely—which he'd always had a feeling they would do. He didn't really blame them; people get busy, and orphans like him were used to being forgotten. It just meant that, once again, he would have to depend on the only person he had ever been able to rely on: himself. Instead of depending on Whit, he would have to rely on his wits.

Which led to the third and last time he could remember being happy: the past couple of weeks at Odyssey Middle School, when he was running things. Or, at

least, running things in Miss Gardener's math class. And that, in turn, had been the very thing that had landed him back here at CCJDC—and unhappy once again.

“Such a sweet setup,” Nicky muttered, clicking his tongue. Okay, so maybe the whole idea was an imitation of the grade-changing scheme Maxwell had had him do at the college. But he'd taken it so much further than Richard had ever thought about doing. He'd had everyone jumping through hoops, ready to do whatever he wanted—even members of the Bones of Rath and Principal Skinner, though he didn't know it. “Made Isaac Morton look like a complete liar and idiot,” he said with a chortle. It was all working beautifully until that freak lightning strike took away his power and fried his computer and database. That's when it had all come crashing down—and Rusty Gordon's fist had come crashing into his eye.

He sighed and rolled to face the wall. When he allowed himself to think about it, the last kind of “happy” he'd experienced had been different from the first two. The first two had happened because he thought people had cared about him—Mr. Whittaker

and Eugene. And more than that, he was happy because he cared about *them*, about their feelings. He wanted them to be happy, and he wanted them to be pleased with him—with his actions and the decisions he made. It was a happiness they all shared, and the more of it you gave, the more of it you got.

But you can't share that kind of happiness with people when they aren't around. So after Eugene and Mr. Whittaker had abandoned him, the only way he could get that happy feeling back was to care about himself and what he and he alone thought. And even then, it wasn't the same.

Sometimes that kind of happiness seemed stronger than the first two—like when he was getting the upper hand on Isaac, making him look ridiculous. But truth be told, that feeling always faded fast and made him want to do even worse stuff to get it back. It had never occurred to him that there could be such a thing as bad happiness, but that's exactly what it was. It had ended up making him do things he really didn't want to do. And if it hadn't been for that freak storm, who knows what it would have made him do?

Of course, Morton and Mr. Whittaker didn't think it was a freak thing at all—more like a God thing, giving Isaac protection and Nicky a comeuppance. But Nicky didn't believe that. Nobody ever gave him anything. Why should God be any different?

His eyelids grew heavy, and he was about to shut them when he heard footsteps on the linoleum tile outside his room, followed by three raps on the door. “Adamsworth,” barked the guard. “You got a visitor.”

Nicky blinked. Visitor? Who would visit him?

“Yeah, okay,” he replied, rolling away from the wall and sitting up as the guard unbolted the door. Nicky yawned, stretched, put on his shoes, and walked out of the now-open passage into the hall. The cold, white walls and fluorescent glare enveloped him and the guard as they walked to the visitation area.

The room was darker than usual and empty—or so Nicky thought. From a shadowy corner, a deep, commanding, smooth-as-silk voice said, “That will be all, guard. You may go.” The guard scowled at Nicky, grunted, and walked out, shutting the door behind him.

Nicky squinted, willing his eyes to adjust to the dim light. They focused on a tall, angular figure, the source of the voice. From what Nicky could make out, the man was immaculately groomed, dressed in an expensive suit, had jet black hair with a gray streak at both temples, and sported a Vandyke and thin mustache that framed a mouth full of pearl-white teeth. Despite the gloom of the surroundings, they sparkled when he smiled. "Ah, Nicholas! Wonderful to finally meet you!"

"Do I know you?"

"No, not yet. But I know you."

"How?"

"I've been keeping an eye on you these past few years. I've also heard a great deal about you."

"Yeah? Like what?" Nicky responded with as much bravado as he could muster.

"Like your prowess with computers, for one thing," answered the rich voice, which then took on a tone of ultimate sympathy. "And how you've been abandoned—let down by everyone you've ever trusted."

"Who told you that?" Nicky challenged.

“I told you, I’ve been keeping an eye on you,” the figure replied. “What’s important is that I want to be someone who *won’t* let you down. Someone you can rely on. Someone you can trust.”

Nicky scoffed. “No, thanks. I’ll pass.”

“I understand. I’d be skeptical, too, were I in your shoes. Allow me to prove it to you.”

“How?”

“For starters, how would you like to leave this place?”

Nicky shrugged. “And go where?”

“To a home—a *real* home, where you’ll be provided for and educated and given a guiding hand. You’ll have everything you want, everything you need. Your life will have meaning and purpose. You’ll be part of a family.”

Nicky suppressed the hope that suddenly welled up in him. He’d heard all this before, and it was always too good to be true. He snickered and said, “Apparently you don’t know about me. I’m a bad seed. I poison everything I touch.”

The man stepped closer and smiled more broadly. “Why do you think I want you in my family?”

A tingle of excitement and fear shot down Nicky's spine. He swallowed hard. "Who—who are you?"

"I'm your new guardian if you'll have me. My name is Blackgaard, Dr. Regis Blackgaard." He rested a hand on Nicky's shoulder. "And you and I are going to change the world."

CHAPTER ONE



GENEVA, SWITZERLAND: PRESENT DAY

John Avery Whittaker leaned back on the bench situated near the Promenade du Lac and watched the sun set on the Rhône River where it exited Lac Léman on Lake Geneva. From where he sat, he could keep an eye on both the beauty of God's creation and his primary focus all day, a row of shops across the Quai du Général-Guisan—specifically, a small toy store.

The view reminded him very much of the place he had left two days ago, his home of Odyssey. From

the airplane window, Whit had kept the little town in sight for as long as he could, until the plane banked left and headed off toward Chicago O'Hare International Airport. From there, he'd made the first of several connecting flights that would lead to his ultimate destination, the Middle East, where he would head up the Baynes Archaeological Missions Institute.

He had known Dr. B. Michael Baynes for years, and Whit's company, Universal Press Corporation, had supported the Baynes Institute financially for almost its entire existence. Michael's tragic death from a heart attack two weeks ago had affected Whit deeply. The UPC search committee had realized they would have to find a replacement fairly quickly or the Institute would have to close down. During their search, one name kept popping up as the best person for the job: John Avery Whittaker.

At first, Whit had dismissed the idea, though he told Bill, one of UPC's managers, to prepare the company for missions work. But it was while he was praying for the Baynes family that he had received what he could only describe as a spiritual message, much like the one

he'd experienced back when he'd told Bill to start preparations. Then, the message had been one word: *missions*. Now it was two words: *It's time*. He could not shake it off. And now that he had a clear indication of just where he was supposed to go, he knew he had to obey. He had to leave Odyssey.

The next two weeks were a whirlwind of activity—packing, finalizing preparations, issuing instructions, making countless phone calls, and attending several farewell lunches, dinners, and celebrations. There was even a ceremony at Town Hall, where he was given the key to the city and a citation of merit, which he found rather embarrassing. Then there were the good-byes. His best friend, Tom Riley, put on a cheerful face, though his eyes brimmed with tears and sadness. Many of the regulars—both kids and adults—at Whit's End, his ice cream and discovery emporium, were stunned, as though they'd just gotten a shot of novocaine. And Whit and Connie Kendall, his beloved employee whom he thought of as a daughter, had cried on each other's shoulders several times.

Then came yesterday. *It's time*.

Though he knew he needed to leave, he didn't want to, for a variety of reasons. A major one was that Eugene Meltsner and Bernard Walton, two of his closest friends, were not yet back from their trip to California. Bernard had gone there to buy a new truck for his custodial service, and Eugene had been off on a summer adventure when—through a series of circumstances that could only have happened to them—they ended up traveling together.

Whit didn't want to leave without saying goodbye to them, but he had no choice. He would miss them both terribly, especially Eugene, his other employee. Whit wasn't entirely certain, but he believed he'd seen Eugene running alongside the plane, waving frantically, as it taxied down the tarmac for takeoff. It was just the sort of thing Eugene *would* do.

The young science and computer geek had earned a special place in Whit's heart, and he prayed for Eugene's salvation daily. He would rather have told Eugene in person how important his friendship was and how much he had grown to love him. Whit sighed—the note he'd left would have to suffice. He

hoped and prayed Eugene would come to understand the depth of the simple last line: “The best is yet to come.”

Whit himself believed that statement wholeheartedly, though it didn’t help with his reticence about leaving Odyssey. He had lived there for so many years—raised his family there, buried his wife and a son there—that he and the town had grown into each other. It was part of him, and leaving it made him feel uprooted and unstable. Still, he had work to do—work, apparently, prepared in advance for him, as the Bible said, and that was a comforting thought. And though the bulk of that work was in the Middle East, a portion of it was here in Geneva. This, too, was one of his missions.

As dusk settled and the streetlights began flickering to life, Whit tried to recall all that had happened back home during the past few years—and there was a lot:

- Richard Maxwell had returned to town to ask for everyone’s forgiveness, and all were amenable except for one: Tom.

- Rodney Rathbone's father, Bart, had rebuilt the ruins of Blackgaard's Castle and opened a new store there called the Electric Palace. Bart's brain was a depthless font of new ways to scam people.
- Philip Glossman had disappeared for a while after creating a small scandal and then reappeared to try to give Tom trouble with his farm.
- And perhaps the biggest event had been the purchase of the Harlequin Theater by its new owner, Edwin Blackgaard—the infamous Dr. Regis Blackgaard's twin brother!

There were many other things as well. It always amazed Whit how much could happen in such a small town. It had been that way in every burg in which he'd ever lived, even when he'd been a kid in Provenance, North Carolina.

And that reminded him of another concern he hoped he'd taken care of—at least he'd tried to—before he left: his childhood friend Jack Allen. Whit had finally tracked down Jack about a year ago. Jack was

living in a small town in central Oregon and working at a car dealership. Whit sent him a letter, inviting him to visit Odyssey. Along with the letter, Whit included an item he had sent Jack once before: a map of tunnels underneath Odyssey. Who had stolen it from Jack and why were still unclear, though Whit had his suspicions about both, suspicions that concerned him greatly, and which were one reason he was in Geneva rather than back at Whit's End.

And speaking of Whit's End, he was also grateful to God for another apparent miracle. He knew he needed someone to run and take care of the place while he was gone. Of course, Connie and Eugene were there, but though he trusted both of them, he needed an adult to make decisions. Tom had agreed to fill in for a while, but he had his own business to run, and the farm took up a lot of time. Whit knew he needed a long-term solution, which he'd left in God's hands. And God had delivered big time.

One of the phone calls he'd made amid the whirlwind of travel preparations and farewell events was to his son Jason, who was living in Phoenix, Arizona.

When Whit informed him of his plans, Jason nearly interrupted him with his response: “Who’s going to run Whit’s End?”

“Well, Tom has agreed to help out, but that’s only temporary, so I’ll have to find—”

Jason did interrupt this time. “What about me?” He then proceeded to list all his qualifications for the job, until Whit stopped him and asked what was going on. Jason sighed and replied, “I’m burned out, Dad. I think I told you a while back that I’ve been feeling the pressure for some time, and my last two assignments really took a toll on me. I need a break—maybe a permanent one. At the very least, I need to come home. May I?”

The last two words brought tears to Whit’s eyes, both when Jason spoke them and now as Whit recalled them. Jason didn’t need his permission, but the fact that he’d asked for it told Whit how serious his son’s situation was. “Of course you may, Son! You are always welcome here!”

“Thanks, Dad.” The relief in Jason’s voice brought even more tears, both then and now.

And that was it. Jason would wrap up the details of his latest assignment, pack up, and take over Whit's End. Odyssey would get a Whittaker for a Whittaker, though Whit and Jason wouldn't be able to see each other before Whit left for the Middle East by way of Geneva.

Oddly enough, his stop here was connected to Jason as well, though the younger Whittaker didn't know it. The shop Whit was staking out belonged to a mutual friend of theirs, one Tasha Forbes. She was with the National Security Agency, and Whit suspected that she and Jason, in addition to being agents, were more involved, to put it politely. There was a real possibility that Tasha could one day be his daughter-in-law. Which made what Whit had to do here even more difficult, since it was brought on by Tasha's nefarious behavior. She had stolen something from him, and Whit needed to get it back.

Or, more accurately, destroy it.

There hadn't been much action at the store all day, only two customers that afternoon. The fact that they were both older men going to a toy shop roused Whit's

suspicion that they were more than mere customers. The first man was an eccentric-looking fellow wearing an ill-fitting suit. He was mostly bald but had wild tufts of hair exploding from the sides and back of his head. Whit got the distinct impression he was a scientist or a professor. The man entered but did not exit, which told Whit there must be either a back door or another way out of the shop.

The second fellow appeared moments later, leading Whit to conclude he was tailing the eccentric man. Man Two was better dressed, severely crouched over, and supporting himself with a cane, and he wore a wide fedora that hid his facial features. Despite the crouch, he moved quickly to the door, opened it carefully, and slipped inside. After about ten minutes, he reemerged, casually now, turning back to wave at Tasha, and pocketed what looked like an order form. He then made his way up the sidewalk, rounded the corner, and disappeared down a side street. *Perhaps he's just a customer after all*, thought Whit.

It was now dark, though the streets were lit up festively. Whit rose from his bench and moved closer to

the shop. From where he stood, he could see Tasha inside, talking with her assistant, a young black girl. Whit wondered if she was also an agent, and he realized almost instantly that she would have to be—the operation was too small to keep things from her.

The two women closed the shop. The assistant waved goodbye to Tasha and then exited through the front door and hurried off down the street. A few minutes later, Tasha turned off all the lights, also exited through the front door, which she locked, and went up the street in the direction opposite from the assistant.

Once he was certain she was gone, Whit made his move. He left the park, crossed the Quai du Général-Guisan, and made his way around to the back of the row of shops. The alleyway was dimly lit and deserted. He quickly found the back door to the toy shop, crouched down, and began to pick the lock. The situation reminded him of an incident in his youth when he'd decided to break into the Provenance Town Hall. His old friend Ben Huck had helped him that night; tonight, he was on his own.

Whit pondered the morality of breaking in like this and considered simply walking into the store in the morning and confronting Tasha. But he knew that she was likely on assignment and that doing that would blow her cover. The danger to her was too great; he had no choice but to do what he was doing.

Suddenly, he heard a click—and realized it wasn't the door lock. It came from behind him. He rose slowly, turned, and stared down the muzzle of a small pistol pointed at him. Holding the pistol was Tasha.

“Hello, Whit,” she said. “It'll be a lot easier if you use my key.” She tossed it to him. “Shall we go inside?”