

Mark Stone, CIA

By Jacob Derry



The barrel of the handgun was only inches from the man's temple. If his body shook any more than it already was, he would surely feel the cold, metal barrel pressing against his hot, sweaty forehead. The man holding the gun steadied his eyes, fixating them on his target and mentally blocking out the shouts coming from the background characters. He gripped the gun tighter. This wasn't how he expected it to happen, but there was no doubt in his mind. What he was about to do was right.

Two hours earlier:

Mark Stone studied every move of the five individuals inhabiting the spacious living room of the two-story suburban home. The room held an uncomfortable silence. They were waiting – each prepared for what they would say to Henry when he arrived. What they didn't know at that moment was that Mark Stone, operations agent for the CIA, was prepared for them. He was perched on a branch of the oak tree in the front yard, overlooking the scene through his binoculars and jotting notes in his worn, spiral-bound notepad. He wrote:

4/24/14

1:07pm

Location: 43 Carolina Drive, North Lancaster, Illinois

Description:

- *Two elderly folk in their 60s, husband and wife – look like typical old people: wrinkly, graying, high-waist pants.*
- *Three early 30-somethings – two males and one female*
 - *Male #1: average size and build, beard, white dress shirt, navy sports jacket, fancy wristwatch.*
 - *Male #2: tall and slender, short black hair, gray hoodie.*
 - *Female: average size, build and bust, long wavy blond hair, creamy skin, simple white blouse and jean capris.*

Stone also noticed but did not make a note that all of the characters' faces appeared grim – reluctant to be there. Their eyes drifted aimlessly as if dreaming about what they would be doing if they weren't there. He had encountered each individual before at one time or another but never during his time as an agent. He was new to the position – two months. The two months were every bit of a thrill ride as the movies had led him to expect. There was danger at every corner: tracking down international crime lords, acrobatic bullet-dodging, epic car chases that ended with explosions, and back stabbings by provocative femme fatales. He was lucky to come out of it alive. However, this, he suspected, would be his most treacherous mission yet.

"Where is he?! Shouldn't he be here? You said 10'clock right!?" the tall slender male, better known as Grant, asked anxiously, fidgeting with his hands inside his sweatshirt pocket.

"Yeah, I have to be back at the office for a meeting at 2:30," said the other male, named Ryan, while looking at the time ticking away on his wristwatch.

"You have to remember, guys, this isn't about us. It's about Henry and what we can do to help him," the young female named Carrie reminded the group. The elderly female, positioned in the flowery-cushioned rocking chair (her name was Beverley Daniels), nodded in agreement, still holding that grim, lifeless look.

Stone had all the information he needed. It was time to make his move. Using a gadget from his utility belt, he shot a cable line that clasped onto the side of the house's chimney. He snapped his end of the cable to the harness hook on his belt and pulled the line to ensure it was tight. Using his slip resistant gloves, he made the diagonal climb to the roof.

It worked perfectly. He landed softly on the balls of his feet, so that the people below could not detect his presence. All the while, Grant paced nervously in front of the large rectangular window of the living room, occasionally peering out in search of Henry's vehicle. There was no sight of it.

Standing just ten feet above Grant was Stone. He detached the cable's clasp from the chimney and reshot the line this time aimed at tree branch another 15 feet higher. Just as he finished, he wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve and gazed out to the horizon just beyond the tree line of the surrounding neighborhood. He didn't know what he was looking for. He was just staring to stare. This was something he did occasionally. He felt a sense of calm from it. From where he was, he could see the shadows of the dark puffy clouds that overtook the nearby neighborhoods. Somewhere out there – likely in a tree house in this neighborhood or the next – there was a child pretending to be an agent for the CIA, using walk-talkies and Nerf guns on their "top secret missions" to retrieve stolen Oreo cookies. He chuckled at the thought. He was once like that too. Now, it was real, and it was the greatest job he ever had. He finally felt purpose in what he was doing. He was protecting people and serving his country. So long as he could help it, he was determined to never go back to his past life. Unfortunately, this mission didn't make it so easy.

He took a deep breath, walked back at an upward slant toward the middle of the roof, and turned to face the tree he had just left from. With the cable gripped

firmly between his hands, he sprinted to the edge of the roof, blasting his body off the platform with full force. Gravity knocked him down several feet as his momentum propelled him out, away from the house. He swooped down and then back up like a pendulum with the tree branch acting as the pivot point. He was flying. At the apex of his swing, he spun 180 degrees, regaining the view of the house. He straightened and extended his legs aiming them right for the large front window.

Grant was no longer pacing. Instead, he was terrorizing himself with another nervous tick: rubbing his hands together vigorously, burning off dead skin cells. He slowed his hand rubbing for an instant when a flash of light zoomed through the right corner of his peripheral. He glanced to see what it was, and, without a second to think, dove to the side of the window and onto the floor. A figure plunged through the glass, like a wrecking ball, destroying anything and everything in its path. Glass sprayed across the room. The figure landed remarkably on his feet, appearing without a cut, scrape, or bruise. Those who observed it were in awe. It was the man they were waiting for: Henry.

Mark Stone was clothed tightly in black from head to toe accessorized with straps attached to his belt, cool armbands, and various other gadgets. He stood tall with broad shoulders in the middle of the wreckage that was now the living room. Then, he crouched down with his hands up and ready as if he was expecting someone to come attack him.

“Oh heavens no! Are you all right, Honey?” Beverley Daniels – the sorrow wiped from her face and replaced with sincere worry.

“Asshole!” the old man shouted with enough fury for him to rise from his comfortable position in his beige recliner, “you’re paying for that window, Boy!”

“Oowwwowie!” hollered Grant from the floor. He was able to lift his upper torso but remained seated, “Yeah – yeah. I think I’ll be okay, Mrs. Daniels, thanks,” he answered politely despite still being in pain and oblivious to the fact that the question wasn’t directed to him.

Mark Stone remained silent, taking in his new surroundings. Ryan and Carrie, from the opposite side of Grant, moved slowly and subtly closer to Henry trying not to provoke him. It was like watching two kids approach a frightened baby squirrel or deer in their backyard just to see if they could get close enough to pet the animal. In this case, the only difference was that the two “kids”, Ryan and Carrie, were more afraid than Mark Stone, who was focused, agile, and itching to knock somebody out via a Firebird Tornado kick (a new move he recently discovered).

“Did you here me?!” the old man (his name was Frank Daniels) asked, receiving no response, “Dammit Henry!!”

“I don’t know who Henry is, Old Man,” Mark Stone snapped without lifting his gaze from the approaching Ryan and Carrie, “My name is Mark Stone. I’m a CIA agent on a mission to find out where the German’s are concealing the Milk Duds.”

“The hell you are!” Frank Daniels exclaimed with a liveliness Beverley hadn’t seen in months. Seeing his son, Henry, acting like such a moron, must’ve energized

him. It was like Henry was a misbehaving kid again and Frank still a fairly young man hoping to set him straight. "I may be old, but I'm never too old to teach you some manners about not busting through your parents' windows!" He grasped his cane that was resting against the recliner-side table, and like the mighty sword Excalibur, he held it up high and waving it in the air as a way of taunting the dragon he was about to slay. He began to move promptly...for an old man in his condition, that is, which still wasn't fast at all. Observing each wobbly step, Mark Stone became confident that he would have time to get a snack from the kitchen and still make it back before the old man got within striking distance. After Frank made it a couple feet closer, he began coughing uncontrollably. His lungs were closing up again as they had frequently in the past when he got worked up. He wheezed short irregular breaths and his posture caved. Beverley was quick to stabilize him and help him back to his recliner before he fell.

"Carrie, would you be a dear and grab a glass a water from the kitchen," Bev requested, "*it's for Frank,*" she added in a hushed tone as if it was imperative he didn't hear, so he could be saved the embarrassment. Carrie rightfully obeyed and came back with a glass of water a minute later. Frank's breathing gradually calmed. He slowly sipped from the glass. He had been dealing with a rare form of lung disease for the past six months. His doctors claimed he was doing "great!" and was "a real champ", but Beverley and Frank both knew this was just doctor talk for "things are actually pretty bleak." The research online said patients with Frank's disease didn't last more than a year. This broke poor Beverley's heart of course. She never told Henry this. How could she? Just like any mother in a similar situation, she didn't want her son to worry. She gave him the doctor talk - "the doctors say he's doing great; he's a real champ." In hindsight, maybe this - his mother lying to him about his father's ailing health - is what caused Henry to first crack.

Neither Henry nor Mark Stone looked the least bit concerned by Frank's recent coughing episode. Stone was on a mission. That's all that mattered. While the group cared for Mr. Daniels's well being, Stone slipped out of the room and down the hall, where he began rifling through a coat closet. He didn't need there help. He would figure out the location of the Milk Duds without them. He suspected they could be stored in this very house. It made perfect sense to Stone. No one would ever suspect the Milk Duds to be hidden in the suburban home of a retired couple in North Lancaster, Illinois. No one...that is, except for agent Mark Stone.

Before Stone could find anything pointing to where the Milk Duds could be, Ryan and Grant retrieved him and brought him back to the living room. He only agreed to go along because he figured he could use the time to interrogate the individuals. He still wasn't sure exactly how the five might be involved, but he was going to find out; he had to.

They were all seated in a circle surrounding Henry. His eyes shifted from face to face examining each of their expressions in great detail. A lot of forced, nervous smiles he noticed. They all directed their eyes down at the floor in order to avoid eye contact; it's like they were ashamed. Not Carrie. Her eyes were locked unrelentingly

with Henry's. She was as determined as Stone was to learn the truth, except the truth she was seeking didn't involve Milk Duds.

Beverley began, "Sweetie, you might be wondering why we all gathered together today and asked you to come. It's - it's because..." Beverley was lost, unable to form the words she needed due to the lump growing in her throat. Carrie continued for her,

"It's an intervention. That's what it is, Henry - "

"Mark," Stone quickly corrected her.

"It's an intervention," she repeated sternly. The words bolted from her mouth like a freight train - a train that slammed the group's psyches. They all knew that's what it was, but no one wanted to call it that. It's like telling someone they have a piece of food stuck in their teeth. You want to stop them from being embarrassed, but you hope the person will figure it out for his or herself. Carrie was the only one brave enough to do it. Henry still wasn't figuring it out though; the train wasn't hitting him like it was everybody else. He thought it was all a game and that he was in an entirely different world. Anger seeped inside Carrie. It was a dark shadow consuming her thoughts. She wanted to yell: this is REAL!

"We're just worried about you, Man; you're not the same anymore," explained Ryan, Henry's older brother, using a soft tone that was a deviation from the typical. He wasn't very practiced at expressing his emotions. He had no reason to be - certainly not for his heartless corporate job, which he always had meetings for.

"What can we do to help you?" pleaded Grant as he stretched his arms out for Henry. None of them really knew what they could do to help. Carrie first suggested therapy when they talked about it, but Beverley was quick to disagree. She didn't think he needed it. "Not Henry, never," she said. At least with a therapist they might be able to pinpoint why Henry had lost himself and was now putting on this charade. All anyone could do was guess. It could have been any number of things though. His mother lying to him about his father's poor health was certainly a possibility, but so was him losing his job three months ago, or the fact that he was thirty-two years old and still hadn't settled down with a family yet. It could have been something deeper below the surface that no one else could see. They were all fairly likely.

Stone thought for a moment, directing his gaze to the ceiling weighing his options. "Well," he began, "you can start..." the group hung on his every word, "by telling me the location of the Milk Duds." Carrie sighed in disappointment, burying her head in her palms.

Henry's mother answered, "We don't keep candy in the house. Your father would always sneak-eat it." Henry was well aware they didn't keep candy in the house. Beverley was unaware that Milk Duds was actually the codename for innovative weaponry software the government was seeking to keep under control. Why the CIA chose Milk Duds as the codename, Stone had no idea. He assumed they were running out of badass codenames, and they started using regular day objects to make conversations including them sound normal and unsuspecting.

"I am sixty-six years old. If I want candy, I should be able to have it!" Henry's father interjected commandingly. His health was weak yes, but he always had

strength to defend his personal liberties no matter how ridiculous. "Besides, what do you need Milk Duds for?"

"Well, if he wants Milk Duds, we can go out and pick some up at the supermarket I'm sure. It's no trouble really," Bev offered. She would do anything for her baby – her thirty-two year old baby.

"Milk Duds aren't even that great. They stick to your teeth," Grant commented while shaking his head in disapproval, "I prefer Kit Kats,"

"Twix are pretty good too," added Ryan.

"Right you are!" Frank happily agreed.

"Okay, so I'll run down to the store and grab some Kit Kats, Twix bars...but what about the Milk Duds?" Beverley asked. She swung her black leather purse over her shoulder and snagged her keys from the top drawer of the nightstand aside the front door.

Carrie groaned. She was surrounded by numbskulls – lovable but easily distracted numbskulls. It was no wonder Henry had gone insane. She had known Henry the shortest amount of time, so why was she the one that seemed to care the most about helping him? Carrie was Henry's girlfriend...kind of. They had in fact been dating for a little over five months now, unfortunately the past two months were him acting like this – secret agent Mark Stone on a mission to save the world. And the more displaced he was from reality, the more disconnected she felt from the nice, funny, cute guy she first started dating. She knew she would feel guilty breaking up with him. He was unstable; he could kill himself! It was a problematic situation. If she stayed with him, all her friends would ask, "why didn't you dump him? He's crazy!" And if she broke up with him, those same friends would say "how could you break up with a guy going through such a tough time already? Don't you have a heart?!" Another part of her believed he could come out of his fantasy at any moment and be the sweet old Henry again.

Stone had been tapping his feet and bobbing his knees up and down without realizing it – a sign of anxiousness. He was getting nowhere by simply sitting there. Mark Stone had to find a way out. Before Carrie could decide her next step or Bev could leave for the supermarket, Stone sprang from his seat in the middle of the circle and made a run for the stairs. Grant lunged at him with his long body, wrapping him up by his calves at the edge of staircase. Henry's knees buckled, but he was back to his feet in a second and escaped Grant's grasp, continuing up the stairway. Grant remained hot on his trail, followed by Carrie and Ryan. The action riled Frank up, and he grabbed his cane. He was ready to jump out of his chair again to whoop that buffoon's butt, but was restrained by Beverley.

Stone barreled down the upstairs hallway, tipping and knocking family photographs off the walls as he went. A few came crashing down shattering the glass and posing as obstacles for the pursuing taskforce. He turned sharply into the room on the right at the end of the hallway. It was Henry's old room. Grant was only a second or two behind. He slid on his socks across the hardwood floors to the door opening, nearly hurtling into the adjacent closet. It was too late. Neither Henry nor Mark Stone could be seen in the room. Grant's eyes fell ten feet in front of him upon the window that overlooked the backyard; it was wide open. He leapt over the bed and landed at the foot of the windowsill. He got there just in time to see Henry

sprinting out of the yard and out of his view. Grant wondered: did he jump out of a second-story window that easily? Ryan and Carrie were now in the doorway; they quickly realized what had happened when Grant turned away from the window to see them. His hands placed on his head and fingers rifled through the thin fibers of his black hair made him appear dumbfounded. Though, Grant didn't have time to fret; he still had a chance to find Henry, to save him. He navigated out of the room, blowing by Ryan and Carrie, who were in the midst of guessing where Henry might have went.

The two-story jump was easy for Mark Stone. He had done it several times both in training and in missions that required it. The key was to not think about it because that's when you hesitate and second-guess yourself. His next destination was a long shot for discovering the location of the Milk Duds, but he was running out of options and time. Stone took an off-road shortcut and arrived in four minutes.

Meanwhile, Grant raced out the house, with Carrie not far behind, to see which direction Henry was going. They followed him as he darted through bushes, up and down rolling hills, and in between trunks of towering trees. Mark Stone was aware of this, but chose to avoid the potential confrontation because he didn't see them as a serious threat...yet.

Ryan didn't continue the chase because he was sick of the "bullshit", and he had his 2:30 meeting to attend to. Beverley and Frank stayed at their house, where they could relax from all the "ruckus." They waited by the phone for a call from Grant or Carrie.

When Stone finally stopped running, he lied down on top of a grassy hill to survey the area stretched out in front of him. Grant and Carrie caught up less than a minute after. They monitored Henry from a distance, conspicuously hidden by a large willow tree.

"I should have known!" Grant cursed at himself in disgust. There were only two places Henry would go in the town. His parents' house was one and where they were now was the other.

"What?! It's a school," Carrie said naively, looking around at the numerous children on swings and various playground structures, jumping rope and playing hop scotch on the cement.

"No," Grant paused, "It's *our* elementary school. The one Henry and I went to as kids." Carrie looked at Grant with her eyes wide. Henry, back when he was still Henry, had rarely talked about his childhood – nothing about his elementary school.

"It's probably the only other place he thinks the Milk Duds could be," she suggested.

"That's exactly right, Carrie," Stone interrupted. He must have snuck up on them without their noticing. He was good at that now that he was in the CIA.

"Come on, Grant, let's take a walk." Neither Grant nor Carrie knew what to do, so neither budged a step.

"Come on," Stone repeated, motioning with his hand to follow. Grant looked to Carrie, who nodded her head towards Henry, encouraging him to go. He shrugged

his shoulders and went along. They walked down the hill across an unoccupied soccer field to the fringe of a forest that marked the left edge of the playground area. Carrie stayed by the willow tree keeping an eye on the two.

“Grant, do you want to know one of the most important skills to have as a CIA agent?”

“Sure. Why not?” If he could keep the conversation flowing, Grant would have a chance to talk to Henry. Not Mark Stone, but Henry.

“Perspective,” Mark Stone answered, “We all have different perceptions for objects, people, and events, but the ability to pick up on the subtle differences and see things for how they truly are...is...*essential*.”

GAAaaahh! Grant yelled in his head. Why couldn't Henry pick up on the obvious fact that he was not actually a CIA agent?! He nodded along for Henry's sake.

“Take those German special agents right there for example,” Henry pointed to a group of six adults – probably teachers – standing near the school entrance supervising the children on the playground, “they probably think they are the good guys, but they don't realize the corruptness of their leader,” he looked down and shook his head in a way that conveyed his sympathy for the souls he saw as misguided. He peeked his head up, “If only they saw...what I saw and knew what I knew, ya know? They would surely change sides.” Stone examined the group of German agents pondering the thought. Grant followed suit because he didn't know what else to do. He didn't recognize any of the teachers from his days at the school. A few of them were close to his age – in their early to mid thirties. The others were much older – in their 60s or 70s. Regardless of their age, they all wore the same blank expression, an expression that said, “Get me out of here!” and “I hate this!” Grant easily identified the signs: the careless posture with arms folded across the upper torso, the head slightly tilted to the side, the empty frown that refused trying to be a smile, and, of course, the aimless, drifting eyes daydreaming of something better. Moving from one face to another, Grant, for the first time ever, realized that he had observed this expression thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of times before. He saw it on the faces of bank tellers, fast food cashiers, people waiting in waiting rooms, his coworkers, and even he, himself, and the rest of Henry's family had held the expression earlier that day while waiting in the living room.

It was the stark opposite of Henry's face at this moment. His appearance was confident and dutiful. He stood tall with his chest high. He knew what he wanted and was determined to attain it. His eyes revealed this fearlessness. At the same time, he looked as though he didn't have a worry in the world. The corners of his mouth perked up forming a sly smirk like he had a secret no else knew.

Mark Stone cleared his throat and turned to Grant, “Grant...are you working for the Germans?”

Speechless. Grant didn't think he was working for the Germans, but how could he be sure in this imaginary world Henry was living in? All Grant could muster was a mumbled “No.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Good. Now come on, let's go find out what those Germans know about the Milk Duds,” he declared boldly and sprang into a jog in the direction of the teachers.

The only thing worse than Henry being crazy was Henry being crazy and interacting with strangers. They would have no idea what to think; they would probably call the cops on him. Grant had to stop him before he got any closer.

"Henry!" Grant exclaimed while chasing from behind. It worked. Stone froze in his tracks and spun 180 degrees.

"It's Mark Stone," he barked, "I already told you. I'm an operations agent for the CIA."

Grant had enough of playing this ridiculous game. His anger boiled over, and before he knew it, he was denouncing Henry's false identity: "But that's not realistic! If you were really working for the CIA, you wouldn't be going around telling people!" Stone stared back blankly thinking Grant had no right to talk about something he knew absolutely nothing about.

"Come here," Stone commanded despite Grant being only a few feet from him, "look at these high-tech gadgets the CIA provided, then tell me I'm not in the CIA." Stone took off and laid out his utility belt displaying his gadgets.

Where Stone saw a gun-like device that shot a cable line, Grant saw a Nerf gun rigged with a jump rope. Where Stone saw a pair of gloves that enabled him to scale a vertical wall, Grant saw suction cups glued to Beverley's leather gloves. The night vision goggles were real; they still had the Walmart price sticker on them. Where Stone saw a gadget that could deflect laser beams, Grant saw a handheld mirror. And where Stone saw a group of German agents spying on a CIA training camp, Grant saw teachers watching children play on a playground. Henry, or Mark Stone, was a lot more like that kid pretending to be a secret agent in a tree house than he knew.

"Okay, maybe you are an agent...maybe," Grant agreed in order to calm Henry and avoid a scene in front of the kids. Henry was about to head back in the direction of the teachers when Grant blurted out, "Wait!" Stone stopped himself again to hear what he had to say.

"I think I know where the Milk Duds are," he said with a big smile on his face, the sight of which sent a rush of adrenaline through Stone's body.

"You're sure?"

"Of course! It's so obvious that I can't believe I didn't realize it before!" Grant exclaimed enthusiastically, "Come on! Back to the house!" and he took off with Henry now following. Carrie, who was still sitting by the willow, saw them approaching her with great speed.

"What's going on?!" She shouted as they blazed past her without stopping.

"Can't talk. Just follow!" Grant hollered. It was a thrill for Grant to be with Henry again running as fast as they could from school back to Henry's parents' house, like they were kids on another adventure. Grant was acting on pure impulse. He only had the time it took to get back to the house to formulate a plan, a plan to help Henry. Thankfully, it didn't take him long.

Stone was unsure what to make of the situation. Could he really trust Grant? Stone, after all, was a lone falcon; it was a metaphor as well as his codename. All of his past missions were solo.

“Stone!” Grant called out to Henry who was several strides behind him, “I’m going to phone Beverley and Frank to make sure they don’t get in the way of us securing the Milk Duds.”

“Good idea. That old man is an asshole,” Stone replied with a conviction that, if they had not been running, would have caused Grant and Carrie to stop completely and do a double take. Grant did phone Beverley and Frank as he ran but told them to call for the nurses at Kensington Mental Health Hospital to come get Henry as soon as they returned to the house.

The agent and his two colleagues slowed as they reached the curb of 43 Carolina Drive. Grant swung open the screen door to the front hall where Mrs. Daniels was waiting nearby with three cups of water – exactly like they were kids again. Grant gulped his down in a matter of seconds. After a couple of minutes of catching their breaths and hydrating, Grant wiped the sweat that had accumulated on his forehead with his sleeve. He hoped the mental health professionals would get there soon, but he couldn’t stall much longer; Stone was ready to claim what he came for.

The second he walked in the door Stone knew something was off. Carrie, Frank, and Beverley, were all wearing the forced, nervous smiles they wore earlier. It was a setup. It was setup. It was a setup. Stone was only a few feet from the door, but he knew he couldn’t escape this time, not again. He had to settle this once and for all. Right here. Right now.

“Alright...Let’s go get the Milk Duds,” Grant said with a hint of hesitation in his voice. Carrie and Beverley eyed each other nervously while Frank looked on from his recliner in the living room.

“Yeah. Hold on just one second though,” Stone paused. He dropped to one knee and lifted his right pant leg revealing a small pistol strapped to his shin.

Carrie’s cup fell from her hand. The cheap plastic clunked against the hardwood floor.

“Oh my lord!” Beverley threw her arms in disbelief and her head wobbled around the axis of her neck like she was about to faint.

Mark Stone pulled the pistol from its holster and slowly rose to his full height. His arm ascended until it was perpendicular to his body with the gun pointed at Grant’s head. Grant was paralyzed where he stood.

“Henry! What are you doing?!? Stop it!!” Carrie cried, her eyes welling up. Frank was mystified yet managed to stand from his chair.

“Where’d you get that, Henry!?” Frank yelled to no avail, “Henry!?” Bev fell back onto the bottom few steps of the staircase, whimpering and covering her eyes. She couldn’t bear to watch her son become a murderer.

“I knew I couldn’t trust you, Grant. I knew it the second I saw your face through that window earlier today...you’re working for the Germans!” Stone sounded sinister yet was convincingly calm; he was a villain.

“You’re no better than they are,” he said as he swiveled his gun to point to the others: Carrie, Beverley, and Frank. Carrie joined Beverley at the bottom of the staircase. Meanwhile, Frank, still in the living room, kept one eye on Henry and the

other on the broken window, waiting for the nurses from Kensington Hospital to arrive.

Grant said nothing. He didn't know what he could say, if anything but sorry. Even if Grant wanted to say it, he was so terrified he wouldn't be able to do it physically. Stone moved two steps closer to him. The barrel of the handgun was only inches from the man's temple. If his body shook any more than it already was, he would surely feel the cold, metal barrel pressing against his hot, sweaty forehead.

Grant took this ever so fleeting moment to reflect on his journey with Henry and how it had led him here. He recalled the time when they were seven and built a time machine out of cardboard boxes, duct tape, and tin foil, then charged kids in the neighborhood five dollars to use it. It was better than any lemonade stand. When they were ten, they ran away from home and lived out of Grant's tree house for three days, embezzling snacks from his house. There was bowling, bike rides, and bonfires, and the time at 8th grade summer camp when they snuck out to the girls' cabin at night and got a glimpse of Haley Broderick changing. Another time they organized the senior prank by having a rooftop party on their high school building. These were all Henry's initiatives; Grant just followed his lead. Without Henry's constant curiosity and adventurous spirit, Grant's adolescence wouldn't have been nearly as exciting as it was. Things, however, were certainly different now.

Like a predator preparing to pounce on its prey, Agent Mark Stone began circling Grant methodically, never lifting his gaze. Grant suspected it was all over for him. As Stone returned to his starting point of the circle, he spoke in the form of a spooky whisper, "Perspective, Grant..."

"If only you saw what I saw and knew what I knew...you would certainly change sides."

Despite the pressure mounting heavily against him, something, in that moment in that order of words, clicked for Grant – a revelation of sorts. Henry wasn't crazy; he was right. Grant was on the wrong side...in real life. It wasn't Americans versus Germans. It was, in many ways, kids versus teachers and adults, the lively versus the lifeless, free spirits versus chained prisoners. Prisoners chained to a boring job and a mediocre life, except they weren't being held against their will. They were doing it to themselves. That's what Henry was fighting against. Being a CIA agent was his way of avoiding the path of his father, brother Ryan, and so many others living this way. They were drifting through the world without enthusiasm and without doing anything meaningful to make this evil place any better. That's what he was talking about at the school. Perspective. Grant could now see what Henry saw. He realized his only option to get out of this alive was to change sides, to be a good guy with Mark Stone.

Stone steadied his eyes, fixating them on his target and mentally blocking out the whimpers and shouts coming from the background characters. He gripped the gun tighter. This wasn't how he expected it to happen, but there was no doubt in his mind. What he was about to do was right. Stone placed his finger on the trigger and—
"Wait!!!" Grant pleaded.

Stone softened his grip and lifted his finger to listen. He waited, but the air remained empty until Grant finally found the words.

"I'm not like them. I'm not...all I can say is...*I know* I was wrong," he admitted. Stone was taken aback slightly. His steely glare reduced to an inquisitive look, wanting to hear more.

"I see what you see, and I want to make things right. I want to help," he offered. Carrie, Frank, and Bev were on pins and needles to hear Henry's response to the plea.

"Well that's very nice, but it's TOO LATE!" Stone declared fiercely. Stone's gun remained firmly marked on Grant's skull, and their eyes remained locked. It was a stare down of grand proportions between two mental maestros – two familiar friends. For those in attendance, it was petrifying to watch. For Stone, it was exhilarating, like a stare down between two gunmen about to shoot it out in a classic western movie.

It was at this time that Frank noticed the Kensington van pull up to the house and the nurses head for the front door. Stone could sense someone closing in. He deliberately broke his eye line from Grant's. It looked as though nothing happened, but Grant saw it in plain sight: it was a wink.

Ding-dong. The doorbell rang. He immediately pulled the trigger. Click.

"NOOOOO!!" Frank bellowed. Grant flinched. Carrie and Bev peered away from the scene, but nothing happened. No bullet whizzed through the air or blasted through Grant's brain. Instead, Stone dropped to his knee again, pulling another pistol off of his opposite shin and tossed it to Grant. This one, he assumed, was also not loaded. Two familiar friends on a crazy adventure once again. Ding-dong. The doorbell rang a second time.

"Hurry! To the computer for the Milk Duds!" Grant directed upstairs, "I'll cover you!" Mark Stone launched himself onto the outside ledge of the staircase and over the railing. Grant dove into a summersault, landing at the bottom of the stairway where Carrie and Beverley sat in shock, alarm, and confusion. He looked at them and then at Frank across the room,

"Everything is going to be okay. I'll explain later," Grant said with a big grin, which quickly transformed into his serious face – the look of a man on a top secret mission. He raced past the two up the stairs to meet Stone at the top. Together, they downloaded the Milk Duds, a software file conveniently located on Mr. and Mrs. Daniels' desktop computer, onto a flash drive and deleted the original. Then, they escaped from the house using Stone's cable gun to repel from the second floor. They narrowly avoided the clutches of German Intelligence agents lurking for them at the school. Thankfully, Stone's utility belt included a smoke bomb. Finally, they made it to the CIA safe house, the tree house in Grant's parents' backyard, with the Milk Duds securely in hand. Once there, they turned the flash drive with the weaponry software over to their captain, who was waiting for them. Mark Stone and Grant did it; they successfully saved the world...and all before dinnertime. Mission: Complete.

After Stone's and Grant's extreme getaway, Carrie answered the door to send the Kensington nurses back to the hospital, labeling the call a "mistake" and "misunderstanding."

The group of five that had decided to hold the intervention reconvened. Unfortunately, Ryan was still busy with meetings so he couldn't make it, but he was "glad to hear Henry was doing better and was confident the group would make the right decision for him." This time they met, they decided, after much persuading from Grant, that maybe it would be best for Henry if they continued to play along with him...for now. Still, they knew something had to be done, so, at Grant's suggestion, they applied him for a real job with the CIA. Low and behold, he got the job. They had to convince him that, even though he already worked for the CIA, this job was better because it was a promotion with better pay. They also had to explain to him that his coworkers would call him "Henry" because that's the new undercover name he was assigned.

Taking the job meant moving to CIA Headquarters in Langley, Virginia, and moving meant Henry saying goodbye to his family and Carrie. Carrie and Henry mutually decided to break up; neither wanted to be in a long distance relationship, and they really hadn't been together much that last month anyway.

Grant also applied and received a position at the CIA. It was in a different division, but it allowed he and Henry to live together and go on adventures occasionally outside of work.

For Henry's job, he worked at a desk cubicle. He hated it. "We'll see how it goes," he told Grant one day after work as they sat in lawn chairs on the roof of their apartment building. It was just going on nine o'clock and the sun had already fallen, but it wasn't completely dark yet. Henry and Grant were front row as God painted a masterpiece in the clouds of the late evening sky. Spiraling streaks and waves highlighted by sensational shades of deep purple, magenta, and cream orange stretched long and deep across the heavens. One by one night-lights of the city streets began to flicker on all around them. Henry spoke again: "There's just something about being in the field that I miss. Something you can't replicate at a desk."

"Maybe you should request an interview for that position training new field agents," Grant suggested, "I think you'd be good at that - leading people." Henry hadn't considered it previously, but he liked the sound of it. Helping people pursue their own aspirations in the field. He smiled fondly at the idea.

"Yeah, I think I'll do that." As he said this, he gazed out to the horizon. The kid in the tree house was still out there somewhere not too far away. He chuckled at the thought.

THE END.