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Feathers

Shayne Clarke

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

Feathers

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Master of Fine Arts

Feathers is a young adult novel about two knucklehead boys and a summer of mischief they share. Boots and Gopher, the two principal characters in Feathers, are twelve-year old boys who are fascinated by a loft of racing pigeons kept by a peculiar man living on the edge of their small town. The fascination leads them to steal a few pairs of pigeons in hopes of generating their own loft. Their plan is to release the adult pigeons back to the man's loft while Boots and Gopher keep the babies. In stealing the pigeons, they discover the man also houses falcons and hawks. Gopher becomes obsessed with falcons and begins a study of falconry.

The obsession overrides better judgment and federal law, and the boys also steal a small kestrel falcon. They don't realize the gravity of the situation until a "wanted" poster is put up at the local feed store letting people know that a federal law has been broken. The story continues with the resolution of this conflict and the relationship that is developed between the young men and the old falconer. It is a story about consequences of seemingly simple acts; it also explores relationships between the boys and their parents, and between the boys and an unlikely mentor.

Keywords: falcons, hawks, falconry, pigeons, young adult novel

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Critical Introduction to Creative Thesis: Catch Me If You Can

As I entered the MFA program, I expected a good review of the principles governing creative writing, adding to my undergraduate work and to what I had gleaned from books I'd read in the twenty years since graduation. I looked forward to enhancing the mechanical skills of creative writing: dialogue, plot, points of view, and description. I also hoped I would learn once and for all where commas go and perhaps get bold and drop an occasional semi-colon—or even a dash.

I expected mastery from a master's program. I was naïve. Looking back over my study of creative writing, I see the value I've gained is not mastery, but an introduction to principles and practices I will pursue the rest of my life. Equally satisfying is the introduction to authors who exemplify the nuts and bolts of creative writing and who have achieved a degree of mastery. I'm a more careful reader now; I read as a writer and have stacks of books I am anxious to read.

In my prospectus, I claimed my primary writing goal was to create engaging characters. Plot was important, but would take a back seat. Now I realize the folly in my mechanical approach. My guided writing study has allowed me to think more holistically about writing. While individual aspects of creative writing can and should get focused attention, I don't think one can claim the most valuable prize. I think now, for example, character and plot are to a certain extent Siamese sisters, inseparable, while one may seem to act in a more dominate manner for different stories.

I read quotes from experts like William Gass, who wrote, "Great character is the most obvious single mark of great literature" (173). John Gardner agreed with Gass and uses Shakespeare as an example. "The center of every Shakespearean play, as of all great literature, is character [. . .]" (43).

The famous Mr. Bennett quoted by Virginia Woolf was even more direct.

The foundation of good fiction is character-creating and nothing else. ... Style counts; plot counts; originality of outlook counts. But none of these counts anything like so much as the convincingness of the characters. If the characters are real the novel will have a chance; if they are not, oblivion will be its portion.

(23)

While this seems to support character as the dominant partner, to suggest one over the other, I believe, is most likely to read the argument out of context. It's like assigning the doctrine of grace to the Apostle Paul as his sole theology.

I've learned that while the study of character can be a singular activity, character is interdependent with all other aspects of creative writing. John Gardner writes about plot in relation to character: "Plot not only changes but creates character: By our actions we discover what we really believe and, simultaneously, reveal ourselves to others" (47). Continuing, he comments on the role setting plays, "And setting influences both character and plot [. ...]" (47).

Recognizing the interdependence character has with the rest of the players, I agree with Virginia Woolf who describes character as a fleeting imp who dares the writer "in the most seductive and charming way in the world, [to] '[c]ome catch me if you can, '" (23) to discover the character's true identity. And like Rumpelstiltskin, if the writer is patient and clever, the imp can be caught. It is the chase that makes for good writing and good reading. Woolf continues, "My belief [is] that men and women write novels because they are lured on to create some character which has thus imposed itself upon them" (23). This happened to me. I first put Boots and Gopher on the page and started to direct their lives. I have heard about letting the characters write the story but didn't really believe it. It sounded like a gimmick or trick writing teachers

use to get students to pay more attention to their characters. Once I let go and started thinking how Boots and Gopher would react, not just how I would react, it became more fun.

My focus will still be to discover how to create and sustain engaging characters, but I will broaden that to include the other aspects of creating writing I have studied and how that study has influenced my own journey through the MFA program and shaped the writing of my novel.

I've always had an ear for good dialogue. I would rather settle in to watch a movie with tight dialogue between interesting characters than watch cars or planets exploding. The same is true with books I've read. With my formal study, I've learned that dialogue has to move the story along. Chit-chat is not that intriguing, but dialogue which moves the story along or gives insight into the characters is. Because I love to read and hear crisp dialogue, I've taken on the challenge to write it myself. William Noble wrote, "Dialogue is an essential ingredient for the portrayal and development of character. Narrative describes a character but dialogue humanizes and personifies the character. It gives dimension and substance and individuality" (31).

I relied heavy on dialogue to reveal my characters. I wanted Gopher to be more reluctant, more cautious than his buddy Boots. Gopher is the voice of reason, if that is possible for two young men. The following excerpt from *Feathers* exemplifies my approach. Boots and Gopher are talking about how they will get their pigeons.

"Back to the pigeon business," Boots said.

"Yeah, it would be fun to have some pigeons. It would even be fun to race them—especially against each other, but where are we going to get some pigeons? Racing homers have to be expensive."

"They are, but we're looking at our future breeding stock." Boots pointed down at Elbert's flock circling a huge barn.

“Do you think he’d sell us some? What are you going to do, rob a bank?”

“Close.”

“You’re going to rob your parents and then see if Elbert would sell us some pigeons?”

“Sell?”

“Like when you go to the store and you want a pop. You give the nice man money; he gives you a pop.” A smile spread on Boots’ face, and I knew he had a different definition for buy and sell. That smile always made me nervous, but it also meant we were about to have some fun.

“Gopher, we won’t have to *buy* the pigeons. We’ll simply *borrow* some.”

“Borrow?”

“Borrow. It’s perfect. I’ve been planning it for weeks.” Boots was famous for his plans. It usually meant some dangerous scheme that involved us both; and if we got caught, I was the one who got in trouble.

Boots pointed down at the pigeons. “We’ll borrow a few of Elbert’s pigeons, they’ll hatch some eggs and raise some babies, and then we’ll just let the parents go when the babies are old enough. They’re homing pigeons, remember? The parents fly home, go back to their lives and we’ll raise the babies until we have our own flyers. It’s beautiful! Go ahead and admit it, I’m a genius.”

“Great plan, Einstein, except that one of the other words for borrowing is stealing. And stealing in Maple Grove is still illegal.”

“Borrowing is borrowing. It means you’re just using something for a while and then you give it back. Gopher, it’s just like borrowing a shovel. You borrow

it, you dig a hole and you give the shovel back. You don't give the hole back with it."

I had to think about that one for a second. It sounded right, but felt wrong.

"But what do you do when the shovel suddenly has little baby shovels? Do you give them back too?"

"No, you didn't borrow the baby shovels because they didn't exist. You simply give back what you borrowed—the mother shovel," Boots said with certainty.

"Or stole."

"Whatever."

I tried to let dialogue and action, more than straight exposition, inform the reader about the characters of Boots and Gopher. Ayn Rand wrote,

The main means of characterization is *action* and *dialogue*—just as it is only by means of their actions and words that one can observe the characters of other people in real life. There is no way to know the soul (the consciousness) of another except by means of physical manifestations: his actions and words. . . .

The same applies to fiction. (60)

Ayn Rand is both a good and bad example for me in this respect. I plowed through *Atlas Shrugged* this summer. This was my second reading; the first was twenty years ago. I read more as a writer this time. Rand created engaging and interesting characters, used dialogue and action to bring them to the front of the stage. As the novel progresses these characters become uninteresting as they walk to the pulpit, begin preaching and morph into Rand's philosophical propaganda puppets giving heavy-handed speeches for pages at a time.

I initially read *Atlas Shrugged* as political commentary to current conditions, but it turned into an instructive text on how characters and story can get buried in theme or blatant propaganda. This was good for me as I considered the role Elbert Packard, the Judge, or any of the adults should play in my novel. I had to trim their dialogue so it didn't feel they were giving too many speeches.

I also had to be careful as I described the falconry aspect of my novel. I wanted to educate kids on falconry, the way I was educated with *My Side of the Mountain*, the book that ignited my own passion for falconry 40 years ago. I also wanted to make sure young kids wouldn't go out and try to trap their own falcon. I also wanted to teach young kids about some of the important aspects of falconry, like the need for a license and proper feeding. I found myself deleting many of these lines because they just didn't fit. I was becoming Ayn Rand. My story was getting lost in my purpose for telling it, rather than letting the "story be the boss," as Tim Wynne-Jones said recently on the BYU campus. It was also challenging to write about something I know so intimately, but that my characters wouldn't have been able to learn on their own.

In my study of character I read the advice to become a "watcher of people" and realize I have done that my entire life. John Gardner in his book *On Becoming a Novelist*, said,

The true writer's scrutiny of imagined scenes both feeds on and feeds his real-life experience: almost without knowing he's doing it, the writer becomes an alert observer. He may even become such a watcher of people that he seems an oddity to his friends. (37)

People-watching keeps me from being bored when I'm stuck at the airport or waiting at the mall. I might see a large man with vacation shorts hiked up to his armpits wearing tall black

socks and running shoes. The shoes have never been running obviously, but then I wonder what this guy is like at church, or if he goes to church, or what his wife is like, if he has one, etc. I begin unconsciously to write his story, including where he works, his choice of pizza, the relationship with his wife or girlfriend, how he might handle a particular conflict, often making it absurd, to amuse myself.

Working in Manhattan for four years and riding the commuter train each day from Connecticut provided rich opportunity to study people. The train introduced me to great characters both inside and outside the train. As I rocked back and forth on the Metro North train, I wrote character sketches about the people I saw, ala Edgar Lee Masters. I wrote about a man who came face to face with the jet blast of a shaken beer can. I wrote about couples in and out of love, or so I imagined. I wrote about a man's hair that seemed at war on his head, and a fly that spent the afternoon exploring a woman's shoulder. Virginia Woolf also made a study of character. She said,

But the novelists differ from the rest of the world because they do not cease to be interested in character when they have learnt enough about it for practical purposes. They go a step further, they feel that there is something permanently interesting in character in itself. When all the practical business of life has been discharged, there is something about people which continues to seem to them of overwhelming importance, in spite of the fact that it has no bearing whatever up their happiness, comfort, or income. The study of character becomes to them an absorbing pursuit; to impart character an obsession. And this I find it very difficult to explain: what novelists mean when they talk about character, what the

impulse is that urges them so powerfully every now and then to embody their view in writing. (24-25)

Henry James said it more succinctly. “Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost” (14). A writer who is a keen observer of human behavior has a better chance of getting that same keenness crafted in his or her writing.

Another challenge I have always had with my stories harkens back to feedback I received from Douglas Thayer in an English 318 class twenty-eight years ago. “You are too nice to your characters,” he said. It was and perhaps still is true. I started to like my characters; they became friends and family. And like friends and family, I didn’t want to mess up their lives. But convincing conflict is essential for real characters to tell real stories, so I had to rough them up. Orson Scott Card agrees, “Stories about happy people are boring” (53). Being nice works great in real life, but not so well in fiction. Anne Lamott makes this case clearly:

But no matter what, you are probably going to have to let bad things happen to some of the characters you love or you won’t have much of a story. Bad things happen to good characters, because our actions have consequences, and we do not all behave perfectly all the time. As soon as you start protecting your characters from the ramifications of their less-than-lofty behavior, your story will start to feel flat and pointless, just like in real life. (45)

Stephen Tuttle in a more recent English 518 seminar reminded me that no one wants to read a story about normal people doing normal things. It is these character flaws and quirks, their roundness, not necessarily the dramatic external forces that crash around them, the helps engage the reader. Janet Burroway suggests a step beyond round.

The central characters in your story or novel need to be not merely round, but spherical. They should contain enough conflict and contradiction so that we can recognize them as belonging to the contradictory human race; and they should be, as we are or hope we are, capable of change. (71)

I had originally expected to write a novel about Mormon missionaries—to write the great American Mormon novel, as it were. Over the years I had piled up a number of mediocre chapters and hoped to improve on them. My own missionary experience was rich with interesting characters. I knew that writing for the Mormon market was tricky to start with, but I was up for the challenge.

Several people suggested I read *Falling Toward Heaven* by John Bennion, which I did. As I began my research into what makes a good or bad Mormon novel, and particularly a good missionary story other than the last-door-of-the-day-we've-prayed-for-your-knock story, I realized how complicated the task was to write one. Anne Lamott warned of perfect characters, "They shouldn't be too perfect; perfect means shallow and unreal and fatally uninteresting" (50). I wondered how this worked in Mormon fiction where the apex of Mormon culture is perfection? I was naïve in thinking to write for the Mormon audience, to be true to the mission of the LDS Church, it would seem that every character should be perfect, or at least be perfect by the end of the piece. According to Lamott, they would be perfectly uninteresting as well. In reality, the piece would also be perfectly unread.

Even Mormons who take the notion of perfection seriously still want to follow characters who are moving to or from perfection, not simply basking in perfect harmony with the universe. If there were an all-good news TV station broadcasting from Orem, Utah, it would go out of business. (Unless it was supported by Mormon masons chiseling stones for throwing at sinners.)

I needed to think more deeply about my missionary characters, and now my characters in Feathers. As William Gass suggests,

Give your fictional creatures qualities, psychologies, actions, manners, moods; present them from without or from within; let economics matter, breeding, custom, history; let spirit wet them like a hose: all methods work, and none do. (174)

In the end, my brief foray into Mormon fiction and the definition of what is good and bad for that genre was perceived a narrow trail, and I decided to get off. I felt another genre would allow me to explore my writing skills with less bias and scrutiny. I may return to the missionary novel at some point, and if so I will be much more prepared. I will let the characters drive the story, instead of theme or purpose. Reflecting now, I realize that I could have written a missionary novel for my creative thesis. Every story needs the same attention to character development, effective dialogue, etc. True, writing for the Mormon market is a narrow target to hit, but perhaps I was too narrow-minded as I took aim.

I chose to write a young adult novel because I knew so little about that genre, but feel I knew a good deal about young adults--especially young men. First off, I have a clear recollection of my young adulthood. It didn't stretch my imagination very far to write Feathers. I followed my brother and his friend on our bikes as we rode into a farm one afternoon and "borrowed" some pigeons--although I don't recall ever giving them back. When I was twelve, I had my own kestrel. I have also spent twenty years working in Scouting and youth-related activities. I've either been or seen knucklehead kids like I have written about.

Another motivation for learning about writing for young adults is my own son, a reluctant reader. I wanted to see if I could "contribute a verse" to other reluctant readers. I don't know if I have succeeded there yet. My son hasn't begged and pleaded to read my story, and I don't want

to give it to him until it is finally finished. My hope is that he will still be a young adult when I'm ready for him to read it.

As I began to read young adult literature, I realized that there was much more to the characters and the stories than just Johnny catching the winning touchdown pass. The themes and characters were every bit as complex as I had read with fiction for adults.

One of the first young adult books I read was at Chris Crowe's introduction: *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier. Then I read Chris Crutcher's *Staying Fit For Sarah Byrnes* and John Green's *Looking for Alaska*. These were helpful introductions to young adult literature. I learned that serious themes could be written in a fun style, that funny and serious could share the same chapter or even sentence. Dean Hughes' seminar, one of the two I took on writing for young adults, reminded me that childhood is as complex as adulthood. The simple carefree days of youth are really not that simple and carefree. Watching the drama for first place in line at the school bus stop in front of my house reminds me of that.

And while I agree with Dean, I also think there are simple and carefree days of summers and I chose to write about such a summer in *Feathers*. To some degree it is a reaction to some of the heavy themes I have read in young adult literature. It is more like Gary Paulsen's *Harris and Me*, a summer tale of two boys on a farm, than it is of *The Chocolate War*. I would like to write a deeper-themed young adult novel at some point, but for now I am happy with *Boots and Gopher*.

Regardless of how deep or shallow the theme, the challenge I set out for myself as I began my study remains. I want to write stories driven by characters who are memorable, who have inner conflicts that are real and who confront them honestly. The desire for my readers is that they are engaged with my characters long after the last page is turned. I want my readers to begin writing sequels and prequels in their heads. My characters may not be interested in

changing the world as much as understanding the world that is changing them. I understand better what it takes to develop the characters I wish to write about. Can I do it? As I ask that question a whispering voice speaks out of the shadows. It is character. I see only a glimpse, then a quick reappear and vanish. I see a smile and it leaves an indelible impression on my mind as words leave an auditory print. "Catch me if you can," he says--and the chase begins.

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Feathers

One

I thought the day for stealing Elbert's pigeons would be a night. I pictured Boots and me in full camouflage, faces smeared with black and green, sneaking through the cornfields surrounding the bird compound. We'd look like the *few and proud* from the Marine commercials, or the guys stalking elk in the catalogs down at Buck's Outdoor World. We'd move like ghosts around Elbert's barns and sheds, peek around corners with periscopes and whisper into walkie-talkies as we got closer to the pigeon loft.

Of course we'd need rope, gas masks, bolt cutters in case Elbert took us prisoner, headlamps and possibly night-vision goggles.

But it was day--a sunglasses day--when Boots called and told me to come over to his garage. I was building one of my famous double PB and jam sandwiches, creamy on one side and chunky on the other and homemade strawberry jam smeared in the middle, when he called. He lived just across the field, about eight bites of sandwich away.

As I stepped into Boots' garage, I saw two big army duffel bags from Vern's Army Surplus store, which reeked with sour surplus smell.

"Today's the day, Gopher," Boots said as though the Governor of Idaho had declared it such.

"The day for whadtht?" I said, wishing I'd doubled the jam between the PB.

"For pigeons. We're sneaking into Elbert's. I've got it all figured out."

"Did you get night vision goggles?"

When Boots hatched a plan it usually required supplies from Vern's. The Vietnam War had been over for a couple of years, so they had plenty of leftovers. We spent hours in there imagining what we could do with knives, sheaths, machetes, holsters, camo netting, helmets, ammo containers and secret Green Beret gear, all the while wishing one of us had a job, outside of the money Boots got for selling night crawlers, and my allowance, so we could actually buy the big stuff.

"Don't need night goggles. We're going right *now*."

I stopped mid-chew and stared at him. “Are you nuts? We can’t go in there during the day! Elbert will catch us; that’s why we need to go at night and why we need night vision glasses.”

“Of course I’m nuts, or I wouldn’t be stealing pigeons in the first place.”

“Borrowing.”

“Right.”

When Boots first hatched the plan to “borrow” some racing pigeons from Elbert Packard, it sounded a lot like stealing. Elbert lived by himself on an old farm about five miles from town. Boots and I stopped there at least once a week on our way home from swimming in the canal to watch his pigeons fly. They raced in tight circles around his house and sometimes darted between barns and sheds and the giant trees behind his house. It was like he had his own air force; pigeons flying in tight formations like fighter jets until one would spiral out with a wingover and weave its way between trees and buildings. Sometimes they’d be in a dog fight, chasing each other straight into the clouds.

One day we were perched on our usual place on a hill just above the farm, when Boots announced his plan.

“Gopher,” he said, staring at a few pigeons racing out of sight, “It’s time we get into the pigeon business.”

“Yeah, that would be cool someday.”

“Not someday; now. We need our own pigeons. I’m getting tired of watching; I want to start racing.” We heard that Elbert raced his pigeons and had one of the best racing lofts in the state. “We could even race them like he does. I’m starting to dream about pigeons.”

“Maybe when we get our licenses next year,” I said. That was one of the advantages of living in Idaho; you get your driver’s license when you’re fourteen.

“Sorry, Gopher, but we’re not waiting until next year; next week--maybe. I’ve already told my mom I’m going to start raising and racing pigeons.”

That’s how it was with Boots. I had to ask my parents for things, and it usually involved a huge talk about making good choices and the consequences that follow and then they would simply say, looking at me with their eyebrows crunched, “It’s your decision, son,” which really meant the best decision was their decision.

Boots, on the other hand, would just tell his parents what he was going to do, and they would say okay. His parents were tired. At least that's what my dad says. Boots was the second youngest of seven children. His brothers and sisters were all married or going to college, except for Boots and his little brother Eric, a nine-year old we called The Scab, because he was usually picking at one. Boots could get away with just about anything, as long as he kept it from The Scab.

"Let me guess; your mom said, with tears dripping down her face, 'Boots, that is wonderful. Oh thank you for being so in love with nature, we'll keep them right here in the house. I always hoped you would raise some pigeons.'"

"Funny, Gopher. No tears, but I did talk about the Bird Study merit badge and helping me get my Eagle Scout award."

"You played the Eagle Scout card to get pigeons? That's the one you play to get out of jail or when you have a bad report card coming! And since when is the Bird Study merit badge required for Eagle?"

"I'm not going to jail, and I've used it for a bad report card already, but as you will remember, you can use the Eagle Scout card over and over."

"True."

That would never fly with my parents. I could never get away with *announcing* that I'm doing something. I still had to ask. I think it's because I'm the oldest and my parents are still experimenting with me. At least it feels like it. My mom, especially, is always reading books on how to raise teenagers and asks about my feelings all the time. I don't think my two younger sisters get the same treatment. Maybe it's because they are always telling everyone their feelings without being asked.

"Boots, you're lucky. If I asked my parents if I could get some pigeons, my mom would say what she has said since I was six, 'We're just not pet people.' All I wanted for Christmas was a gerbil or maybe a hamster. 'Christopher, honey,' she said, 'gerbils look fun spinning around on their little wheels and everything, but they make such poopy messes, and they spread germs. We're just not pet people.'"

"Did she use the word *poopy*?" Boots did his best impression of my mom.

"Yes."

"Back to the pigeon business," Boots said.

“Yeah, it would be fun to have some pigeons. It would even be fun to race them—especially against each other, but where are we going to get some pigeons? Racing homers have to be expensive.”

“They are, but we’re looking at our future breeding stock.” Boots pointed down at Elbert’s flock circling a huge barn.

“Do you think he’d sell us some? What are you going to do, rob a bank?”

“Close.”

“You’re going to rob your parents and then see if Elbert would sell us some pigeons?”

“Sell?”

“Like when you go to the store and you want a pop. You give the nice man money; he gives you a pop.” A smile spread on Boots’ face, and I knew he had a different definition for buy and sell. That smile always made me nervous, but it also meant we were about to have some fun.

“Gopher, we won’t have to *buy* the pigeons. We’ll simply *borrow* some.”

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“Borrow. It’s perfect. I’ve been planning it for weeks.” Boots was famous for his plans. It usually meant some dangerous scheme that involved us both; and if we got caught, I was the one who got in trouble.

Boots pointed down at the pigeons. “We’ll borrow a few of Elbert’s pigeons, they’ll hatch some eggs and raise some babies, and then we’ll just let the parents go when the babies are old enough. They’re homing pigeons, remember? The parents fly home, go back to their lives and we’ll raise the babies until we have our own flyers. It’s beautiful! Go ahead and admit it, I’m a genius.”

“Great plan, Einstein, except that one of the other words for borrowing is stealing. And stealing in Maple Grove is still illegal.”

“Borrowing is borrowing. It means you’re just using something for a while and then you give it back. Gopher, it’s just like borrowing a shovel. You borrow it, you dig a hole and you give the shovel back. You don’t give the hole back with it.”

I had to think about that one for a second. It sounded right, but felt wrong.

“But what do you do when the shovel suddenly has little baby shovels? Do you give them back too?”

“No, you didn’t borrow the baby shovels because they didn’t exist. You simply give back what you borrowed—the mother shovel,” Boots said with certainty.

“Or stole.”

“Whatever.”

I knew two things at this point. First, though not sure how, we were going to “borrow” pigeons from Elbert Packard, no matter what objections I could think up. I was the voice of reason, but we never listened to that voice. Second, Boots had a good point. Borrowing really was different than stealing. Stealing is taking something from a store or out of a car. Taking Elbert’s pigeons would be ... borrowing.

“Here’s the deal, Gopher. Elbert leaves every day with a load of pigeons about now. He’s gone for about two hours, and when he comes home his pigeon baskets are empty. I think he drives his racers out of town and lets them go, and they race back. That gives us two hours to get in there, find a few nice breeders and get out of there.”

“Okay, but where are we going to put them? We can’t keep them at my house--they might be poopy.”

“We’ll keep them here at my place out by the tack shed.” Boots motioned out the side door.

“You don’t have any place for pigeons out there.”

“Not yet, but we’ll build something. Don’t worry about it. Let’s go!”

Two

I'd heard Boots' line, "don't worry about it" a thousand times. Most of the time he was right, but sometimes, worrying about it would have been a good idea. I wasn't sure if this was one of those times.

Riding our bikes up to Elbert's place, I slowed while Boots started straight down the gravel lane that led back to where we assumed the pigeon pens were.

"Hold on Boots. How do you know Elbert's gone?"

"He always leaves in the afternoon."

"Maybe he got sick."

"Okay, how about I knock on the door?"

"You're an idiot."

A cornfield followed the lane down to the barns and sheds; perfect for hiding bikes and setting up a command post. A small squadron of pigeons worked the air space over us and the compound, like a Special Forces unit protecting the White House. Only Elbert's house wasn't white. It was yellow. Yellow like a squash, and old as any house around. The front had a formal entry with huge elm trees standing guard on either side of a gray wooden porch. A small white railing, with paint peeling like after a sunburn, fenced the porch in. Overgrown bushes fought the trees for sun and made it feel spooky.

Boots thought camo paint on our faces might draw attention, being daylight and all. I smeared a little stripe across my nose for good luck anyway. It helped me focus; I was ready to play commando, to bust in there and rescue hostages, only I guess in this case--take hostages.

As we stepped out of the cornfield we studied the barns and sheds for the pigeon lofts. We ran over to the nearest shed, painted red at some point, but now all worn out. It reminded me of my grandmother's lipstick at the end of a family reunion.

Next to the first shed stood a large hay barn, also worn red with a huge slanted roof and weathered wooden shingles, some loose and slipping out of place. The smell of hay reminded me of "bucking" bales on a trailer on my uncle's farm. We heard a couple of pigeons up in the rafters, but figured they were wild. As we slipped around the side of the barn, we heard other pigeons, saw a couple with their landing gear down and we knew we were getting close.

Boots took the explorer position while I tracked the escape route. I wanted to know how fast I would need to run to get back to the cornfield.

Just as Boots turned the corner of the barn, he screamed, and crashed back into me like he had stepped on a bee. A nasty growl mixed with Boots' scream and exploded into a wild snarly barking fit. I wanted to run, but Boots had me pinned to the barn. Then he pushed me in front of him and I poked my head around the corner to see what wanted to eat Boots. I expected to see White Fang, some rangy wolf, or maybe a wolverine. No White Fang, but maybe his ugly cousin. He snarled at me with wicked clinched teeth and his jowls trembled as he pulled hard on the chain that kept him from killing me. This was by far, the ugliest dog I had ever seen. He looked like an experiment gone bad—the worst mixture of the ugliest breeds on earth. German Shepherd sized, but with short scrubby hair, mostly black with odd white smears on half his face and down one leg. He had an old scar that crept up over his left eye—probably from killing a mountain lion. The heavy chain and collar helped restore my breathing. Boots didn't see the chain, just a killer wolf dog lunging to tear his face off.

I jerked back and looked at Boots. "That is an ugly dog."

"It was going for my throat." Boots said, still a little shaky.

While Ugly Fang barked and growled and fought against his collar, we darted around another shed with a BB-broken window and a door hanging loosely. It gave us a good shield from Ugly Fang, who barked like he was getting paid per bark. I wondered if this was such a good plan, but didn't want to say anything.

We worked our way around a smaller shed listening for pigeons and finally found the pigeon loft. It was about the size of a tool shed with an open area covered with wire that extended out a couple feet. Pigeons flew in and out through an open window. There were probably 50 pigeons; some of them picking at the ground while others seemed to be playing tag. We heard more pigeons inside, so we went behind to see how to get in.

Still panting, Boots said, "I could be dead right now."

"Did you see how ugly that dog was?"

"Um, no I didn't, Gopher. I was protecting my throat."

"That was the ugliest dog I have ever seen."

"It almost killed me!"

"We'd better get out of here. There might be someone else in the house."

Boots turned the door knob to the pigeon loft.

"Crap, it's locked."

I was ready to abort the mission when Boots yanked on the door and it popped open.

“Locked, but not shut.” Boots said with a sinister smile.

I glanced back over our trail, remembering which shed led to the barn, past Ugly Fang, still howling like it had treed a bear, then across the gravel driveway and into the cornfield.

“We’re going in, Gopher!” With that Boots handed me a duffel bag.

“I’m right behind you,” I said, looking for other escape routes.

Boots opened the door to the pigeon loft and a dozen pigeons bolted for the window leading to the flight pen. This stirred up a whirlwind of pigeon dust and feathers that choked us. Another twenty pigeons stayed put, alert and nervous up on skinny shelves like toys on display. They were like a slingshot pulled back, not sure whether to fling out the window or just stay put. I knew what they were feeling.

“Hold still,” Boots cautioned me.

As our eyes adjusted to the dim light of the loft, we could also see box-like shelves about a foot wide. Most had nest bowls made out of some kind of cardboard and were mixed with pine needles and pigeon poop. It looked like breakfast cereal for old people. Nestled in some of the bowls were adult pigeons sitting on eggs or protecting squeaky chicks.

“Now what?” I said. “What about the baby ones?” The plan was to open the door, stuff a half dozen birds in the bags and head back to the cornfield. We hadn’t thought about the babies.

“Leave the babies. We just need adults,” Boots said.

“If we take mothers, will the babies die?”

“Not sure. Okay, don’t take any mothers who have babies.”

“How can you tell the mothers from the fathers?”

“Good point.” Boots said, moving in front of the window so the birds were trapped in the nesting part of the loft.

“We better be quick, is all I can say. Elbert could be back any minute.”

“Okay, we’ll each snag five. If they look like they have kids, leave them.”

There was a lot I didn’t know about pigeons. Each time I grabbed one it beat me in the face with its wings, or scratched me with its feet. Finally I stuffed five of them in my bag and jumped out. Boots was right behind me.

“Let’s get out of here before Elbert gets back,” Boots said.

“I’m right behind you,” I said, and tried to get the bag over my shoulder Santa style. Five bagged pigeons were heavier than I expected.

Remembering the cougar-killing dog, Boots took off opposite the way we came in. We had just made it around the other side of the barn, between another shed, dragging our loot, when we almost ran into a group of huge zoo-sized bird cages.

“That’s an eagle!” Boots yelled, forgetting we were trying to be sneaky.

There, in a cage two feet taller than us and wider than two pickups, was a very large eagle, or hawk, or something with huge claws, eyes like Halloween and a beak that could rip your face off. It was perched on a two-by-four covered with green outdoor carpet. The bottom of the cage was filled with pea gravel, feathers of every size and a big mound of white eagle/hawk crap.

“It may be a hawk,” I said. I looked up hawks and eagles in our encyclopedia once. I tried to match this bird with my memory. Was it a red-tail hawk or an eagle? It didn’t have a white head so it wasn’t a bald eagle. No red tail; maybe it was a golden eagle. I held my gaze on his and thought he had some super mind control power. I couldn’t move. I wanted to climb in to see what it would do. Maybe it would be my friend, let me pet it, or maybe it would just eat me.

“Let’s get out of here,” Boots said. I soaked in one last stare at the king of the cage. I wanted to bow as one of his subjects. Then I saw other cages with hawks or falcons. One of the hawks, even smaller than the pigeons we had just taken, stopped me in awe. It had a beautiful blend of orange like a robin’s breast, but mixed with white and blue like a rain cloud. Wow, even cooler than the eagle bird. It flew around the cage, almost dancing, not frightened, even showing off. It was so quick and agile. I tried to remember what it was called.

Boots yelled “Come on!” and took off running without looking back. I started running too, but stopped. I had to look back, not at the eagle or hawk, but the smaller, beautiful bird who looked straight back at me. I stared at it again, taking snapshots in my mind like it was my last chance to ever see something so amazing, then I dashed the last hundred yards to the cornfield. Boots didn’t stop there. He kept running and dragging his duffel bag full of pigeons through the cornfield until he reached our bikes.

Three

None of our plans were big on advanced thinking. The plan was to grab the pigeons and get them home as soon as possible. So far so good. We had two duffel bags of bewildered pigeons and reached our bikes without getting shot. Then it hit me.

“How are we supposed to get these guys home?” I half drug, half swung the duffel bag.

“Put the bag on the handle bars,” Boots said, propping his load between the handle bars and the nutcracker bar—the one that goes from the seat to the handlebars. As I plopped my bag on the handle bars I wished I had a book rack fender like the smart kids. True, they looked dorky with their books all strapped on, but suddenly dorky didn’t seem that bad. As we took off with our stash, I knew we weren’t going to break any land-speed records.

First of all, it wasn’t like the birds were sitting quietly in the bags calmly enjoying the ride. They flapped around like any hostage would. Pigeon dust and feathers blew out the top where the bags were mostly zipped shut. I laughed at Boots. He had the zipper opening tucked under his chin and little feathers stuck to his face. He looked like my dad after he cut himself shaving, with the little pieces of tissues stuck to the cut places.

We had pedaled about a half mile from Elbert’s place when Boots, apparently afraid the pigeons couldn’t breathe, unzipped his bag just a little—actually more than just a little. We pedaled down Clement Road, an ancient asphalt road, then turned down Pepperidge Lane, a gravel road with loose rocks scattered freely where it overlapped Clement. Just as we made the turn, one of Boots’ pigeons, a freedom flyer, tried to make its break. That bird wiggled his way out and bolted, but Boots lunged and grabbed it with both hands. His quick hands snagged that bird like a touchdown pass. “Sticky fingers,” the fans would cheer. I stared in jealous awe, except for one thing--Boots was still on his bike.

His hands were suddenly full of pigeon with wings beating him in the face and arms. He looked like a twirling magician on a unicycle pulling doves out of his sleeves, while his legs balanced, braked, steered and pedaled. Gravity watched, amused for a moment, then grabbed him hard. Boots crashed in a spinning, bouncing, rolling thunder. He went right over the handlebars as the back tire, tread-less as usual, lost its grip. Dust puffed, gravel spit, and Boots, the pigeon and the duffel bag all rolled and tumbled. I expected the pigeon to rise out of the carnage but it didn’t fly. Boots must have squeezed it to death.

Not quite. There in a heap lay Boots and the pigeon--both alive. I worried first about the stolen pigeon. It looked startled, but less ready to fly. It seemed to be counting its feathers looking for blood. None that I could see. Not so for Boots. He had bloody scrapes on his elbows and the knees of his jeans were ripped open.

“Boots, that was awesome!” Dust covered him like a flour ghost on Halloween.

“Thanks” he said not looking up.

Despite the fact that he crashed and rolled and flipped and spun, he didn't let go of the pigeon. He just sat there holding the pigeon up like he had fallen in a river but kept the pigeon above the water to save its life.

“That was just like Evel Knievel jumping Las Vegas. You crashed and burned, but you're still alive.”

“Evel Knievel broke every bone in his body.” Boots moaned.

The pigeon too seemed impressed. It still didn't move; as if it forgot all about escaping and just wanted to behold the moment. Truth was, it probably got the wind knocked out of it with Boots squeezing so hard.

“Gopher, take this stupid bird.”

I made sure my bag was zipped tight with just a small opening for air and set it down on the side of the road.

I stuffed Super Pigeon back in Boots' bag just as Mrs. Wheeler drove up in her mouthwash blue Ford Econoline van. Great. Of all people we didn't need as a reporter to cover the crash, it was Mrs. Wheeler. Not only did she have a big mouth, but her mouth was big. She had big teeth and when she smiled it seemed the top half of her head swung back like a Muppet. And she was loud. Her mother never told her about talking in a quiet voice. My dad always said she was in business for herself and her business included everyone else's business. She rolled the fresh-breath-mobile up to us and rolled down the window.

“That was a nasty crash, Jeffrey. Are you okay?” Mrs. Wheeler was one of the few people who called Boots by his real name. *Jeffrey* became *Boots* during the 3rd grade Halloween parade. He wanted to be a super hero, so his mom wrapped a cape around him and stuck him in bright purple moon boots she snagged from the Advanced Used Store. We thought he was either The Incredible Grape, ready to stain bad guys with a power stream of grape juice, or being tall for his age and skinny, The Incredible Purple Piece of Gum Guy who kept tripping over his

purple boots. Someone called him “Boots” and we’ve called him that every day for the past four years.

Looking up at Mrs. Wheeler, suddenly Boots was very okay.

“Oh yeah,” he said, acting like wiping out on his bike was part of his normal day. “I just took the corner a little too fast.” He held his arms down straight so she couldn’t see his elbows which by now had bright blood dripping down his arms.

“Do you need a ride somewhere? Your bicycle looks like it has sustained quite an injury.”

I hoped she would keep focused on the mangled bike, and not on the bags which were still moving on their own. Fortunately, she kept her car running and her radio playing the soft hits for elevators, so she couldn’t hear the birds screaming for freedom. I could only imagine what my mom would say if Mrs. Wheeler told her about me having pigeons.

“No, I crash all the time,” Boots said, which was true of course, but it was usually from jumping over ditches or garbage cans or trying to hit the brakes on a turn to see how far the bike could slide. He usually didn’t crash from stealing pigeons. “I’ll be fine Mrs. Wheeler. Thank you for checking with us. It was kind of you to show your concern.” Typical of Boots talking to an adult.

I tried to divert her attention. “This’ll just allow us to practice our First-Aid merit badge.”

“Well okay. But you boys better think about getting a wagon to put your sleeping bags in before you go on your next campout.”

I knew if I looked at Boots at that moment, I would lose it entirely and make her stay and ask more questions, so I looked straight at her donkey-sized teeth and said, “Good advice. Thank you, Mrs. Wheeler; we will get us a little wagon for our next campout.” I felt my thankful smile getting bigger and bigger, so I looked down at my bike like it needed a sudden adjustment.

“Yes, thanks for your concern, Mrs. Wheeler. The wagon is a good idea. It will keep our feather beds here soft and fluffy.”

I held my breath.

“That’s funny, Jeffrey. Okay, well, I need to get along here.” And she gave some gas to the germ killer and drove off.

I let my breath out like I had been sitting at the bottom of a swimming pool, and both of us laughed until I thought I was going to barf.

Four

Like Boots, his bike was only scraped up—nothing broken. The handle bars were twisted out of whack, but we wrangled them back in place enough to make the two miles home. Boots, still pepped up about the pigeons, talked about racing them someday and attaching secret messages to their legs. That sounded fun, but my mind was suddenly full of falcons.

“Boots, did you see those falcons?”

“A little. I was running from a dog, remember?”

“A dog on a chain.”

“The chain was rusty and just about to snap.”

“Like you saw the rust on the chain.

“It was all in slow-motion.”

“You didn’t look that slow to me. What do you suppose Elbert does with the hawks and falcons?”

“Probably trains them to kill pigeon stealers.”

“Good thing we’re just borrowing or we’d be dead.”

“Maybe they’re sick.”

“Looked pretty healthy to me.”

“So, Gopher’s an expert on hawk health now?”

“At least I can ride a bike.”

“But you would have dropped the pigeon.”

Boots was right, I was much more concerned with staying alive than he was, which was why he always won the scar contests.

By the time we got to Boots’ place, we wondered if all the birds were still alive. I thought for sure the escapee had suffered cracked ribs, sprained feathers or at least had a headache.

Boots looked worried too. I guess technically if you borrow pigeons, thinking you’ll return them and they die, you’re not borrowing at that point--you’re stealing. So we were both relieved when I swung the door open to the tack shed, our temporary pigeon loft, and emptied our bags. No casualties, just a few broken feathers. Still startled, some bolted for the highest perch--a shelf with dusty jars of horse medicines, grooming brushes and combs. Others bobbed their heads for a minute then flew over to a pair of worn saddles. The rest stood there on the floor alert, but not sure whether to fly or stay put.

I picked up my bag and shook out all the extra feathers. Boots did the same, but some of the feathers in his bag were attached to a dead pigeon which rolled out on the floor in front of us.

“You killed one of them!”

“Maybe he’s just asleep.” Boots said not believing it.

He picked up a very dead pigeon. One of the birds we had taken.

“Great, we just killed one of Elbert’s pigeons.”

“*You* just killed one of Elbert’s pigeons.”

“It must have smothered when I crashed.”

“Or died of a heart attack.”

“Crap, this isn’t good.”

“Yeah, because now you’ve *stolen* a pigeon Boots.”

We stood there staring at the dead pigeon. This was not part of the plan.

“What are we going to do now?” I said.

“I guess the thing to do is give back an extra pigeon when we take the others back.”

“Maybe we could each give one of our prettiest pigeons.”

“Two for the price of one. Elbert actually comes out ahead on the deal.”

I’m sure there was something wrong with the math or logic there, but I just wanted to hurry and bury that dead pigeon before something else happened.

We held a brief graveside service which included burying the pigeon about a foot down, covering it with rocks and Boots waving his hands around trying to look like a preacher. He looked more like he was swatting flies. We then gave it a moment of silence, and then headed back to the tack room.

“Well, Gopher, we’re finally in the pigeon business.” Boots acted like we had just opened up a shop on Main Street and were waiting for our first customers.

“Yeah and if that business is killing them, we are doing great.”

“Gopher, we need to stay positive. Things happen.”

“Okay, so what do we do now?”

Boots didn’t respond immediately. I think the question got a little bigger, now that we had buried one pigeon and the rest were poking around the tack shed, looking at us like they were the last kids in a dodgeball game and we had the ball.

“Well, we feed ‘em and raise up the babies and learn all about racing homing pigeons.”

“Do you think Elbert will miss them?”

“Gopher,” Boots said a little more confident now, “You have to look at this like an ant farm. Do you think the ant farmer knows exactly how many ants he has?”

“There’s no such thing as an ant farmer.”

“Sure there is, but the point is no, Elbert isn’t going to miss them.”

Just then the biggest of the bunch tipped forward and dumped his digestion all over one of the saddles.

“And what’s your dad going to say, when he sees piles of pigeon crap all over his saddles?”

“No one rides that much anymore, but that’s the next step; we need to build us a pigeon loft.”

I looked down at the dried blood on Boots’ elbow, “And you need to get yourself some Band-Aids. Remember anything from your First Aid merit badge?”

I left Boots to bandage himself while I rode off. I didn’t stop at my house, however; I rode out to Highway 44 and the half mile into town. Usually I’d stop at the Merc for a Hostess Fruit Pie, but this time I went straight to the library. Folks claimed the Maple Grove Library as one of the oldest functioning libraries in Idaho. As an old converted church, it stood proper with yellowed brick and rocket-sized white pillars which seemed to guard the front door. A dozen cement steps led up to the front door which was wide enough for a scout troop to climb up side-by-side. Walking up the steps I wondered why the entrance for the old church was so wide. Maybe for quick exits.

Mrs. Snodgrass, the librarian, was at the front desk checking out a stack of books for a mom and a couple of wild kids. Mrs. Snodgrass was as old as the library, and had kind of a mad face, made madder with black framed glasses. Not what you would call a small woman, she looked like she could stare down a grizzly bear, but she was actually more like a teddy bear. Maybe a teddy bear wearing a mad mask. She didn’t seem to notice the kids were doing somersaults and making dog noises. The mom and her pups were soon done and on their way.

“Hello. Oh, you’re the Homer boy, aren’t you? Is it Christopher?”

“Yes.”

Usually when I heard “Christopher” directed at me, it was from my mom and meant I was in big trouble. Sometimes my dad slipped up and called me Gopher, even though my mom strongly preferred Chris. I have Boots to thank for the nickname Gopher. It was around the fourth grade. I still couldn’t say my r’s very well, so I called myself “ChwisTOPHA. And then it was just easier for me and everyone else to say “Topho.”

Boots made the final change. One day we stuck a hose down a fresh gopher hole to see what would happen. I was looking right in the hole when suddenly a gopher bolted out, baptized by immersion, but not full of the glory of it. It came at me like it was shot out of a sling shot. I screamed and fell trying to get out of the way, then scrambled backwards like a beach crab. Boots buckled over and laughed his head off. The gopher scampered past us and disappeared into a ditch.

“Topho, scared of the gopha,” Boots squealed, and laughed until I turned the hose on him. That day he changed Topho to Gopha which evolved into “Gopher,” and he has called me that every day since. And so has everyone else.

Mrs. Snodgrass was fussing with some checkout cards and a stamp pad. “Your mother was in just last week. We were on the same PTA committee a couple years ago. Tell her hello for me.”

“Okay.” I said, immediately forgetting what I just said okay to. “I’m looking for a book on falcons.” I probably should have waited until she said, “How can I help you?”

“Hmmm. Falcons by themselves or falconry, too?”

Assuming falconry had to do with falcons, I said, “Yes.”

“Okay.” She smiled and led me upstairs.

“Let’s check the biology section and if we can’t find some there; we’ll check pets.”

The biology section had several huge books on birds from around the world with small sections for falcons, hawks and eagles. In the pet section we found books on parrots and parakeets.

“We have a book on pigeons. I hear they can be fun. It is checked out at the moment, but you want falcons, right?”

“That’s right.”

“The last place we can look is in hunting and fishing and that’s downstairs.”

“Okay.”

Walking down the stairs, she said, “Are you a falconer?”

“Um, no. Not yet. I mean, no, I don’t have a falcon; I just like them.”

“There is a falconer who lives just out of town. His name is Elbert Packard. Do you know him?”

“Nope.” I said.

“Nice man,” she continued, not noticing how fast I responded. “I think he donated a book on Falconry a couple years ago. Now where would I have put that?”

Oh yes, I continued in my mind. He’s a nice man and keeps a nice little doggy-- “Fluffy” I think his name is--who only kills teenagers if they are stealing things.

Buried in the middle of books on hunting deer, elk, ducks, archery, and tons about fishing was the one book on falconry.

“Here we go,” Mrs. Snodgrass announced proudly like she had just delivered a baby, “*The Art of Hawking* by E. B. Michell. I’m assuming falconry and hawking are the same thing.”

“Me too,” I said, wanting to grab the book and run before she asked me if I had ever stolen pigeons from anyone.

“This is an old book. Looks like it was written and first published in Britain in 1900. Oh, but it was reprinted in 1964, so that’s what--13 years ago? Oh and I was right, Elbert Packard did donate this.” Inside the cover was a stamp that said *generously donated by* and then a line where someone filled in *Elbert Packard*.

Seeing his name in print gave me a shock.

“Would you like to check it out Christopher?” Double shock. My real name and Elbert’s in print. It felt like Mrs. Snodgrass turned suddenly from a librarian to a private investigator. I quickly checked it out and found a table to read it right away.

I cracked open the old black book like it had all the secrets of the universe. The first thing I landed on was a picture of a trained goshawk named “Gaiety Girl.” She gripped an arching perch with razor hooks and locked her gaze on something beyond the picture border—probably dinner. I stared at that picture for five minutes trying to absorb every detail into my head in case someone snatched the book from me, and left me with just my memory. I then flipped to a drawing of a fierce little falcon, a merlin, which was about the same size as the little falcon at Elbert’s place. It looked like a robin with shoulder pads and an attitude. Next to the merlin

drawing was a description of a kestrel with “upper plumage reddish brown...streaked with dark brown splashes on the breast, and spots on the abdomen.... Adult males” it said, “have the head, lower part of the back, and upper surface of the tail, light slatey gray.” That’s the bird I saw at Elbert’s! A male kestrel. I remembered the gray on its head. The book said a kestrel was a good beginner bird. I closed my eyes and saw myself walking around with the kestrel on my glove. Soon it was flying around my mind and landing on my fist. I could feel the smile forming on my face as I thought about having my own kestrel.

“Looks like you are enjoying the book.”

I snapped alert and looked straight at Mrs. Snodgrass. My face flushed pink like I was in trouble.

“Oh, yeah, um it’s great, it’s a great book.”

“Good for you for reading over the summer.”

I read a few stories about hunting with peregrines and sparrow hawks. I had no idea you could train a falcon to hunt for you. I couldn’t move. I read about a sparrow hawk named *Lady Macbeth* catching partridges, water hens, and pheasants and a peregrine named *Kismet* catching herring-gulls, whatever they were. I just couldn’t imagine how cool it would be to go hunting with a falcon! I imagined myself with a peregrine named Kismet. The girls would flock around me. “What’s his name they would say?” they would say. “Kismet,” I would say proudly. It’s a peregrine falcon. I read the old book like it was a Hardy Boys adventure. All the way home I kept thinking what it would be like to have my own falcon. *Kismet* and I would catch herring-gulls and partridges. Yes, someday I would have a peregrine named Kismet, but first I needed a beginner hawk, something to help me get started--a kestrel.

And I knew just where to borrow one.

Five

The next day, I was the man with a plan. I found Boots out staring at the pigeons. He sat like a little shepherd boy waiting for one of them to get lost so he could fetch it.

“Look at them, Gopher! Look how cool they are!”

“Yeah, they’re cool, Boots, but not as cool as a falcon.”

“That may be true, but we don’t exactly have a falcon here now, do we?”

“Not yet,” I replied.

“Figure out a way to trap one?”

“Got one already trapped.”

Boots looked straight at me to see if I was kidding. “Talk to me, Gopher.”

“I got a plan. I’m going to borrow me a little falcon.”

“From Elbert’s place?”

“That’s right. I saw it the day we borrowed the pigeons.”

“Wow, Gopher, you’ve got more guts than I thought you did. I thought you were all afraid of getting shot and everything.”

“That’s before I read about Kismet.”

“Kismet? What religion is that?”

“It’s not a religion, idiot; it’s the name of a peregrine falcon.

“Sounds religious.”

“I guess it could be.”

“So what’s your plan Gopher, the Mighty Falcon Dude?”

“Well, we just do what we did with the pigeons. We just sneak in there, borrow us the little falcon, which is a kestrel, by the way, and then take off, like we did before. Only we put it in a soft box attached to my bike instead of the duffel bag.”

“That’s it?”

“Yup.”

“That’s your plan? Go in during the day, snatch a falcon and ride off?”

“That’s right,” I said.

“You’re an idiot.”

“Why?”

“Plans take time, Gopher. You can’t just use an old plan. There’s a big difference between a pigeon plan and a falcon plan.”

“What’s the difference?”

“We have to do our homework. First, what are you going to do when it attacks your face and starts to eat your eyes out? And second,” Boots always had two things to say, “After it eats your eyes out, what are you going to feed it the next day?”

“Well, I need to figure that out.”

“And how are you going to cut the lock off the pen? We were lucky the pigeon pen wasn’t locked, remember?”

“True.”

“And at least one of us remembers there’s a wolf on a weak leash there.”

“Don’t think it’s really a wolf, but we’ll have to figure out what to do with the dog.”

“That’s right, Gopher, there are things to figure out. You can’t rush into this sort of deal without a good plan, but you’re in luck. I happen to be an expert and I’m your friend so I won’t charge you my normal consulting fee. Plus, I think having pigeons and a falcon would be really cool.”

“You’re very generous, Boots.”

“Thank you. Although the fine print reads, ‘if you get your eyes pecked out, don’t take your dark glasses off and stare at me with your gaping sockets.’”

“Deal.”

It always worked out best when Boots took over a plan. I usually knew what I wanted, but didn’t have the same creative genius. I was ready to get the falcon right then, but Boots convinced me that we needed to get our pigeon loft built first. In just a day the pigeons had stirred up all the old dust, knocked off a bunch of bottles which shattered on the cement floor and the birds were crapping everywhere.

It took us a week to get the loft built. Our loft, like most of our forts, held no respect for geometry. We depended on what we could find at construction sites or leftovers from other projects around Boots’ house. Our loft looked like a pile of junk anxious to get to the dump. It did have one straight wall which came from the outside of the tack shed, but that was it. We figured the pigeons didn’t care what their new house looked like, so neither did we.

As I looked around the finished loft and thought about hauling everything from the construction site, it hit me.

“Boots, how is it you felt okay about *borrowing* pigeons, but when we needed wood from the Swensons’ new house you asked the builder guys for scraps instead of coming back at night and *borrowing* it?”

“First of all, you can’t borrow wood. It is hard to give it back when you are done with it. Second of all, those builder guys will get you every time. Whenever I think about taking wood without asking, I think of Eddy Swarny.”

“Who’s Eddy Swarny?”

“The kid who got caught stealing from construction guys. They nailed his pants, with him still in them, to the side of a house. They left him there until his parents had to come and get him. I heard he cried. You don’t want construction guys mad at you.”

“Maybe Elbert’s a construction guy. Would your mom come get you if you got nailed to one of his barns?”

“Gopher, relax. Elbert’s not a construction guy and he isn’t going to come after you with a nail gun. A shotgun maybe, but not a nail gun.”

At the same time we worked on the loft, Boots perfected the plan for borrowing the kestrel and I read all I could about falconry. I learned that people had been training falcons since forever. I also learned the kestrels in my book were the European cousins of the American kestrel. They mostly ate mice and grasshoppers. I could buy mice from the Family Pet Ark in town and grasshoppers were everywhere. I made a perch like the ones in the book and pulled the lace from my hiking boots to use as a leash. I wondered how trained Elbert’s kestrel was or if that was my job. Thinking about that, I looked in the index under “eyes” and there was no reference to falconers’ eyes getting pecked out, so that was good.

We figured we’d get less attention if we kept the kestrel in a small add-on cage next to the pigeon loft. I would keep it tethered to a perch like the ones in the book. I planned to keep the kestrel for two months--until school started--then return it to Elbert’s place. Two months would be perfect. I could train it to fly and hunt for me, give it back, and then by next summer I would be ready for a peregrine.

The next day after swimming in the canal, Boots had us on a surveillance mission looking down on Elbert's compound.

"Gopher, we need to draw exactly where those cages are, I didn't pay much attention because I wasn't planning on coming back."

He pulled out a little black spiral notebook that he kept his plans in. "Here, draw it the best you can."

"And let me guess--you want me to draw arrows to where Ugly Fang is chained?"

"Chained? There's no chain, just a skinny piece of baling wire."

The barns, sheds and cages were separated from the house by an old orchard with just a few apples trees hanging on, and a single taller tree which had three weathered boards nailed for stairs that led to a big fork. Probably for a tree fort long since abandoned.

A gravel lane joined the house with the buildings in back. From the diagrams we put together, it looked like there was a rectangle shed, the one with a lot of missing shingles, that would shield us from Ugly Fang.

So far we knew that Elbert kept a regular schedule. He was out of the house not too long after the sun settled in on his place. He walked down the lane to the barnyard with a bag of some sort strapped over his shoulder. It probably had a sawed-off shotgun in it. He then greeted Fang, throwing him a side of beef or buffalo head to chew on. Then he disappeared into the missing shingle shed.

Boots was convinced the cages had locks on them, especially if Elbert had figured out he was missing some pigeons. Soon after that the falcons and hawks started screaming, so I assumed he was feeding the falcons. It wasn't enough for Boots to assume. He was a lousy assumer. He had to know.

"Gopher," he said, "I think Elbert has those cages locked and we need to figure out where he keeps the keys to the cages."

"Like his pocket?"

"No, but I think to know for sure, we need to be in that shed when Elbert comes out in the morning to feed the birds. He probably has a key out by the shed somewhere."

"Why would he keep the key out there?" I asked.

“Let me guess, your parents keep an extra key to your house under a rock by the front door right?”

“Um, yeah, that’s right.”

“And where does your mom keep the car keys? I’m going to say, in the kitchen, somewhere near the fridge or in a cupboard near there. Am I right?”

“Yeah. Are you sure you didn’t do time before I met you?”

“We met in the second grade. Gopher, focus! People are predictable. If your mom keeps her keys in the same place every time, so does Elbert.”

“So you want us to be out there in the barnyard when Elbert is out there? He’ll shoot us.”

“Elbert is not going to shoot us, and unless you have a better plan, we need more information.”

“Your plan is fine. I can’t believe I’m risking my life for a falcon, but wait till you see that little guy up close, Boots. It’s going to be cool. He’ll fly around the neighborhood; we can go hunt mice or sparrows...”

“And grasshoppers.”

“Sure even grasshoppers. By the way, how did you know we keep a key under the rock by our front door?”

“Because all the rocks in front of your house are flat and match the brick on your house except the one that looks like a bowling ball.”

“You’re right; it does look like a bowling ball.”

“So one question, Gopher. When are you going to tell your parents about the falcon?”

“You mean, your falcon?”

“My falcon? You’re the one who’s converted to Kismet.”

“As far as my parents will know, it’s your falcon, Boots. After I’ve shown them how awesome it is and that it’s really not hard to take care of, you’ll just give it to me.”

“Maybe, I’ll sell it to you.”

Six

Boots' plan to discover Elbert's keys was a better one than mine, but he agreed on the camouflage and headlights leftovers from my plan. The leafy camouflage, designed for dense forests, stuck out more than hid us, but made us feel official. We were thirty minutes ahead of daylight with a mission to execute. Painting our faces black also added a measure of confidence.

When we reached the clearing which led across the dirt lane to the barns and sheds, we could see the outline of the house but didn't see any lights on. A white pole fence with paint peeling from years of weather came all the way down the lane. Boots climbed over it and I fell to my belly and crawled underneath it like GI Joe.

"You're an idiot," he said, looking down.

"Can't be too careful. What if he takes a shot from the window? Who's going to get hit first?"

Boots didn't respond, but was smirking. Soon, we made our way across the lane and to the first shed. So far no one had been shot. Knowing Fang was on the other side of the sheds helped us be much more careful than we were our first mission.

The first shed was chock full of bags of grain; no room to hide. Right behind the cages, another shed looked like a good hideout. Boots was scouting ahead carefully. He took one step in the shed, flipped on his headlamp, then bounced back, knocking us both down while he did the land version of the back stroke.

I grabbed his leg as he was about to run. "What's the deal? You find a dead guy hanging in there?" I was ready to spring too.

"That's not funny," he shouted in a whisper, "and you know it."

I poked my head in the door and flicked on my headlight. No dead guys. Just a room filled with old saddles, and other horse gear, but covered with thick dust and knitted with a million cobwebs. It looked like a spook alley. I busted up laughing, but then tried to swallow it.

Boots was tough. He could beat up any kid in our class, but he was deathly afraid of spook alleys and spider webs, thanks to his older brother Travis. Years ago, Travis and his friends left Little Boots in a homemade spook alley piled with a huge bowl of swollen macaroni shells, gelatin balls and cracked cherry tomatoes. They also draped him with slinky fine yarn and yelled "spider!" Boots screamed for an hour.

“Come on Boots, I’ll go first.” The shed gave us a perfect view of the cages, so I wanted to stay there.

“Let see where else we can wait.”

Just then we heard a screen door slam up at the house and Fang started barking. Boots jumped in the shed after me. Fang’s bark was not the warning kind of bark; the one we heard last time which said, “*I want to eat you alive,*” it was the excited, *I’m happy to see you again, please feed me* sort of bark.

In the shed, I could make out saddles, a little horse buggy, bridles and big barrels of something, all covered with dust and lazy spider webs. I couldn’t see any macaroni or gelatin balls, but Boots still held his breath. As we looked around with the door almost shut, we had a perfect view of the missing shingle shed and the bird cages.

We expected Elbert right away but he didn’t come for a while. Soon the sun filled the barnyard and we saw the cages. The kestrel cage was the closest to us.

“That’s the kestrel? The little one?” Boots whispered.

“That’s *him*.”

“Wow, you’re right, he is pretty.”

“He’s going to train me to be a falconer.”

“Cool, but first we need to get that lock off.”

I had forgotten about that. Sure enough, there was a lock on the front of all the cages. The kestrel perched directly facing the warming sun which made his orange and blue feathers look like a painting.

We heard Elbert before we saw him.

“Hey, boy,” he said yelling to the dog as it stopped barking. “How’s old *Trigger* this morning?”

Trigger? I mouthed.

Boots made his hand into a gun and pointed it at me.

“Trigger, are you ready to take the pigeons for a ride? You are? Well let me feed the big birds and then we’ll take the pigeons out for a run. Good boy.”

Elbert didn’t sound like a killer, but that’s usually what they say about killers—pleasant, always keeping to themselves, nice to mean dogs.

As he walked in our view, it was the first time we had ever seen him up close, even though it was just through the crack in the door. He was older than our dads, grandpa-looking, tall and thin, but not weak. He was probably a basketball player when he was young. It had been a few days since he shaved and white stubble covered his face except for where it grew into a bushy gray mustache. He wore an old John Deere hat with sweat stains around the brim and it looked like it had been smashed a few times.

The hat covered his eyes so I was left to imagine what they looked like. And sitting there in the shed I imagined they were yellow and black and snappy like a campfire. I knew if he could see us, he could set us on fire just by looking at us. He had something holstered on his hip that at first I thought was a gun; the gun that would shoot us before we could even leave the tack shed. It would be the gun that would be brought out in court when he went to trial. I was relieved when I realized it was only a knife. Granted it was a very big knife, like the ones we had seen at the Army Navy Store, but at least it wasn't a gun.

As he walked toward us and the cages, he whistled--which usually means happy--but his whistle also sounded like the whistle you might hear from a guy who cuts heads off for a living.

He had a worn canvas fishing creel slung over his shoulder, which he dropped next to a gnarly old stump that had a well-used hatchet half-buried in its head. I thought he'd pull a fish out of the creel, but instead he plopped a dead quail on the stump and freed the hatchet. Still whistling, he raised the hatchet and brought it down with a fierce smack on the feathered plump. He thumped it a few more times until the well-dead bird was just a mash of feathers, meat and blood. I looked over at Boots who was staring intently at his shoes.

Elbert buried the hatchet back in the stump, pulled out his knife, and cut the remainder into smaller pieces. He wailed on a few more dead quail, then scooped up all the parts and put them in his satchel. His hands were bloody with bits of feathers stuck to them. Then grabbing the hatchet like it was a handle for the whole stump, Elbert tipped the stump back, reached down and pulled out a set of keys and put the stump back into original position.

"You're right!" I whispered. "He's got keys out here." Boots nodded still gritting his teeth. Elbert pulled a glove out of his pocket, put it on his left hand and walk over to the kestrel cage. He unlocked it, and shut the door behind him. The kestrel started bobbing his head toward Elbert. He whistled two short whistles and raised his hand up. The kestrel raced over and lit on his glove and started eating from his fist. It was the coolest thing I could imagine! A falcon

sitting on your fist eating from you, perfectly calm. I almost squealed in delight. “Wow!” Boots mouthed.

Elbert was talking to the kestrel as it ate from his fist. It would snatch a bite, then look up at Elbert and around the cage cautiously, then bob down for another bite. After about five minutes, he put the kestrel back on a perch, gave it some more food and walked out of the pen, locking the door as he left. We watched him feed the rest of the birds in the same way, only when he got to the big bird, he just threw in the food through a little door. After he fed the rest of the falcons and returned the keys under the stump, he went to a nearby faucet, washed the blood off his hands and went to the feed shed. Boy, were we glad we didn’t hide there. We waited, listening and watching. Was he feeding the pigeons?

Suddenly he walked toward our shed with an old bucket in one hand and some barnyard trash in the other. We pushed back toward the wall between the saddles. I thought Boots was going to pop as some of the spider webs wrapped all over us, though I was sure the spiders had long since died of old age. With a squeaky creak, the door of our shed swung open and Elbert heaved the bucket in, and dumped the trash on the floor in the corner. The bucket hit the floor like a grenade and seemed to explode. It was filled with rusted out nails or bolts which danced all over the floor. While Boots was sucking air to scream, I heard the door close shut, and then a hard clank. Complete darkness!

I was so scared I forgot we were wearing headlights. Boots didn’t think to turn his on either. We heard Elbert walking around outside but didn’t want to try the door just yet. Finally, when at least a year had passed and Boots was about to have a heart attack, I tried the door. Locked! I felt like I had just been locked in the spook alley too.

“Boots, you okay?” I whispered. I really needed the plan guy to be at his best thinking.

“Peachy.” I was sure he was about to start screaming his head off. But as our eyes adjusted, we both saw a horizontal crack of light coming from one side of the shed. We pushed just above it and a small window on hinges swung open filling our space with light. Boots dove out headfirst. I heard his footsteps as he ran out ahead of me before I was even halfway out of the window.

I held back, knowing if Elbert saw Boots running, he would chase him, and I would have to go another way. I kept low, stepped carefully, and tried to tame my breathing down so I could listen. With relief, I heard nothing, then Elbert’s old Land Cruiser start and the engine whine as it

pulled out of the driveway. I peeked up the lane and saw Elbert driving away with a basket of pigeons on the roof. He wasn't chasing Boots and he wasn't coming back for me. At least not yet. I tried to calculate how long he might be gone.

I looked around for Boots, but didn't hear or see him. I looked over at the kestrel cage. He was eating the rest of the food Elbert left him. Instinct told me to run after Boots and regroup, but my feet didn't move. They were frozen from leftover fear and excitement. Boots was spooked from the shed, but out in the light he would have his wits about him. I expected him to come running back any minute. I looked down the path Boots had gone and then back at that beautiful bird. I stared at the stump. Boots would be putting the plan together. And suddenly so was I.

"New plan, Boots," I said to myself, then ran over to the bloody stump. I looked around one more time, tilted the stump back and reached for the keys to the falcon cages.

Seven

I could barely get the key in the lock because my hands were shaking so hard. My heart raced from the bucket explosion, Boots bolting from the window, and from what I was about to do. The kestrel, untethered, ate cautiously on a perch in the back of the cage. I smelled, before I saw, the pile of white falcon crap underneath the perch. It reminded me of the hamburger foil dinner I stored in one of my socks for a campout, then forgot that I didn't eat it. After several weeks it was moving on its own.

The smell was the last of my worries. I had a falcon to catch. As I took a step forward, it froze with its jet-black eyes more alive than anything I had ever seen. It measured me, detecting whether I was a friend or an enemy. I wondered if it could hear how loud my heart was pounding and if my next move would snap it into attack mode, or just scare it silly.

“Hey little fella, I'm not going to hurt you.” *And don't hurt me either!*

The original plan called for Boots and me to come at night when the falcon was asleep. We would shine a light in its eyes and then just reach out and grab him. We caught sparrows like that in the winter. Now inside the cage, the falcon staring me down, I wondered if I should back out and stick to Boots' plan. But with Elbert and Fang gone for sure, I had to take matters in my own hands. That cracked me up. I'd call the kestrel “Matters” because I took him in my own hands. My smile stayed just a second, because I wasn't sure Elbert and Fang would be gone. And where was Boots? In the cornfield waiting, or had he aborted the mission entirely? I felt like a lit firecracker where the fuse fizzles out, but sometimes still explodes.

Matters kept his laser-lock stare on me. I certainly didn't look or smell like Elbert, so I couldn't tell fear from pre-attack analysis. I let him make the first move. He didn't attack, just eased his head down and plucked a few more feathers. He shifted his feet and reached down again, this time ripping off a piece of meat about the size of an M&M. In one smooth motion, he tossed the meat back in his throat and swallowed. He was quick, looking right back at me the instant he swallowed. He still looked nervous and fidgety, but seemed to be more hungry than scared or mad because he would look at me, sneak a bite, then look right back at me. He seemed wound tight, like a mouse trap ready to spring.

I took a chance with a half step forward. *Matters* gripped down on his food and crouched, ready for launch. I took another step. If he launched, what would I do? Grab him like we did the pigeons? He wasn't an eagle, but he still had some nice hooks and the way his razor beak ripped

through that meat made me real cautious. I took one more step. Yikes! He flew straight at me and buzzed my head. Perched just above the door, he stood ready for another take off. I guessed if he wanted to grab my eyes, he wouldn't have missed. I eased to the middle of the pen, and I took a half step toward him. His eyes darted around me, over me and through me. This was no parrot that would just step up on my hand. I wished I had a net. Ah, no net, but I did have a tee shirt, which I yanked off.

That scared Matters and he zipped straight at me. I ducked and hit the dirt. Only the dirt wasn't normal brown earth, it was covered with feathers and white creamy sticky falcon crap that felt like a mix of sour cream, cream cheese and corn syrup. It smelled like sour cream too, the kind that spent a summer vacation on a kitchen counter in a cottage filled with flies. "We're not pet people," I heard my mother's voice in my head. If she saw what I was kneeling in, I would never be a pet person. But I was a pet person. I knew that for sure because I wanted that bird and didn't care about the smell and the crap and getting my face attacked. I wasn't willing to donate my eyes though.

As I tried to think of how I could net him with my shirt, I remembered Elbert feeding him on the fist. Would Matters eat from my fist or just Elbert's? I took a step toward him and he buzzed straight to the front again. Maybe after two or three days of this he would just get tired or bored and would hop on my shoulder and we could walk out together.

Not likely.

Maybe he'd come to some food. I reached up to his perch and picked up parts of the bloody mess he was eating. Remembering how Elbert had held the food in his left hand, I did the same and held my shirt loosely in my right hand. Taking half steps like I was in a mine field, I made my way to the front of the cage, holding out my fist. He didn't buzz past me immediately, so that was good. As I got closer, he switched his glare back and forth from my eyes to the meat on my fist. I prayed that he didn't think of both of them as food.

Three steps away I stopped, held my breath, and closed my eyes. I stretched my arm out as far as I could. Just before all the blood drained out and rigor mortis set in, I looked up and saw the kestrel bobbing cautiously toward my hand. The little piece of meat started out feeling like a chicken nugget and now felt like a Thanksgiving turkey—stuffed. I knew if I reeled my arm back in, he would bolt. I also knew if I didn't reel it in soon it was likely to fall off. Just as my arm started to shake, he jumped down on my fist and gripped my hand. I wanted to scream. I forgot

that Elbert was wearing a glove. It was all I could do to keep from shaking the little falcon off like a bee. I grimaced and tried to think happy thoughts. When my arm tensed and twisted a little, he tightened his grip, not because he was going to eat me, but it seemed to keep him steady on my hand. I closed my eyes and clenched my teeth. I wished I had a piece of leather to chew on.

The little falcon finally eased his grip on my hand and started plucking the food. I started breathing again as the pain relaxed. I couldn't believe it. I was feeding a falcon on my fist! I was a falconer! I looked to see if Matters had jesses on. Jesses were the leather straps that attached to leather anklets on the falcon's legs to tether it to a perch. Matters had the leather anklets with eyelets for the jesses, but no jesses—nothing to grab.

My best option looked like reaching underneath his tail feathers and grabbing his legs. I didn't want to break any feathers; the book said keeping a falcon's feathers unbroken and clean meant you were a good falconer. I wanted to be a good falconer right from the very first. I also wanted to avoid a tetanus shot. As I saw the blood spots where he first dug his talons into my hand, I also wanted to keep those hooks out of my flesh. I kept hoping Boots would show up to help me.

Carefully dropping my tee shirt on the ground, I eased my right hand up and under his tail feathers. He was still eating, but nervously. How was I going to grab his legs without him grabbing me? I thought maybe I should let him go and come back with a better plan. Instinct took over. When he reached down for his next bite, I quickly grabbed his legs with my right hand. As I did, he clamped down on my thumb with one of his needle feet. Every swear word I'd ever heard rushed to my mind, but I just sort of barked like a dog without a voice box, trying not to let the scream out fully. Adrenaline surged and I yanked him off my left hand and he left streaks of blood. He let out a piercing scream and flapped wildly. Panic mixed with adrenaline for both of us.

This was taking too long. Still no sign of Boots. I wasn't used to solo missions. With my left hand free, I reached around trying to fold in the wings of the now frantic falcon. He reached back and snagged my index finger leaving red before I could get his wings tucked in. Instinctively, I pulled him against my bare stomach to help control him. For a falcon, flesh is flesh and he then took a nice bite of my absent abs and screamed again. I screamed too, right out loud as his talons grabbed the middle finger of my right hand. All this screaming would alert

Elbert and Fang if they were close at all. With the falcon digging into my finger, I cradled him against me again, tightened my stomach hoping it would help and grabbed my shirt from the ground. There was still time to toss him and run for the door. Borrowing. I was just borrowing. It felt like I was killing him. Somehow I wrapped the shirt around him, folded in his wings carefully and traded his grip on my finger for a wad of tee shirt. I leaned against a wall while both of us had a breathing contest.

What had I done? I had the bird, or it had me, and I had one more chance to let it go or take off with it. Maybe the rest of this falconry stuff was going to be this hard. Maybe I should figure out another way to get one. I looked like a horror flick character with blood oozing from wounds on both hands and my stomach. How to explain that to my non-pet-people mother? I also didn't want to go to all that hassle for nothing either. I had my falcon; I had taken Matters into my own bloody hands. I had also completed a solo mission. So far. I had the falcon bundled up like corn on the cob, with his sharp beak and talons both covered. I looked around to see if Elbert was there with guns pointed at me, but the coast was clear.

Eight

I heard him before I saw him. Boots came running around the cage out of breath.

“What the . . .?”

“I got my falcon!”

“Looks like he got you! Let’s get out of here.”

We took off running, but then Boots slammed on the brakes and ran back to the cage. He picked up the lock and put it on the fence. He then left the door a little ajar, and put the keys back under the stump.

“Maybe Elbert will think he forgot to lock the door and some pesky kid let his falcon out.”

“How do you think of these things?”

We made it halfway into the cornfield before we stopped to catch our breath.

“I’m going to name him *Matters*. He was eating off my fist!”

“Looks like he ate your fist and then your stomach for dessert.”

“It was so cool and so scary!” I coughed.

“Gopher, don’t talk; let your breath catch up to you.”

I tried to calm down but I was too excited and scared.

“Okay, so exactly how were you planning on getting your falcon friend home?”

“Don’t know. And where were you?”

“Waiting for you! I thought you were telling Tweety there that you were going to come and get him when we had the plan put together. Can you hold him in one hand?”

“I guess so.”

And then Boots looked me right in the eyes, like he was searching for something.

“What are you looking at?” I said.

“Just checking to see if you still had your eyes.”

“Yup. I think he was more afraid of me than I was of him.”

“Well, let’s get out of here before Elbert comes back and sends Ugly Fang after us or sets the cornfield on fire to smoke us out.”

“Yeah, thanks for just leaving me there to get killed, by the way.”

“Sorry about that--sort of panicked.”

“Yeah, me too; only I waited to see if you were going to get shot first. And if you did, I hoped Elbert would think it was a solo job.”

“What a friend you are.”

We rode home as fast as we could, but we were careful on the corners. The last thing we needed right now was another bike crash and some adult like Mrs. Wheeler on the scene to ask a lot of questions. I had the falcon wrapped pretty tight, so riding one-handed wasn't too bad. We went straight to Boots' house. I didn't want my mom seeing me with my bloody scratches even though most of the blood had dried up by then. I looked like I'd been in a knife fight with someone wielding very small knives.

“So, Gopher, now what?”

“Good question. I can't tie him up until I get some jesses made and a swivel and leash.”

“Right, whatever jesses are.”

“It's a skinny leather strap that attaches to the anklets he already has on. It's how we keep him tied up.”

“Anklets? This is sure a lot more complicated than pigeons.”

“True, but the cool factor is times ten.”

“Since when did you know anything about math?”

“Since the first time I saw this little falcon.”

“So what are we supposed to do with him until you get your jerseys made?”

“Jesses.”

“Whatever.”

“I guess we will have to put him in a box.”

We found an old moving box to put him in and poked holes in it so he could breathe. When we emptied my shirt in the box the kestrel screamed and bounced around and then just froze. We snapped the lid closed as quickly as we could and covered the box with a dark sheet. That seemed to calm him down.

Applying first-aid was normal for us; we got me bandaged up with just a few Band-Aids and some first-aid cream. Then we decided I would go buy my falconry supplies while Boots stayed home and made sure Matters didn't get out or something else got in.

Tandy Leather store held one of my two favorite fragrances in Maple Grove. Geraldine's Bakery being the other. The smell of leather filled my whole head as I walked in. I stood by a table full of leather scraps just smelling. Before I got too drunk on leather, I bought a small square of kangaroo leather and a hole punch. The kangaroo seemed well suited for making jesses.

My next stop was Buck's Outdoor World to see if I could find the right kind of swivel for attaching the jesses to the leash. The book seemed to make a big deal about keeping the jesses and leash from getting tangled.

Boots and I spent hours in Buck's because they had stuffed deer heads, stuffed pheasants, ducks, partridge and quail stuck to the walls. We always looked at the air rifles and the .22s and wished we had the latest models. It wasn't a big store, but was chock full of treasures that would take you a couple of hours to fully explore, and it was old. It smelled old--like a grandma's house, or maybe a grandpa's garage. The wooden floor was smoothed down from years of wear, and had the same color a baseball glove has when it has been oiled and broken-in and worn for a hundred years.

The owner was named Buck, but everyone called him "Grumpy," not because he was, but because his face was born grumpy and never grew any different. Even when he smiled, which he did a lot, he looked a bit grumpy. I looked all through the fishing and hunting stuff and the only swivel I could find was the little gold-looking fishing swivels, five to a pack, used to switch out different lures. Too small.

Then Grumpy came waddling over. I heard the distinctive rhythm of his boots hitting the wooden floor. My dad said one of his legs was shorter than the other from the war or something.

"Hey there, young man, watchyer lookin for?"

"Uh," I was thinking of another word for falcon swivels, "swivels, but bigger than the ones over by the spinners."

"Oh you mean the big ones? You goin' deep sea fishin'?"

"No. I, ah..." I either needed to learn to be a better liar or get out of the lying business. "No, I'm not going fishing, at least not right now, I mean not right away, I just heard they were cool."

"Well, don't know how cool they are, but they do have ball-bearings in 'em. Come over here; got some behind the counter."

Behind the counter he had his deep sea stuff, which always made me wonder--since we were miles from any deep sea. I think he just liked having a little of everything. He opened a drawer and pulled out some heavy duty swivels. They looked like the drawings in the book with a small ring on both sides of a barrel-shaped thing that allowed the rings to spin independently. They looked like they might work for an eagle or big falcon--way too big for a kestrel.

“I call these my falconer swivels.”

I froze.

“Falconer swivels?” I muttered, not looking up.

“Yeah, a guy comes in here every once in a while and buys some of these for his falcon. You a falconer?”

“What?”

“You a falconer, too?”

I wanted to say, “Yes sir! Yes, I am a falconer, I train falcons. In fact, I have one tethered to my bike just outside”; but none of that was true, at least not yet.

“Um no, I don’t have a falcon.” *With me*, I said in my head. “Do you have any smaller ones with the ball bearings?”

“I’ve got these little guys,” Grumpy said, and pulled out some kestrel-size ball-bearing swivels.

“Those will work just fine. I’ll take those.”

“Well, whatever you’re going to do with them, they’re \$2.95.”

I bought them and raced over to Zamzows Feed Store to buy a glove. That was a lot easier. Not so many questions. A glove is a glove; it doesn’t demand so many questions. Zamzows had a ton of leather work gloves. I had pictured myself with a big gauntlet like the book showed, but remembered Elbert just had a thin leather glove that seemed to work fine for him. After handling the falcon with no glove, I wanted to make sure I got a good one. When I got to the check-out counter, the lady checker said, “Looks like you are a little late in buying your glove, eh?”

I looked down at my scratched and bandaged hand. I thought, “Yeah, I’ll tell you what, the next time I steal a falcon, I’m going to make sure I buy a glove from you first.”

“You’re right,” I said keeping things friendly.

“Those thistles are killers, aren’t they?”

“What?”

“Thistles. You’re digging thistles right? They’ll stick you quicker than a porcupine.”

“Yeah, they sure will.” I just wanted to get to the door without any more questions.

I had my glove, leather, swivels, now all I needed was a leash and some food.

My next stop was the pet store. Arnold’s Ark looked like a kid’s bedroom, a pet person’s bedroom, where his mom let him keep snakes and lizards and then it just got added on and added on. Arnold’s had pets and pet supplies for just about everything but fish. He would remind people that they didn’t gather fish on the ark, just animals.

I wasn’t quite sure how to ask if they sold falcon food. Kestrels ate smaller birds and mice, but the only birds I saw for sale were the exotic green and red ones, which had to be expensive. I doubted Elbert fed his kestrel African pretty birds.

They did have plenty of mice, a happy bunch who looked like they were on permanent recess in a glass aquarium-looking thing with a screen top. I thought I had better go for the mice.

The girl working there that day was a pretty redhead with hair more orange and blonde-like than red, and blue eyes the color of Erwin Cunningham’s favorite marble in grade school. I was immediately embarrassed for some reason I couldn’t remember. She also had some white parrot-looking bird on her shoulder which made her look like a pirate, a very nice-looking pirate.

“Can I help you?” she said, looking at the bird instead of me.

I wasn’t sure if she was talking to the bird, so I stood there for just a second, wondering if the bird was going to answer.

“Do you need some help?” she said again, this time turning to look at me just at the last second.

I replied to the bird, “Um, yeah, do you sell mice?”

“Dead or alive?”

“Uh, which is cheaper?”

“Dead.”

“Okay, can I get a dozen dead mice?”

“Coming up. You feeding Elbert Packard’s birds, or do you have a snake?”

Hearing his name made me snap my head up. She looked over at me with a little more attention.

“Who?” I said with my head back down pretending to be intensely interested in the red sand lizards love.

“Elbert Packard, the bird guy out on Cloverdale.”

“Don’t know him.” I said too quickly, “I’m getting this for my cousin who has a snake.”

“Cool, what kind?”

“Ah, it’s a...” The only snake I could think of was a water snake and I think they just ate water skippers. “It’s ah, I don’t know, it is a big snake, maybe a boa.” I wasn’t very good at talking to girls as it was, and this one had a bird on her shoulder that could probably sense I was lying.

“Looks like you were trying to feed the snake your finger. Make sure you don’t mess with a snake when it is eating, right?”

“Right, this is from thistles.” I said looking down at my bandaged hand.

“They can be nasty. Well I hope your snake, or your cousin’s snake, enjoys his dinner. Make sure the mouse is all the way thawed out before you feed it or it might throw it up, and that’s really gross, but I’m sure your cousin knows all about that.”

I was convinced she knew I was lying. And she knew Elbert and his falcons. Seems like everyone did. Maybe she was Elbert’s daughter or niece or something. Or maybe my picture was up on all the pet stores and post offices by now. One thing was sure--I was leaving traces of my crime all over town and my crime wasn’t even a day old yet.

Riding back to Boots’ place, I kept telling myself it wasn’t really a crime. It was borrowing, like the pigeons. I would keep it for a couple of months, studying it like a book. That made me feel better, like I had checked a book out of the library. I was going to study it for a while, and then give it back when I was done. I just had to make sure the “book” was in good shape when I returned it. I’m sure the fines for an overdue falcon were much worse than for an overdue book.

Nine

Getting the jesses and swivel on Matters was almost as hard as teaching a cat to sit. When I asked Boots to grab the kestrel, he just pointed to my Band-Aids and said, “No way, Pincushion; you need to bond with your bird.”

“Chicken.”

“I just don’t want a tetanus shot. I hear you get that one in the butt with a needle as long as a hammer.”

“Boots, you don’t get a tetanus shot in the butt to start with, and the only way you need a tetanus shot is if you step on a rusty nail.”

Once we got the jesses, swivel, leash--a used shoe lace--all attached, I pulled Matters up on my fist and held him like I was a prince and he was a peregrine—Kismet even.

“How do I look?”

“Ugly as ever, but the falcon is beautiful. So what are you going to do with it now?”

Boots asked a fair question.

“You know, train it and stuff.”

“Train it to do what? Can you make it talk?”

I thought about the girl at Arnold’s Ark with Parrot on her shoulder.

“Falcons don’t talk--they’re hunters.”

“So you are going to teach it to hunt?”

“Sure. Maybe it already knows how. And how about you? What are you going to train the pigeons to do?”

“They are just going to make babies, and they don’t need training in that. Later we’ll train them to race.”

Ever since I saw that kestrel at Elbert’s and had my brain tattooed for falconry, I turned my pigeon brain over to Boots. It would still be neat to raise them, but not as fun as flying a falcon. The pigeons would be cool after they had babies and they started to fly, but that was going to take a while. And since the pen we made for Matters was right next to the pigeons, I would see them every day anyway.

And unfortunately, so would The Scab, Boots’ 9-year old brother.

“Boots, what are we going to do about The Scab? What did you tell him about how you got the pigeons?”

“I told him we joined the pigeon club and they gave them to us.”

“Did he buy it?”

“Of course.”

Matters stood gripped hard on my glove, incredibly alert and ready to jump at the first chance. His eyes danced from Boots to me and back.

“What should we tell him about Matters?” I said. “Did we also join a falconry club?”

“I think we just tell him the truth; that we borrowed him from Elbert Packard for a summer biology experiment.”

“Perfect.”

I got to try that story out later that day when I was tying Matters to the carpet covered sprinkler pipe that acted as his perch.

“Hey Goph, what kind of bird is that?”

The Scab was really a talking freckle. His voice was whiny and scratchy at the same time. I wondered if he had freckles down his throat which made his voice like that. He had big front teeth for a little kid and it seemed like his mouth never shut well enough to keep things moist, so his upper lip was always cracking.

The Scab was also one of the few people who called me “Goph.” Maybe he felt he had a right to because his brother was the first one to call me “Gopher.”

Ignoring him didn’t work. He repeated, “Hey Goph, what kind of bird you got there?” I looked back at him and the sandwich bits that didn’t get washed off his teeth.

“A kestrel.” With The Scab it was always tricky to know how much information to let out. Boots knew that better than me and filled in nicely.

“So, Scabby, we need you to keep a secret. Are you up for that?”

Boots was brilliant. The Scab, while not entirely trustworthy, could be held in check if he felt like he was part of the deal.

“Sure thing.” He said.

“Okay, well the secret is Gopher and I want to win first place in the science fair competition this year. We’re not about to do another volcano. We want to do something real. But we don’t want anyone to know about it or everyone will want to do the same thing.”

“Okay, that’s cool. Where’d you get it?”

“We can’t say, because again then someone else will want to get one from there.”

The Scab thought about this for a minute, played with the bill of his Yankee cap, then said, “Science fair huh? Wow, what do you get if you win the science fair?”

Good question. I never knew any of the kids who won the science fair, and couldn’t even guess what the winner got. A microscope? A chemistry set with your name engraved on the box?

“Scholarship money,” Boots said.

“Oh.” The Scab said, and then after a few more fiddles of his cap, he left.

“He could be a problem,” Boots said.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

But he wasn’t the only problem. It turned out that dead mice stink bad after they unthaw and are left unthawed for a couple of days. Our fridge wasn’t the best place to keep them either. Lucky for me, my mom smelled but did not see the mice I hid in a butter box. I was also lucky to get the butter box out of the fridge while she had gone to the utility room to get some cleaner. It was a good thing Boots’ family had an extra fridge in their garage. People don’t seem to care as much about a garage fridge as they do a kitchen fridge.

A much bigger problem was figuring out what and when to tell my parents about the kestrel. Even if Elbert had given me the kestrel, my parents would have refused it. I tested the water with a talk about getting a parrot.

The day after I met the pirate girl at the pet store, I casually mentioned over dinner that it would be cool to have a parrot as a pet.

“Are you kidding?” my Mom said. “Have you seen how messy they can be? They scatter their food all over the floor. And they can stink. Which reminds me, did someone leave some broccoli salad in the fridge on Monday? Stunk up the whole thing. Anyway, Myrna Waldron has a cockatiel in her house and the thing is practically running the place. It screams if anyone but Myrna gets close to the cage, sometimes has a fit and starts plucking its feathers all over the place and if they don’t change the newspaper every day it smells like a pet shop.”

“That’s my favorite smell.” I interjected.

“Well you need to get your nose fixed.”

“What would you do when you go on scout trips? The Waldrons never leave town because they don’t trust people with that stupid bird. Oh, and when it’s not screaming it’s always making the weirdest noises. It’s worse than a dog!”

My Mom just said, “Were not really pet people.” I think he felt like the law was pretty clear on the pet issue.

For that reason, we felt it best to call it Boots’ falcon if they ever got wind of it.

And that didn’t take long.

A few days after the Myrna killer cockatiel talk, my mom called over to Boots’ place to have me come home for dinner. The Scab answered the phone and said I was out back feeding *my* falcon.

I heard the rest of the phone call over dinner.

“What’s this about you feeding a falcon over at Jensen’s?”

“Who told you that?” My knees started shaking back and forth. Fortunately, no one could see them.

“Eric did when I called over there today.”

The Scab. Not to be trusted; just like we thought.

“Oh,” I said trying to be nonchalant, “Yeah, Boots has one for a little while. We are thinking of doing a science project on it.”

“Since when are you are and Boots interested in science projects?”

“We’re just sick of dry ice volcanoes, so when school starts up again, we are going to win first place.”

“Noble of you.”

“But don’t tell anyone, we want to surprise people with it.”

“Right. That will be a big surprise. Maybe you could take Myrna Waldron’s cockatiel too.”

“Good idea Mom. Hey, is that a tuna casserole we’re having tonight? It smells delicious!”

“Better than the pet store?”

“Much better.”

Ten

According to the falcon book, the first step in training a falcon was to get it to eat on a gloved fist. Matters did that from the first day. From there I had to get it to fly to my glove for little pieces of meat. This was a little tricky, but soon it flew across the pen for food.

“Let’s see your pigeons do that, Boots,” I said after Matters had flown across the pen to my fist for a piece of meat.

“If I wanted to teach a pigeon to fly to me for food, I could do it in a snap. They do it all the time in big city parks, you know. That’s one of their big tricks. That and pooping on businessmen. Let’s see your falcon poop on a businessman.”

The next step, the book said, was to fly outside on a long leash called a creance. I whistled and Matters flew across the yard for food three times in a row. Having the leash attached was comforting. Then came the day to fly it free. I couldn’t eat breakfast, partly for the excitement and partly for the “what if?”

We went out in Boots’ pasture where we hoped for fewer distractions.

As I unleashed Matters, Boots said. “And what will you do if he decides not to come back?”

“Oh, he’ll come back. He’s flown to me on the creance for a week now.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“He will.”

And he did the first time. I put him on a fence post and whistled. He bobbed his head up and down for a second and flew the twenty-five yards to my fist for a piece of meat.

“Gopher, that’s awesome!”

“Yeah it is isn’t it?” As Matters finished his snack and looked around for more, I just couldn’t believe I had a wild bird on my fist, who could fly away if he wanted to, but chose to stay with me.

“Do it again, Gopher!”

I carried Matters back to the same fence post and set him down like I did the first time. Walking back, I was trying to get another piece of meat ready when I heard two screams: one from Boots and one from Matters. I jerked my head back just as a bigger hawk swooshed down on the kestrel seeming to knock him off the fence post. Then, suddenly Matters jumped up as the hawk came in again and they took off in a death chase off towards some trees at the end of the

pasture. We watched as they spun and pitched like a swallow and dragon fly and disappeared in the thick grove of trees.

“Did Matters get hit?”

“I don’t know,” I stammered.

“Man, that was incredible! That hawk came out of nowhere! Did you see him? He came in like a heat-seeking missile.”

“I just saw him as he buzzed Matters off the fence.” I was shaking now. Whatever confidence I had as a falconer had just been sucked out of me.

“I hope he didn’t get caught out there. If he did, he’s hawk food for sure.”

“No kidding.”

We took off running and all I could imagine was a pile of feathers and the big hawk plucking on Matters, like Matters plucked at a mouse. I felt sick to my stomach as I thought about facing Elbert or anyone else who found out about my killing his falcon.

As soon as we got to the trees, the big hawk flew out and I looked to see if he had Matters in his talons. He didn’t, but he could have been chewing on Matters before we got there. We both looked around and couldn’t see Matters or a pile of feathers either.

“Do your whistle thing, Gopher. Maybe he’s hiding.”

I was out of breath so whistling had to wait. With all the tall cottonwood trees hanging over us, Matters, dead or alive, would be hard to find. Finally, I put some meat on my glove and got a weak whistle out.

“Do it again. Louder this time.”

Nothing.

We walked from tree to tree looking up through the thick leaves. They were loaded with small agitated birds, probably still scared from the two bird killers that came crashing in.

Listening closer, we heard a couple of noisy magpies. They were hopping around the fork of a tree and were sounding the alarm. Maybe they were defending a nest up there.

I whistled loud and shook the meat on my glove. We both saw the movement at the same time. There was Matters, wedged deep in the branches of one of the big trees.

“Is he hurt, Gopher?”

“Can’t tell.”

“Whistle again.”

This time Matters bobbed his head, but did not fly down.

“I think he’s still worried about that big hawk.” Boots said.

“You’re probably right. Or the magpies.”

“Will the magpies kill him?”

“No, but they might annoy him to death.”

It took another ten minutes of whistling, but finally Matters jumped off the branch that protected him and dropped down to my fist for a big piece of meat.

Once I had secured his jesses to my leash, I sat down on a rock and closed my eyes.

“Wow, that was a close one, Gopher! I thought for sure he was a gonner!”

“Me too.”

“I guess he’s been chased before. He seemed to know what to do.”

Almost losing Matters really spooked me. I kept him tied to his perch in his pen, or only flew him a short distance on the creance after that. I wondered if I was over my head trying to learn about falconry by myself.

As each day passed I also became more paranoid about getting caught. Every time we rode into town, I thought we would be arrested. I kept looking for our faces to be on a wanted poster. Boots never seemed to worry about things like that.

“Gopher,” he said one day, trying to put me at ease, “these are just birds; it’s not like we stole tires off someone’s car. Plus we are going to give them back, remember?”

“Unless we kill them; yeah, I remember.” I also remembered watching Perry Mason after school where no one got away with anything. Perry, the crack-shot lawyer, always won his case in thirty minutes and still had time for commercials. I could just see Boots and me in court. Boots would tell a nice lie, well rehearsed; the jury would be crying that this poor young man had to be around all the scary adults. I would get on the stand and Hamilton Burger, the prosecutor, would approach me and ask sternly, “Gopher, are you about to tell a lie too?”

“Yes,” I would scream. “Okay, I did it! I stole the falcon and the pigeons. Boots, I’m sorry. I just can’t take it any longer.” Perry would stare at me with those dead Halloween eyes, say “No further questions your honor,” and wait for a commercial break.

I shook that scene out of my head as we walked in Arnold's Ark for some more mice. Parrot Pirate girl was there again, but this time the parrot was climbing up a fake tree near the messy cash register.

"This your cousin?"

"What?"

"The cousin with the snake."

"Oh, ah." The look on Boots face was a big-time *no*. It was the weird thing he did with his right eyebrow, perfect for poker, and I knew it well.

"No, that's another cousin."

"Of course. Need more mice?"

"Yeah." I followed her back to the mice bins while Boots wandered around. When I got back to the front of the store, Boots walked over to the community bulletin board. It was usually filled with notes tacked to the wall of people selling pets, grooming services, or flyers on how to become a millionaire.

As Parrot Pirate girl was ringing up the mice and putting them in a cardboard transport box, Boots had a short coughing fit--except it was three long, intense coughs. We learned in scouts that three long blasts on a whistle meant *Danger, Alarm, or Look out*. We always used the same signal. I snapped my glance over at Boots who arched his eyebrows over at a poster. *Stolen Falcon*, it said. My wallet sunk to the counter with my hands stuck in the bill section and didn't move. I stared straight at the cash register. It was like someone just hit my off switch and I had lost power. The only thought that made it to the front of my mind was, "You're going to jail." Then there was someone talking. The parrot? No, the Parrot girl.

"You okay?" She said, looking at me straight in my face. "They are the same price as last time."

I powered back on.

"Oh right. I was, ah, just thinking if a rat would be better, but I think the mice are fine; yeah, fine mice, they are going to be fine. Rats are too big." I had to get out of there before she called the cops or the nut house.

We were going to stop at the Red Steer Drive-in for a *Long-horn Special* and a shake, but instead I rode with my head down as fast as I could straight to the park. Boots did his best to

keep up with me. I rode to the back picnic table, the one covered in seagull crap and sort of hidden behind a couple of ancient cottonwoods.

“Boots, we’re going to jail!”

“*We’re* not going to jail, *you’re* going to jail.”

“What?” I wanted to deck him.

“Gopher, get a hold of yourself. I’m kidding. No one is going to jail. At least I hope not.”

Boots tried to act calm, but it wasn’t working. I knew calm--and he wasn’t even on the same team as calm.

“What did the poster say?”

“It said, *Stolen Falcon.*”

“I saw that much. What else did it say?”

“I was a little freaked, too, okay? But it said a falcon was stolen from Elbert Packard, that stealing a falcon is breaking a federal law and...”

“Federal what? We’re going to jail. We’re going to jail. We’re going to jail. No, we’re not going to jail; we’re going to prison. We’re going to prison. It will be a federal prison. It will be in some other state; we’ll be locked up with baby killers and ...”

“Gopher, shut up! You’re making me crazy. We’re not going to federal prison, but we may go to jail. Man, why did you have to steal that dang falcon?”

“I borrowed it, remember. I’m going to give it back. The poster should say *Borrowed Falcon.* This was your idea in the first place.”

“Correction. My idea was to borrow some pigeons while they lay a few eggs and then we let them go. They fly back like they were on vacation, and happened to lay a few eggs while they were out. The plan wasn’t to steal a falcon, remember?”

“Yeah, but I couldn’t help myself. I had to. I had the Kismet experience, remember?”

“Um.”

“Kismet, the hunting falcon in the book.”

“Right. I can just see your lawyer in court. ‘Your honor, my client Gopher here suffers from Kismet, a rare disorder where one sees a picture of a hunting falcon and goes berserk.’”

“Hey, maybe we should just sneak it back in.”

“Oh right. That won’t work. Do you think Elbert is going to leave his keys laying around again? He’s probably hired another attack dog, too.”

“Good point. What else did the poster say?”

“It said if you have any information to call Elbert. And there’s a \$500 reward offered. Hey, there’s an idea. What if I turned you in, got the reward, and then we split it? That’s \$400 for me and \$100 for you. Maybe you’ll just go to juvie jail with kids who steal bikes and kill their parents.”

“Oh that’s nice, Boots. You’re flying your stolen pigeons, winning races against Elbert with his own birds, while I’m learning to smoke and shave in jail?”

“So that’s a *no*?”

“Yes, idiot, that’s a no.”

“Okay, well we need to put a new plan together. I’m getting all jumpy and that’s your job. I need to think.”

The plan was to find out if Elbert’s poster was up all over town. We went first to the post office.

“Can I help you?” shouldn’t have scared me, but when the lady behind the counter asked, I had no answer. We had nothing to mail.

“Yes,” Boots said without even a pause. “We would like to buy a stamp.”

While Boots dug for change, I surveyed the wanted posters looking for a kestrel or pictures of Boots and me. None.

Next we went to Zamzows feed store. In the back of the store by the loading dock, they had a chalkboard, the “goat board” we called it, where people advertised goats for sale, pasture for rent, horse shoeing, or stolen falcons! There it was--the same poster we saw at the pet shop! We rode straight home. We were on the run now and we needed to lay low for a while.

Eleven

Our plan exposed a wrinkle a week later when we went on a two-day campout for Scouts. Our only choice was to put The Scab in charge of feeding all the birds. I worried the whole time we were burning hotdogs and tennis shoes at Pleasant Lake. The minute we got back, I rode over to check on Matters. Boots met me in the driveway with the bad news.

“Something killed six of the pigeons.”

“No way.”

“Yes way. I went out there as soon as I got home and there were feathers and blood and pigeon parts everywhere.”

“What about Matters?” I held my breath.

“He’s okay. Luckily we made his pen a little stronger.”

I went out to see the crime scene. Splattered blood, dried and drying, smeared the plywood floor and walls. Piles of pigeons feathers lay scattered mixed with pools of drying blood next to each pile. There were pieces of pigeon flung about, as though whatever beast had eaten there just got bored with it all.

The four pigeons still alive were so jittery they couldn’t hold still. No doubt they had been traumatized by the killing. There were no wounded. It looked like if you got caught, you were killed and eaten. Feathers, some caked with blood, were blown about like someone shot them with a shotgun. Couldn’t be a gun though or the boards would be smashed to pieces. We also found some gray fur that had rubbed off on the slats where an animal had squeezed through. Some animal had pushed its way between two slats in our loft and had gone on a killing spree.

“Boots, I don’t know what to say. This is awful.”

“Yeah, it is.” Boots didn’t get that serious very often, but he certainly was now.

“You think it was a cat?”

“Could be, but I think it was probably a raccoon. Those suckers can be mean.”

We both just stood there staring at the carnage. I didn’t want to say what I was thinking, but it didn’t take long before Boots said it.

“So much for borrowing,” he said. “I guess this is now officially stealing.”

When we yelled for The Scab, he came out and seemed horrified too. “They were fine when I fed them yesterday,” he said.

“We should have never left on that stupid scout trip, Gopher. And we shouldn’t have trusted Scabby here.”

“Hey, you need to build a stronger cage,” he said. And he was right.

As we swept up the feathers and tried to wash off the blood, I was even more paranoid about Matters getting killed. What would I do if I came in there and found his body all chewed up and bloody? I checked on him and he was standing on his perch with all his feathers puffed out. He looked a little sleepy. He probably didn’t see the killing, but the noise would have scared him and probably kept him awake all night. Seeing him sitting all puffed out triggered something I had read in the hawk book on health. It said if the falcon is perched with their wings hanging down and their feathers puffed out, it could be a sign they are sick. His wings weren’t hanging down, but his feathers did look sort of puffy, like a dandelion ready to blow. When eating or getting ready to fly, he would pull his feathers in slick and tight. Now they seemed more tired. Maybe I was reading more into it, but having just seen what I had with the pigeons, I didn’t want to take any chances. I also noticed he had one foot pulled up in his feathers. I didn’t know what that meant. Did it mean he was sick? I didn’t know, but just thinking about Matters getting sick and dying was more than I could process.

“Boots, we’ve got to get this bird back to Elbert”

“Yeah, I’m wondering about the rest of the pigeons, too.”

“I mean what if it was pieces of Matter we were picking up?”

“Wait, that’s funny. Remember in science when we learned you can’t destroy matter? He can’t be killed.”

“Yeah, funny, Boots.” On another day, it would have been. “You think we should just let them go? Do you know for sure they are homed in to his place? What if they don’t know how to get home?”

“Dang it, Gopher, I didn’t think about that. If these birds don’t fly home, that’s four more birds we stole.”

“Why didn’t you think of that?”

“I can’t think of everything.”

“But usually you do.”

“What if we just put them in a box and left them on Elbert’s door.” I said.

“What about the dead ones?”

“You mean the feathers? That’s all that’s left. We could leave those, too. Did we at least scrape up any numbered bands from their legs?”

“Boots, ever thought about becoming an axe murderer?”

“Only on scout camps.”

“Right. Well, I think we might just have to talk to Elbert face to face and tell him what we did.”

“Speaking of axe murderers.”

I thought of Elbert hacking the crap out of those dead birds with his hatchet on the bloody stump next to the hawk pens. Both of us just stared for a couple of minutes, trying to figure out what to do.

“Gopher,” Boots said, breaking the awkward silence, “I think you’re right. We just need to confess to Elbert; and if he kills us, we die as men.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know, but that’s what they always say.”

“Maybe we could go out like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.”

“You mean where they ran into the plaza and got filled with lead by the entire Bolivian army?”

“Oh, right.”

“So what’s our story, Gopher?”

“We were working on a scouting merit badge?”

“That will go over well. ‘Hi Elbert, My name is Boots and this here is Gopher. We were working on our stealing merit badge and decided to steal your falcon and pigeons so we could earn an award for our next Court of Honor. Thank you. We’re giving them back now. Oh and these leg bands are all that’s left of some of your pigeons. Sorry about that.’”

“Elbert could be a very strong supporter of the scouting movement.”

“Not likely. Maybe we say we were doing a science project that got out of control.”

“This isn’t science; it’s biology.”

“Well, Boots my friend, it looks like confession is the only answer. We take the birds, we go to Elbert’s, and we die as men.”

Twelve

It took us two days to get up the nerve to go to Elbert. Boots duct-taped a box with the pigeons to his handle bars. He poked holes in it with a screw driver so they could breathe. He double-taped the box just in case he wiped out on his bike. By now Matters was tame enough to just ride on my handlebars or maybe even follow me in the air, but I wasn't taking any chances either. The worry of having something happen to him was stronger than the fear of facing Elbert—and that was a lot. Matters rode in a box with a special perch. The fear of being arrested before we even got there was also pretty strong. We were on Cloverdale almost to Elbert's. We had been quiet for ten minutes and were pedaling slower and slower until we finally turned down the lane. We didn't see any pigeons working the air like we usually did. Maybe they were just on a race somewhere, or maybe that was a bad sign.

The front of Elbert's house looked much more formal, and we guessed the only people who used it were people who were lost or trick or treaters. We rode around back. We knew Elbert was there when we saw his rusty Land Cruiser with the homemade rack on top. He parked behind the two-story house in an open garage detached from the house. As we got closer, we stopped pedaling and coasted. We were like outlaws riding into a dusty western town where everyone was quiet. All the kids were kept inside the building because the two outlaws were about to get shot.

We kept a sharp eye out for Fang, expecting him to explode out of some bush and clamp on to a free leg. I wondered who we would see first—Elbert or Fang. Maybe Elbert had hired more Fangs to protect the place. The back entry also had a porch, with a rocking chair and a big worn-out pillow on the ground next to it. It looked like Fang's bed and it was empty. Was Fang running loose or tied up in the back protecting the birds? I looked for a shotgun leaning up against the wall next to the rocking chair but didn't see one. Maybe Elbert stood in the barn holding a rifle with me in the scope. We parked our bikes and unwrapped the boxes.

“Gopher, go knock on the door.”

“I changed my mind.”

“You can't change your mind. I beat you fair and square. Rock always beats scissors.”

“Let's go two-out-of-three.”

“No. A deal's a deal. Rock-paper-scissors has spoken.”

“All right. Cover me, I'm going in.”

Boots stood guard at the bikes as I walked up the broken cement step and onto the wooden slat porch. My legs were spaghetti as I stepped towards the door. I paused before I knocked. I wasn't sure I had the strength to lift my arm. I looked back at Boots. He waved me on. We should've agreed to two-out-of-three before we ever did rock-paper-scissors. I reached my hand up and waved my knuckles toward the glass pane of the old painted door. The first two raps didn't connect, but the third did in kind of a whisper knock. No answer. I turned back at Boots and mouthed, "He's not home."

Boots waved his hands about pretending to knock on a door with real force. This time I just knocked as hard as I could. *Open the door and sic your dog on me, I thought.* Let's get it over with.

"You boys selling something?"

I whirled around to see Elbert who had walked up behind us. He had wore his sweat-stained John Deere hat, a faded button-up work shirt, some long-legged Wranglers and cowboy boots. Up close, he reminded me of Clint Eastwood from *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*, only a little older. He looked like a gunfighter, tall and lanky. I imagined his John Deere hat switched for a beat up Stetson, spurs added to his dusty boots and a wind-ripped bandana tied loosely around his neck. I checked to see if he was wearing a gun belt. None. He had the same gray stubble on his face that we saw through the crack in the door the day I stole Matters, but I didn't remember how bushy his mustache was. The hair peeking out from under the hat was also gray. He didn't have the squinty, *I'm-about-to-kill-you* eyes that Eastwood trademarked, but I was still ready for anything.

"I already bought greeting cards from the scouts this spring."

Oh good, I thought, he buys stuff from scouts, maybe he wasn't so bad after all. Then I saw his hands. Covered with blood.

I couldn't move; my breath came in little sharp snaps, but was not enough. I felt like I had a boa constrictor around my neck.

Boots to the rescue. "Mr. Packard, my name is Jeffrey Jensen and my friend here is Christopher Homer." Holy crap. Boots was using our real names. "We're not actually selling anything; we came to tell you something. And Gopher, I mean Christopher, is now going to tell you what that is."

I felt like a gopher had just been crammed down my throat. And right then the pigeons in the box, which had been quiet up till then, suddenly shifted, flapped a little and made that gurgly coo pigeon sound. Elbert looked straight at the box, but this time it was with Clint Eastwood eyes. Odd, but my first thought was, *why didn't we gag the pigeons?* That thought lasted less than a blink because Elbert reached in his back pocket and unfolded a huge knife. The kind you could skin a deer with. He just looked straight at me and started cleaning out the blood from under his fingernails.

“Gopher, maybe you and Jeffrey should bring those boxes inside and tell me what you came here to say.”

“Yes sir.”

Boots dropped one of the bird boxes. So much for composure.

Elbert ushered us in the house and I looked around for guns and dead scouts.

I'm not sure what I expected inside the house. We knew he lived alone, but weren't sure if he had a family, or if they had all moved out. Maybe they were all dead in the basement. We walked through the kitchen, which was cleaner than I expected--dishes drying in a dish rack, towels hanging on racks, and a folded newspaper on the kitchen table. The smell of coffee and bacon lingered from breakfast. In the front room I saw what looked like family pictures on the wall. From the groupings, it looked like there were once three kids and their mother. I had never pictured Elbert with a wife. The house looked like it had been decorated by one, but probably quite some time ago. Either Elbert's wife had died or was on an extended vacation, because we had never seen anyone on the farm but Elbert, and it looked like things hadn't been updated since she left.

“Have a seat there, boys.” Elbert pointed to a couch that was probably in style back when it first came to the room. He sat in a well-used Lazy-boy chair, although there wasn't anything lazy about Elbert. As he sat down, he just looked at me, seeming to search my soul as he waited for me to speak. I was waiting too. My brain does funny things when I get nervous. What sprang to my mind first was the stealing merit badge idea. I squashed that quickly and cleared my throat. So did the pigeons. Elbert looked down at the pigeon box. It was like they all had little megaphones and were screaming for help.

“So you here to sell me some pigeons?” It was more a statement than a question. He kept cleaning his fingernails with the sharp point of his knife. The blood on his hand had dried too and he started scraping that off with his knife.

“Mr. Packard,” I started, “I uh, well, I mean we....”

“Yes?”

I couldn't stand it any longer. “I stole your falcon, and Boots and I stole some of your pigeons and one of them got killed when Boots wiped out on his bike and some of them got killed by, we think, a raccoon or a wild cat, and your falcon almost got killed and maybe its sick because it sometimes gets all fluffy and maybe it will die, and it was a stupid thing to do, and I know it wasn't right, and we're sorry.”

Elbert just looked straight at me. He didn't say anything, just started opening and closing his knife, so I kept going without even looking at Boots. “We were just going to borrow some pigeons, but then I saw the falcons and they were just so cool, that it made me want to borrow the little one, I think it's a kestrel, for a while. We were going to bring it back with the pigeons too and then when the raccoon killed them, and we saw the poster in the pet shop and we didn't mean to get them killed or for the falcon to almost get killed and now we just want to give the falcon back and the pigeons. We'll pay for the dead pigeons and ...” I had no air to continue.

Elbert sat easy in his lazy boy chair, and continued to open and close the knife while looking at us, then back at the knife. I thought maybe he was going to hypnotize us before he slit our throats.

“*Boots*, I guess you are called,” Elbert was looking at Jeffrey, “Is there anything you would like to say?”

“Mr. Packard, we've watched your pigeons fly around your farm since we were in grade school. We just think they are so cool. We thought we could sort of borrow some and have them raise a few babies and then we would let the parents fly home.”

“What made you think they would just fly home?”

“I guess we didn't. We should have just come and talked to you, but I'm sure they are very expensive and we didn't have much money. And then Gopher saw the falcon and had some kind of Kismet religious or something experience where he just had to have it.

“Religious experience?”

It did sound dumb.

“Gopher’s not usually a criminal type. It’s weird, but since he took that falcon he’s been a nutcase about it. Can’t get him to talk about anything else. If he had a girlfriend, he would have dropped her like a bowling ball to be with that falcon.”

Elbert looked over at me and I felt like a nutcase.

“But it was wrong; it was wrong to take the pigeons. We didn’t think any would die, but they did. And we will do whatever it takes to pay for them.”

Elbert was quiet for what seemed like an hour. He just looked back and forth at us; all the while playing with the knife like it was a number two pencil on test day.

“Let’s take a look at the kestrel,” he finally said. He looked in on the bird and lifted it out on his fist, not even bothering to get a glove. He looked Matters over and put him back in the box. At least he was still alive.

“Where did you get the jesses?”

“I made them, sir.”

“Do you boys know it is a federal offense to have a falcon without a license?”

“Not until we saw the poster, sir.” I said.

“This is a serious crime. I’m not sure what to do here.”

Finally he shut the knife and put it back in his pocket.

“I think I really have no choice.” He said, his face stained with serious.

Elbert got up and walked back to the kitchen, picked up a phone on the counter and dialed a number. I looked at Boots and he looked scared. Not a good sign. Boots made the universal sign that your throat is about to be slit, by drawing his finger across his neck

Someone must have answered Elbert’s call.

“Yes, this is Elbert Packard out on Cloverdale. Is Sheriff Coldbert in? Thank you.”

Elbert washed his hands in the sink while he waited. “Hi Sheriff, thanks for taking my call; I have two young men here who have confessed to my falcon and pigeon disappearance. They have brought them back, but some of the pigeons have died. Being a federal offense, I don’t have a choice here do I?”

The Sheriff seemed to be taking his time answering, while Elbert answered a lot of yes and no answers.

“Do you want me to bring them in or will you come get them?”

Pause. And looking over at us said, “No, I don’t think they’ll run.” Run? I couldn’t walk.

“Okay, I’ll hold them here until you arrive.”

Elbert hung up the phone and looked at us even more serious than before, if that were possible.

“You boys ever ridden in a police car?”

Thirteen

Boots and I always dreamed of riding around in a police car. We imagined the sirens wailing, lights dancing on top as we broke all the speed limits chasing some bad guy. Boots bragged that he would grab the shotgun out of the front and chase down the bad guy after the cop had been hit. I would probably stay in the car and radio for back up. We never imagined riding in one with handcuffs.

When Sheriff Coldbert pulled in the driveway twenty minutes after Elbert's call our dream became a nightmare. He pulled out two pairs of handcuffs and said, "You boys know how to put these on?"

I thought if we said "yes," he might think we'd been arrested before. If we said "no," he might not believe us, because handcuffs don't really need instructions. Every western or cop show showed a bad guy getting cuffed. However, the only handcuffs I had ever seen were the cheap metal ones that you could open with a screwdriver. These were steel and cold and every time I scratched my nose, the chain clanked together. Boots was quiet all the way into the backseat of the Sheriff's car. Whenever I looked over at Boots, he was just staring straight forward like a mannequin. I knew he was thinking, and I hoped he was putting a plan together.

I was out of options.

"So you boys got mixed up in stealing federal property, huh?"

Boots dropped the mannequin face and mouthed to me, *federal* property?

I just shook my head and with my best face suggested I didn't know a falcon was *federal* property. And if it was federal property that meant for sure it was federal prison for us. My sweat factory started a second shift. I didn't say anything; you never know what might be used against you. Boots must have had the same thought.

"We plead the Fifth, sir," he said. Perfect answer, Boots. Man, Boots should be a lawyer. He could think so fast in tight spots.

"The Fifth?" The sheriff spit out as he busted up laughing. If he was drinking a Coke, it would've come right out his nose he was laughing so hard. He was a big man, but most of the big was in his stomach. He started coughing and hacking like a dog that just ate a box of Kleenex. Boots looked over with wonder and confirmed that silence was our best defense.

Things didn't get better when we got to the sheriff station. We had been there before for Scouts once. They shared it with the police department. I remember parading past a couple of

prisoners in the jail. The hallway was plenty wide, but we still stayed right next to the wall opposite the cells. One of the prisoners yelled at us and said something about being in a zoo, using a combination of swear words that I've never heard before or since.

When Sheriff Pregnant brought us in, all the office workers and the other police people looked at us with disgust. Or like maybe they had just caught Butch and Sundance. You'd think they'd never seen criminals before. They took off our handcuffs so we could fill out a clipboard full of papers. With so many people walking around with guns, I guess they figured if we tried to run they would shoot us before we got to the door.

I don't know what I was expecting, but when they took our pictures and rolled our thumbs and fingers across the ink pad, it sunk in hard that we were in big trouble. I knew we were in big trouble when Boots looked like he might cry. Well not actually with tears, but he was as serious as I've ever seen.

A very serious, sturdy woman in uniform and a silver badge came up to us and said, "Jeffrey Jensen and Christopher Homer, you are entitled to make one phone call. I suggest you call your parents and tell them where you are."

Whenever I heard our real names used on us, it wasn't a good thing. It would have been like calling Butch, "Robert Leroy" and Sundance, "Harry". But worse than that was calling my parents. Boots was led off to one office to make his call and I was taken to another. It was just an ordinary office with plaques on the walls for someone's years of public service, and pictures of grandkids. Weren't they afraid I would steal an envelope opener and take someone hostage? Apparently not. I sat in the office chair and spun around a couple of times, trying to think of what to say to my parents. They were going to be mad. Their son, a potential Eagle Scout, at the police station with black stains on his thumbs and fingers. This was not going to be easy. I picked up the phone and poked around practicing and delaying dialing the actual numbers. I had to get my story down. I wasn't a very good liar, but there was still a sequence to the facts I needed to think about.

I looked around the office again. A framed picture of policemen posing with an award of some kind hung on the wall. It looked like a graduation shot, or maybe it was the team that hauled in the last two teenagers nabbed for stealing birds or other creatures.

I should have talked to my parents about this whole thing earlier. But they would have said. “Someday you can have a falcon,” which is another way of saying, “Sorry son, you will never have a falcon.”

I had to make the call. I’m sure I had some time limit that was ticking away. I dialed the right numbers and prayed for the answering machine.

“Hello, Homer Residence.”

My mom. Great.

“Mom, this is Gopher.”

“Hello, Christopher. Where are you?”

“Well, that’s why I wanted to call you. I’m in an office downtown.”

“Yes.”

“And, it’s actually an office in the police station.”

“Okay, why are you in an office in the police station?” It was that measured mom voice. Still taking in the facts, but leaning towards mad.

“Boots and I sort of got arrested.”

“Sort of?”

“Yeah, remember when I said I wanted to get a falcon?”

“Uh-huh, except you said a parrot and I said I didn’t want a pet to deal with.”

“I remember that, but remember when I said I really wanted to get a falcon sometime?”

“Okay.”

“Well I got one and it’s actually the one at Boots’ house. I’ve been feeding it there. And it’s really cool.”

“You got sort of arrested for keeping a falcon at Boots’ house?”

“No, I stole it from Elbert Packard.”

“Stole it?”

“Well, I really just borrowed it.”

“Did Elbert know you borrowed it?”

“Not until I brought it back.”

“So you stole it.”

“I guess so.”

“Let me talk to someone in charge.”

Mom didn't yell at me, which made it worse. It was surely coming. Mom wasn't normally a yeller, neither was dad, but they never had a criminal son before either. Maybe she was just waiting until they could see my face up real close. I was oddly curious how they would deal with it.

After the call, Boots and I were brought back into the main processing room and seated on a butt-polished wooden bench. The office had all the flurry of a dentist office, but no one was sucking the laughing gas--at least not yet.

Boots spoke out of the side of his mouth, "You talk to your mom or dad?"

"Mom."

"She mad?"

"I think so."

"Who'd you talk to?" Boots' parents were pretty easy going, but there was nothing easy about the police station. Seemed like we'd already been there an hour. I think he thought we were under video surveillance, because he covered his mouth when he answered and didn't look at me.

"My dad," he said.

"Is that a good thing?"

"I just told him you stole a falcon and I would be entering a plea bargain. Sorry old friend, but you're on your own here."

"You what?" I had my hand over my mouth too and I coughed so it didn't look like we were making any plans. I made a fist with the other hand and wanted to slug Boots with it. That would bring the cuffs back on us for sure. "I can't believe you. You're going to pin this whole thing on me?"

"Gopher, shut up. I'm just kidding."

The tension band snapped and I took in the first full breath of air since we got there. I still wanted to smack him.

"No, my dad was a little weird about it. He just asked what happened and said we would talk about it when they got down here."

The sturdy lady we met earlier, whose brass name pin read, "Melba", crossed a "t" or dotted a lower-cased "j" on a clipboard with such force we could hear it from her desk. She took

a long drag on a straw stuck in a drink cup, probably filled with straight vodka, and walked over to us.

“Okay fellas, now that you’ve done the crime, let’s do the time. Follow me to the jail.”

“Jail?” Boots protested.

“Yes Jail. You will be arraigned at some point, but until then you will sit in jail.”

The door to the jail slid open hard and sent a cold echo down the row of jail cells. The cement floor reminded me of the mortuary we also saw when we were scouts. The first thing I did was look down the row to see if we were going to have neighbors. I was afraid the guy who yelled at us before would be back. We had the place to ourselves.

Melba opened the door to the first cell and motioned us in. She didn’t have a gun, but she had handcuffs and a small black flashlight that could crack a skull open.

“I need to put a meal plan together for you boys. Do you have any dietary restrictions?”
They were going to put us on a diet?

“No, ma’am,” Boots piped up.

“Okay. Well you missed lunch. Dinner will be at 5:30. Breakfast is at 8:30 and lunch is at 12:30. On Sundays we usually have something with meat. Any problem with that?”

“No Spam, please ma’am,” Boots said, looking as serious as a monk.

“Excuse me?” She said.

“Allergies.”

“Spam’s fine, ma’am” I said quickly, trying to keep my face straight. Thinking of spending Sunday dinner in jail took care of that. I wondered if they did anything special for Thanksgiving or Christmas.

“Okay, we check in here every hour. Can I trust you won’t kill each other, or would you like to be in separate cells?”

“We’re fine,” I said. Boots looked like he wasn’t, then nodded.

Melba shut the door to our cell with a slam that echoed around the chamber like a ricocheted bullet. She marched out into the hall then slid that door hard too. An old swamp cooler with a worn belt and a bad pulley played a weird soundtrack to our movie.

Boots and I were in jail.

Fourteen

“Okay Boots, what’s the plan?”

“The plan is we’re busted.”

“Think we’re talking federal prison?”

“We can’t even drive. They don’t send kids to federal prison unless they assassinate a world leader or something. We’ll probably be here for awhile until our trial and then we’ll end up in juvie jail. Or maybe there’s a way to break out of here. Maybe we fake like we’re sick and they take us to the hospital and we sneak out of the hospital through the laundry chute, or overpower a guard. Maybe our guard will be an old guy. We’ll knock him out with his black flashlight and....”

“Didn’t Scruggs Panchert go to Juvie jail for beating up the football coach?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh that’s going to be great. We’ll be pals with Scruggs and learn to smoke.”

“Gopher, we need to get our story together here. What did your parents say?”

“I got my mom, and she’s mad, I think; but she didn’t say that much. I guess she and my dad will be coming down. Do you think they’ll bring a lawyer, or does the court appoint one for us? What about your parents?”

“They’re mad, too. Not sure how much though, because they don’t like being mad over the phone. I’m sure they want to wait until I can see their faces.”

We spent the next two hours going over every detail. Boots wanted to make sure we had our facts straight.

I jumped when the door to the cells clanged open. It was Melba.

“You boys are lucky we don’t have much going on today. Judge Farragut wants to have the trial right now.”

My mind went blank. Boots’ mind never went blank. “A *trial* right now?” He said, “What about our attorneys?”

“We’ll get you one, don’t worry.”

We were then led single-file into the courtroom, which had a high desk where the judge could look down on us, like a vulture waiting for the prey to stop twitching. There were just a couple rows of chairs, much smaller than I expected. Judge Farragut was already seated. He was a big man with a thick neck, bushy brown eyebrows and an army crew cut. I didn’t know his first

name, but if I had to guess, I would say Vince. He looked like the sort of guy who could crack open a walnut with his bare hand.

I looked around and saw a group of very serious people. My parents were there-- especially alert. Boots' parents were there too and were talking quietly to themselves. Elbert Packard was there too. The first thing I did was look at his hands. I guess he got all the blood off before he came to court. He sat on the front row looking like an old cowboy watching a rodeo. His Wrangler jeans stretched out in front of him and his cowhide boots were crossed. There was no urgency about him, but he certainly didn't seem bored either.

He measured us evenly when we walked in. Melba seated us in chairs just below the vulture and announced in a voice louder than necessary, "Third District Court is now in session."

All attention was on the judge. He was reviewing a stack of papers, paused, looked around the room like it was the first time he had ever seen it and then looked down, down at us.

"Good afternoon, boys. My name is Judge Farragut." And then he paused like he had just said, 'My name is Abraham Lincoln.' We have here your parents, Melba Carson from the court and Elbert Packard. I understand you've met Mr. Packard, is that correct?"

"Yes sir," we said together.

"Mr. Packard, let's start with you. Can you tell the court what you do and how you got involved with these two boys?"

Elbert sat up a little straighter as he began to speak. This was the first time we had seen him without a hat and it made him look less mean for some reason. Even his gray mustache seemed to be a little trimmer than I remembered. Maybe it was just combed.

"My name is Elbert Packard and I am a retired zoology professor specializing in raptor rehabilitation. I take in injured or sick hawks and falcons from all over the state. I help them until they are ready to be released to the wild or placed with zoos or aviaries. I've been a master-licensed falconer for many years, and I also race homing pigeons."

Sick or injured falcons? All his birds were sick or injured? Matters may have been closer to death than I thought. Great.

"I see. And how did you meet the defendants?"

"I just met them in person this morning. They came to confess stealing some of my prized homers and a kestrel falcon I was medicating and preparing to release back to the wild. But I've heard about them from Janelle over at the pet store and Grumpy at Buck's who said

there was a new falconer in town. They brought back the falcon which thankfully is still alive and only some of the pigeons they stole. They said the others were killed by a cat or a raccoon.”

“Is that true, boys?”

Of course Boots spoke first. “Yes your honor, I would say it was a raccoon, but it could have been a cat, your honor,” he said with seeming sincerity.

“Yes, it is all true,” I said carefully stepping hard on Boots foot to keep him focused. He had a weirdness about him when he got nervous--he didn’t get more quiet, instead he got more verbal like it challenged him to see what he could get away with. And the pirate girl at the pet store—the one who ratted us out was named Janelle. Never trust a girl with a parrot on her shoulder.

“Did you boys know possession of a falcon or hawk without a proper license is a serious offense?”

“Not when we borrowed it,” I said, probably a little too quick.

The judge looked right at me with deadly eyes and said, “What do you mean *borrowed*?” I could feel Boots’ giving me the eyebrow. Why couldn’t I just shut up? Too late.

“Well at first we were just going to borrow a couple of pigeons. After they laid eggs and hatched we were going to raise the babies and then let the parents fly back to Elbert’s place.”

“And the babies?” The judge didn’t seem to be buying it.

“We were going to keep them as our own flyers.”

“So if you keep something that isn’t yours, isn’t that stealing?”

Why did they all make it sound so simple? I looked over at Boots who was eager to shut me up.

He jumped in. “Your honor, technically, we wouldn’t be stealing the babies from Elbert because he wouldn’t have them yet. You can’t steal something from someone if they don’t have it.” Well said, Boots, I thought. Simple and straight forward. Very logical.

The judge looked at Boots for a long time. I wasn’t sure if he was still trying to figure out what Boots said exactly or he if was just going to pull out the wooden hammer and bang us on the head.

“Jeffrey, have you thought about going into law?”

“No sir.”

“Well you should. Now what I can’t figure out is why you didn’t just buy some from Mr. Packard. You’d sell some birds to these boys wouldn’t you, Mr. Packard?”

“Yes, ah, your honor,” Elbert said.

Boots kept the floor. “Your Honor, we didn’t think he would sell us any and we thought they might be too expensive. Our income comes from selling worms and Gopher’s allowance and we didn’t think we would have enough.” I like the way Boots said, “Your Honor.”

“Maybe you should get a job. Sounds like you have the time. Okay, let’s talk about this falcon. What was the thinking there, boys?”

“Your honor,” I said, “That was really my fault. When we were borrowing....”

“Stealing.”

“Yes, when we went in to get the pigeons, I saw that little falcon in his cage and something went off in my brain. I just knew I had to have one. It was so beautiful. I had never seen one up close before. And then I started reading all about it, and saw pictures of falconers hunting with hawks, and I just thought it was so cool.”

“So why not ask your parents to help you get one?”

“They said no.”

My mom spoke up, “Your Honor, we’re just not pet people, and technically he asked for a parrot.”

“Mrs. Homer, you’re not on trial here. I’ll let you and your son deal with that outside the court, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind your honor, thank you.

The judge continued, “So you just decided to take what you wanted. My court room is full of people doing just that, Mr. Homer.”

Getting called by just your last name is one of the worst things a guy can hear from an adult. What usually follows is a visit to the principal’s office or worse.

“Yes, your honor. What we did was wrong, I see that now. When Matters--that’s what I called the falcon--almost got killed by a hawk, and I thought he might be getting sick too, I thought about just letting him go, but I knew even though I may have to go to jail, I didn’t want the falcon to die.”

“Do you think you are going to jail?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you brought the bird back even though you thought you might go to jail.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And what about you, Jeffrey?”

“I thought he might go to jail too, your honor.” He said it with a straight face, but his eyebrow twitched a little.

I almost lost it. My lips tightened and I had to quickly rub my forehead to hide my face.

“You were both in this together, Jeffrey. If he goes, you go.”

Boots’ eyebrow stopped twitching. “Yes, your Honor.”

“Mr. Packard, you’ve heard their story. Do you want to press charges?”

Elbert got up and walked over to us. I didn’t think anyone was allowed to move around in the courtroom. He looked us over and paused, looking at me. Elbert was a tall man and looked like he could whip both our dads, but there was something in his eyes that said he never would.

“Maybe so, Judge.” He paused again and let his statement hang there for a second.

“Gopher,” he continued, “A falcon is not a pet, like a dog or even a horse. You can’t make too many mistakes. You could have killed that bird. But you didn’t.”

And boy was I glad I didn’t.

“Boots, those pigeons came from expensive racing stock. It’s not enough to keep them fed and watered. You need to protect them from danger like raccoons and cats and boys who want to steal them. Keeping them alive is harder than you expected, I’m guessing.”

“Yes, your Honor, I mean, sir.”

Elbert then turned to the judge, “Sam, I mean your Honor, these boys made a big mistake. But they also confessed on their own. I will leave it up to your judgment.”

“Your Honor, if I may say something.” Boots was taking the witness stand, except there wasn’t really one. “Christopher and I got carried away here.” Oh man, Boots was digging deep. I couldn’t remember when he had ever referred to me as Christopher. “I guess what we thought borrowing was, and what you guys think it is, isn’t the same. We see that now. We have learned a lot from this experience. This is the first time we’ve been in trouble with the law.”

I almost thought he was going to say, “The first time we’ve ever been caught.” If he had the black stuff under his eyes that football players wore, I would have sworn he was Perry Mason.

“It’s clear, your Honor,” he continued, “we haven’t lived up to the Scout Law which includes obedience, but we were loyal—loyal to the birds at least. And we have learned so much by this experience. I think it will help us be more responsible citizens in the future. Thank you for that, your honor, no matter what happens to us.”

Boots sat down and I just stared at the gold eagle statue perched on top of the United States flag in the corner. It helped take my mind off the fact that Boots had just dumped the biggest load of crap the court had ever seen. If I were to look back at my parents, or at Boots, I would have been arrested again for disturbing the peace. I tried to imagine what it would be like to have a huge eagle on my fist. I wondered if I could even lift my arm. Then the eagle reminded me of Scouts and that Boots had just played the Eagle card somehow.

The judge just sat there and looked at Boots. He was speechless. Maybe he was about to break into tears and thank America that Boots had been born. After an hour-long minute or two, he tapped his finger against his head like it helped him think better. He tapped slowly at first like he was warming up a cold engine, then he started tapping faster like the engine was revving up. Finally, he said, “Thank you,” to the room generally, then looked down at us.

“Jeffrey and Christopher, please stand before the court.” All the air slipped out of my lungs, as we stood up. I guessed that standing before the court meant standing in front of the judge. Maybe it was to improve his chances of hitting us with his hammer. “I’ve been to Elbert’s place a few times and I know that on the floor of those cages and pens is a lot of manure. Kind of like what you boys have been shoveling out in this courtroom today. So here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to sentence you to attend rehabilitation—raptor rehabilitation. You are to report to Elbert’s place and spend at least two hours a day there cleaning out his pens and cages and any other project he has for you until the snow falls. And I think Elbert has a dog out there that can smell a kid if he isn’t working too hard, so keep that in mind.”

With that, he slammed the hammer down hard and announced, “this court is adjourned.”

Fifteen

The judge was right about the crap at Elbert's place. The pigeon lofts were crusted and dusty and we had to wear bandanas over our noses to keep from breathing in the dust. The falcon cages, just as I remembered them, had more gooey piles mixed with feathers—kind of like melted Big Hunk bars. Boots and I argued which stunk more, the pigeons or the falcons. Pigeon crap dried out quicker and turned powdery over time. The dry stuff scraped up pretty good. Falcon crap or “mutes” as Elbert called it started out like projected runny marshmallow cream topping and dried strong like mortar.

Truth is, I didn't mind the smell and started getting used to it. The smell or having to clean the falcon pens was a fair trade for being so close to the birds. Elbert had six different flight pens, four of them occupied. The big hawk that Boots thought was an eagle was a red-tail hawk that had been shot. Elbert said the bright red on the tail meant it was an adult. The next cage held a prairie falcon, which looked like a distant cousin to the kestrel. It had some disease with a long name. There was also a cooper's hawk with a broken wing from hitting a telephone wire or something. It had a leather hood on its head and stood quietly on a perch in the back of its cage. The hood made it look majestic and mysterious. And then there was Matters who seemed happy to be back in his cage.

We finished scraping out one of the four pigeon pens and had stopped for a drink of water. Boots had little feathers and pigeon dust all over him. He looked like a circus clown who had dressed himself. I looked down at my tennis shoes and saw my laces covered with speckled green and white. Both of us were sweating, which mingled with the dust made a dirty paste around our foreheads. It had been two weeks since our day in court. Elbert had worked us hard. We built nest boxes, more cages and a loft, fed and watered pigeons, chopped up food for the falcons and hawks, and changed out their bath pans. We also helped him build a security fence around the falcon area, although it was unlikely there were more bird thieves in town. We were there for at least four hours a day instead of the two we were sentenced. And Fang was always there on his chain, hoping one of us would slack off or steal something else.

Elbert walked up and surprised us with two cold bottles of Dad's Root Beer. “So tell me, is this better or worse than going to jail?”

Boots spit out a small feather. “Jail would have been cleaner. I guess we ended up in cages either way.”

Elbert laughed and pushed his John Deere hat back on his head as he leaned against the pigeon loft. He wasn't the hard, mean, gun-slinging cowboy we were expecting. He also wasn't Roy Rogers.

"I need to ask you, Boots, were you planning on racing against me with my own pigeons?"

"I hadn't thought that far ahead, but maybe."

"You've noticed that all my pigeons are black right?"

"Yeah."

"They're called Beckers. Most people around here fly blue-bars. They look like the common pigeons you see in town. So if you showed up at a race with black Beckers, everyone would know where you got them."

"I'll keep that in mind the next time I come here to steal pigeons."

"The next time, I will just shoot you from the porch and feed you to the falcons."

"Would they eat my eyes first?"

"One at a time." Elbert smiled.

"And what about you, Gopher? What were your plans with the kestrel? He really could have gotten killed being so out of shape."

"I was going to keep it until school started, then put it back."

Elbert just shook his head. "To be honest, you guys surprised me when you got here. I was expecting a couple of lazy kids who took my birds because you were bored. I taught high school once, so I've been around lazy kids. I thought I might whip you into shape, but you're both hard workers to start with. You may have noticed I've worked you harder than two hours a day."

Boots smeared more pigeon mud off his forehead. "Haven't noticed," he said. "Feels like we've been at summer camp. Now if you can just point me to the pool, I want to do a cannonball."

Elbert laughed again. I was surprised how easily Elbert laughed once we got to know him.

"I worked you hard and put you in the worst part of the pigeon and falcon business because I wanted to get some work out of you before you fizzled out or skipped off to Canada or something."

“If we were skipping, we would go south.” Boots squinted his eyes like Clint Eastwood.

“And rob banks on your way down?”

“Something like that.”

“Well it’s a good thing I got my work out of you before you become famous bank robbers.”

“So, Elbert,” Boots said like he was an outlaw spinning a six shooter, “I’ve been thinking.” Boots called him Elbert from the first day. I still called him Mr. Packard to his face. “I would like to make a deal with you and my friend Gopher here.”

“Should I get my attorney involved?”

“No need.”

Whenever Boots said the words, “I’ve been thinking” and “I want to make a deal,” we were about to have a lot of fun or get into a lot of trouble. Usually both.

“We’ve been working overtime here and as you said we are hard workers. I’m wondering if we keep working for you here if we can get some pay back.”

“I’m listening.”

“What we wanted when we started all this was to get our own racing pigeons. Then Gopher had his religious Kismet experience or whatever, and decided to devote his life to falcons.”

“What religion is Kismet?”

“It’s not a religion it’s the name of a peregrine falcon.” I said.

“Thank you Gopher, I’ll let you and Elbert have your Kismet moment later. We have a deal going on here.”

“Sorry.”

“I’m willing to keep working double time for you and what I’d like in return is some of your racing pigeons, and have you teach me how to get them ready to race. Kismet boy here wants to be a falconer. I’m guessing he’ll be willing to work more than double time to get a falcon from you. Am I right Gopher?”

Boots spoke like he was wearing a tie.

“Yes, my feathered friend, I would love that.”

“So what do you think Elbert? We’ve got three weeks until school starts, and we could also work after school.”

Elbert smoothed down his mustache as he looked us over. He had the serious look all over his face, and I wasn't sure he was buying any of it. He had the court on his side. We were sentenced to work and Boots was working the sentence. That's why I liked Boots.

A smile warmed up Elbert's face and he said, "Boots, first, when you get done with Law School look me up. Okay, here's the deal. You keep working hard, and don't get arrested, and I will get you some pigeons. You did kill one of them, a nice one I might add, when you first came here stealing. I'll make sure you work enough to pay that back. And if you ever race against me, you let me win."

"Deal," Boots said.

"Now, Gopher, the falcon deal isn't so easy. I can't just give you a falcon. To keep and train a falcon, you need to get a falconry license. You'll have to study from some books I have and pass a written test the state administers. Falcons aren't pets; they're wild animals that allow us to tag along with them while they do what Mother Nature intended them to do.

"I tried to tell him that."

"Thank you, Boots. Once you have your license and I can trust you with my falcons, we could trap you a kestrel or red-tailed hawk. You can keep it here if you want. I don't think your mom is ready to convert to Kismet, just yet.

"Deal!"

"Objection!" Boots declared. "You haven't consulted with counsel."

"Okay counsel, what do you think?"

"Go for it."

"All right, Boots, it looks like you've got yourself a deal. I'm sure Sam, I mean Judge Farragut, will be okay with it as well. Gopher, I'll help you get your falconry license, and Boots we'll get you some Beckers, but first we need to rebuild your loft. I'm not putting my good Homers in that pile of junk, you guys call a loft."

We both stared at Elbert. "When have you seen our loft?" Boots asked.

Elbert laughed. "While you two were hiking on a scout outing."

"What?" Boots fired off before I could. "You saw the remains of the great pigeon massacre? The dead pigeons? The blood?"

"Actually, none of my pigeons died in the great pigeon massacre." Elbert said evenly.

"You saved some of the pigeons before the raccoon got in there?" Boots said.

“You know, it is amazing how much fun you can have with a bag of pigeon feathers and a little blood from the slaughter house.” Elbert grinned.

“We’ve been set up, Boots!”

“What the . . .?”

“It’s true, boys. When I figured you were my bird thieves, I went first for my birds, then for you. I was going to tan your hides. When I saw the birds were in good shape, despite the loft and cage, I thought I could teach you a lesson. And then I met a clever little fellow name Eric, who wanted to have some fun too.”

“The Scab.” I said.

“He’s dead.” Boots snorted.

“I wouldn’t be mad at Eric,” Elbert said. “He just helped me stage the break-in.”

“But how did you know where we lived?” I asked.

“Who told you it was us?” Boots followed.

“You guys aren’t very good criminals. I wouldn’t wrap a career around it. At first I thought someone had just let the kestrel go.”

“That was my idea,” Boots said.

“When I added the missing falcon to the missing pigeons, I thought someone might be keeping them for themselves. If that were true, they would need food. I heard from friends in town there were a couple of new falconers around. I thought my poster would heat up the trail. And it did. Mrs. Snodgrass from the library told me that Mrs. Homer’s son was also interested in falconry.”

Boots piped up, and slapped me on the chest. “I told you reading wasn’t good for you. We need to keep you stupid or you’re going to get us in more trouble.”

Elbert continued, “When I came to find you, the first person I met was Eric.”

“The Scab.” Boots corrected.

“Nice kid. Said you were doing a secret science project. Very helpful in showing me where your loft and falcon cages were.”

“And now you know why we call him The Scab. He’s about to get another one.” Boots looked over at me in disgust.

“Again, I would have found them anyway. My first concern was the health of the kestrel. He seemed to be healthy so I just waited to see what you guys would do. You did a good job with the kestrel, Gopher; otherwise I would have snatched him immediately.”

“Thanks.”

Boots rubbed his forehead, like it would jumpstart his brain.

“So what was the deal with the police station and court? That seemed a little weird,” he said.

Elbert laughed a nice easy laugh, like he was remembering his favorite joke.

“Judge Sam Farragut, is good friend of mine. I asked him if he wanted to have a little fun and he was game.”

“What about Melba?” Boots asked.

“She wasn’t acting. Nothing fun about her. She wanted you guys to stay in jail. You need to know she spent ten years in the juvenile detention system. Doesn’t really like kids.”

“So you came to see the kestrel and it was doing fine?” I said. “I was worried that maybe he might be getting sick. That’s part of why I panicked. It stood with its feathers all puffed up and the falconry book said that meant they are in bad health.”

“That is true for most falcons, but not for kestrels. When they are content they fluff their feathers up. You have a lot to learn my friend.”

Elbert was right. I did have a lot to learn, but thrilled to get started. I looked over at Matters in his cage. He sat fluffed, apparently content. His eyes, ever alert, darted from us to something far out in a field and back to a dragon fly as it moved about his cage. Elbert said our first task was to get Matters in shape so that he could fly free and live on his own again. I was getting ready to fly free too and soon with a kestrel of my own.