# Bill’s Preparations For Roland’s RV Trip

By Richard A. Demers

## Preface

Authors hate wasting their scribblings, but not everything they write makes it into a novel. Such is the case with this series of chapters originally written as part of***A Billionaire’s Odyssey***. My editor argued that they interfered with the flow of the novel, that they were too long and elaborate a break from the basic line of the story, that they should be replaced by a simple summary. So, that's what this is, scribblings that didn't make it into the novel that I didn't want to just delete. Even if you haven't read the novel, this story stands on its own.

## Introduction

In the chapters of *A Billionaire’s Odyssey* that precede what follows here, Roland Swanson has psychologically descended into a deep funk that has rendered him useless as the Chief Executive Officer of the Swanson Fund, a hedge fund that manages billions of dollars in assets. To make things worse, Lillian, his wife, has divorced him because of an affair he’d had. His old friend Bill McKee, the Chief Financial Officer of the fund, is desperate to revive Roland and make him productive once again. With Simone, his wife, Bill decides that Roland must leave his estate and reengage the real world and common people. Their solution is for Roland to take a trip in a motorhome, during which he would encounter many novel, enriching situations. They create a TV production company to stage those situations, but easier said than done. These outtakes from *A Billionaire’s Odyssey* detail Bill’s activities prior to the start of Roland’s odyssey of self-rediscovery.

## An Old Beat-up RV

Bill drove through the gate of the high chain-link fence surrounding RV Adventures, Inc. and parked in front of the one-story brick building that served as the lot's office. He was met at the front door by his uncle, who greeted him with a bear hug. Only a few years older than Bill, John Sweeney had gone bald early, but was still active and enjoyed his life and his work.

“Howdy nephew,” Sweeney said. “This is twice in one week. Come to check up on your investment?”

“Not exactly, Uncle John. There is a favor I'd like to ask of you.”

“Anything, Bill, anything. What do you need?” Sweeney asked, as they walked into his office.

“I need a motorhome,” Bill said.

“Those I've got,” Sweeney cheerfully replied. “Type-A or Type-C? For how many people? And how much do you want to spend? At wholesale, of course.”

The bewildered look on Bill's face must have been all the answer Sweeney needed. He'd seen it all too often on customers who'd gotten the RV bug, but still needed to be educated. “Type-A motorhomes look like a bus or a self-propelled travel trailer, and Type-Cs look like a van in front and a travel trailer in back.”

“I'm not sure,” Bill said. “I've seen a number of different kinds on the road, but I've never paid them much attention. What did those people last week, the Kingmans, have?”

Sweeney got to his feet: “They had a Type-A Winnebago, but come on, it's time for some basic education. I'll show you what we have”

Out on the lot, Sweeney walked straight to the biggest and fanciest motorhome, parked facing the road: “This is a thirty-eight-foot Type-A that's built on a bus chassis. It has a diesel engine in the rear. A lot of people consider this the best design because it handles great, has good fuel economy, and gives you a lot of room for carrying stuff under the floor. Let's look inside. I think you'll be impressed.”

McKee liked what he saw. It was luxurious, a self-contained cottage on wheels. Everything was superbly finished with the finest materials, and it included elaborate electronic systems for audio and video entertainment. If he were buying a motorhome for his own use, this is what he would want. But it grossly violated one of Sam Robbins' primary recommendations, to keep everything as low key as possible to avoid attracting unnecessary attention.

“This is great,” he said, “but what I want is something that one person can live in for several months without attracting much attention. Something like this is just too flashy. And besides, it's so big. No, I think something smaller, more maneuverable, and less ostentatious is what I want.”

“Okay, let me show you a Type-C,” John said.

They walked past several Type-As, some of which looked more like boxes on wheels than busses and came to the first of the Type-Cs. It was a thirty-one-footer, also fitted out superbly. McKee let Sweeney show it to him, but again he knew it was too much of a good thing.

Next, Sweeney showed him a twenty-four-foot, Type-C. The biggest difference, he saw was that it didn't have a separate bedroom compartment at the rear. Instead, it just had a large bed built over the cab that you had to climb a short ladder to get to. That would be fine for a single person, but Bill didn't think Swanson would be alone all the time. And besides, everything else about the motorhome was still too fancy.

“No, John,” Bill said, “it's still too flashy, and I want one that has a separate bed in the back. It’ll have to be a small Type-A, I guess. Do you have something that's been used a lot and shows it?”

Sweeney looked at him strangely: “What's going on here, Bill? We both know you can afford anything you want, and I'll sell it to you wholesale besides.”

“First off,” Bill answered, “it's not for me. I have a client who wants to get out on his own for a while in one of these things, but he doesn't want to attract any attention. This is just one of those times when less is best. Do you have anything else to show me?”

Sweeney knew he'd been told to mind his own business and didn't care much for it, but he also owed Bill big time and knew it: “Yeah Bill, I got in an old Type-A Winnebago yesterday, but it's really beat up.”

Bill followed Sweeney to the back of the lot, behind the service building. There, by itself, was an ugly box-on-wheels motorhome that could only be described as well used. It had been owned by a family with four kids, who had used it for many years of summer vacations and weekend outings. It had been all over North America, including Alaska, and it showed all its one-hundred-and-ninety-thousand miles. Its paint was faded, its siding was dented and stained, and its tires were bald. And that was just the outside; the inside condition matched, and the engine, the transmission, and the air-conditioner were shot.

“What would it take to bring everything but the exterior appearance up to better than new condition?” Bill asked.

“A lot more than it's worth,” Sweeney replied “I only took this in trade because they bought a new one. There's no way I can fix it up and sell it at a profit. I was planning on wholesaling it.”

“But what if someone is willing to pay whatever it takes?” Bill demanded.

“You're serious about this, aren't you?”

“Completely. How long would it take?” Bill persisted.

“How soon do you want it?”

“I need to have it ready on May first.” Bill said firmly.

Sweeney thought for a moment. “That's going to be tough to do. I'll have to put a team of men on it. And as far as cost is concerned, that's hard to say, but probably more than a new one.”

“Whatever it costs, please get started on it.” Bill requested.

### Lucian Hayes, spy master

The car rented at Dulles International Airport, a Ford Taurus, was indistinguishable from any of the hundreds Bill McKee had rented during his many years of business travel. The sun was still high in the afternoon sky as he drove into a posh residential neighborhood of McLean, Virginia, and parked in front of an elegant Federalist-style brick house. As he walked to the front door, he could feel the eyes of silent watchers as they tracked him up the steps. He was glad he had made an appointment—not that any other type of meeting with Dr. Lucian Hayes would have been possible.

The man who answered the doorbell was five feet six inches in height and shaped like a pear. He had thinning salt-and-pepper hair and a full moustache and beard. He was dressed in a white collared shirt with dark gray slacks held up by colorful suspenders. He smiled broadly and welcomed McKee into his home: “Bill, it's been too long. It's good to see you again.”

“Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, Dr. Hayes, Bill replied as he removed his coat. “I know how busy you are.”

“Yes, things are a bit hectic these days. Still, I always try to make time for friends—and, please, call me Lucian.”

“It's kind of you to count me among your friends,” Bill said.

“Nonsense, we go back a long way. Come in, come in.”

Dr. Lucian Hayes, the Deputy Director for Operations of the Central Intelligence Agency, led McKee into his study, a room lined with overflowing bookshelves. They sat in well worn, wingback chairs on either side of a fireplace in which a fire was blazing to ward off the chill of early Spring. Dr. Hayes poured coffee into ceramic mugs, handed one to Bill, and leaned back in his chair.

Being in Lucian's presence brought back memories of his years at Princeton when he had been just another student in Dr. Hayes course on the History of Western Civilization. He had sat in the front row of the class, captivated by the force of the older man's personality and his love of history. It was not a typical lecture course. Dr. Hayes demanded a level of commitment that few students could rise to. Every class was an immersion in the lives and thoughts of people long gone. This was combined with analysis and debate on their effect on the modern world. Few students gave as good as they got and earned Dr. Hayes’ respect. Bill McKee had been one of the few who had. In some strange way, it had led to an ongoing friendship.

Lucian waited until after Bill had added cream to his coffee. “You said on the phone that you need some advice. It's not something I normally give—it's so seldom taken—but regardless, what can I do for you?”

Leaning forward in his chair, Bill quickly outlined his problem with Roland and the plan he had developed to solve it.

“You've certainly come up with an unusual solution,” Lucian commented. “But I do have a question about security. Putting a rich man out on the road by himself is just asking for trouble. If the word gets out—and you must assume it will—you'll have all kinds of people trying to get their claws into him, including kidnapping.”

“That's precisely my concern,” Bill said. “I need someone to teach me how to think about security, and then I need someone who is absolutely reliable to take charge of security for me.”

### Sam Robbins, security chief

Bill was just getting out of the shower when the phone in his hotel room rang. He rushed to pick up, dripping water onto the carpet.

A man’s voice said, “Good morning Mr. McKee. My name is Sam Robbins. I was asked to call you.”

“Yes, I was expecting your call,” Bill confirmed. “Would it be possible for us to meet this morning?”

“I'm in the restaurant of your hotel right now,” Sam said.

“Good, I'll be right down,” Bill said, as he dried his hair with a towel. “How will I recognize you?”

“I know what you look like Mr. McKee. I'll wave you over.” Sam said.

Bill dressed quickly and proceeded down the elevator to the lobby and into the restaurant. A man in a neatly pressed gray suit sat in a booth near the back of the restaurant. He stood and waved Bill over. McKee walked to the booth without changing his leisurely pace. He wanted his first impressions of this man to be accurate and complete.

Physically, Sam was impressive—over six feet tall and around two-hundred-twenty-five pounds, all of it solid muscle, clearly the result of intensive physical training. He was handsome in the rugged sort of way that some women find attractive. As Bill approached him, he stuck out his hand. “I'm Sam Robbins,” he said.

They sat in the facing seats of the booth. A waitress approached with menus.

Bill scanned the menu, chose eggs over easy with bacon, rye toast, and black coffee. Sam ordered a stack of buttermilk pancakes and coffee with cream.

Bill noticed Sam was looking directly at him, evaluating him.

“What do you see, Mr. Robbins?” Bill asked.

“I see a white male in his late forties, approximately five feet ten inches tall, one hundred and seventy pounds, graying hair, good physical condition but not an athlete—good dresser—an executive of some sort. And, oh yes, someone with incredibly good connections. Now, tell me what you see.”

Bill smiled broadly. “I see a man who lives up to his reputation, though I don't know precisely what that reputation might be.”

“I was told I might be of service to you,” Sam deadpanned.

“Yes, you may,” Bill confirmed, “but I would like to know a bit more about you and your credentials for doing security work.”

“Oh, I've been around a bit—Military Police, Secret Service, that sort of thing.”

McKee noticed he hadn't said anything about his connections with Dr. Hayes, or the CIA, but that was inferable in any case.

“You mentioned the Secret Service. Did that include protecting VIPs?” Bill asked.

“That's one of the things the Secret Service does best,” Sam said, with a knowing grin.

“How about surveillance to acquire information about people?” Bill demanded.

“No problems as long as it doesn’t involve anything illegal, like breaking and entering private property,” Sam affirmed.

“Okay, how much experience have you had in planning and directing mobile security operations?” Bill continued.

Robbins just smiled. “I can handle the job, Mr. McKee.”

Bill leaned back in his seat. “I do a lot of interviewing, Mr. Robbins. People are usually a bit more forthcoming with their answers to my questions.”

“This isn't a typical job interview, is it? I wouldn't have been called me if I couldn't handle it,” Sam said in a strong positive voice.

McKee had to admit the truth of that. “Okay, let's stipulate that you're qualified for the job. I'll tell you what the job is all about, and I'll depend on you to decide whether you can handle it.”

Bill reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out an envelope which he put on the table. “There's five hundred dollars in this envelope. If you decide you don’t want the job, pick it up and forget we ever met. If you decide you can handle the job, we'll discuss pay for you and the team you'll be hiring. Agreed?”

Sam glanced at the envelope but didn't touch it. “Agreed,” he said.

The waitress brought their breakfasts and they reverted to casual chit-chat while they ate. Bill used the time to think about the quiet, intense man opposite him. Sam Robbins wouldn't be easy to get to know, and McKee would be handing over to him an opportunity to do incredible damage if Dr. Hayes had misjudged his character. Still, he liked what he'd seen so far, and he had to trust someone, or the project would never get off the ground. That's why he'd gone to Lucian Hayes for a recommendation.

After breakfast, they took the elevator up to McKee's room. Finally, providing specific names and places, Bill told Robbins about the project. Roland would be traveling around in an RV while Lillian, his ex-wife, lived a busy life in Manhattan. The goal of the project was to get them back together, so they could resume their marriage and so Roland could return to work at the Swanson Fund.

Sam's reaction when Bill finished was simple and direct. “This is just about the craziest thing I've ever heard… crazy enough, though, that it just might work. What worries me is the number of people who need to be involved. It's going to take a cast of dozens, spread all over the country. You know, don't you, that your principals’ safety cannot be guaranteed in any absolute sense, especially if you don't want them to know we're around. It's hard enough when the principal is cooperating and stationary—two of them in this case—but you want them to be moving around, mingling with all kinds of people, unaware we're even out there. No, Bill, there's no way anyone can guarantee their safety.”

McKee hesitated, “But you can improve their odds, right?”

“That much I can do,” Sam asserted, “but it's going to be expensive. You're asking for around the clock coverage of two people for six months. That'll take at least two teams of four people in the field, one for each principal, someone manning a central control station, and someone coordinating the whole effort. Figure on a payroll of ten people just for security. With expenses, that'll be over a million dollars.”

“That's about what I figured,” McKee said, “Security is not an area I'll skimp on. Can you do the job?”

Sam hesitated, wondering what was motivating McKee to do something so radical. “Yes,” he said, “but now it's your turn to tell me why I would want to take on this responsibility.”

*Why indeed,* Bill wondered, *it’s a real bitch of an assignment, both arduous and boring at the same time. What would motivate this man and earn his loyalty. Money, partially, but that was never enough for a professional in any field. No, it would have to be pride at being involved in something important, and in a job well done.*

“Let's get your salary out of the way first,” Bill said. “How does twenty thousand a month sound—plus expenses, of course?”

Sam didn't have to think very long about the money. This was far more than he'd ever made in government service. He just nodded his head.

“Fine, what will it take to get good people for the rest of your team?” Bill asked.

“Something in the ten to fifteen a month range, depending on their experience,” Sam answered.

“Fine, but hire the best people available, a mix of men and women of mixed races,” Bill said.

He continued, “I'm prepared to go a big step beyond the money. I want everyone on the security team to have a strong incentive to do their absolute best, both individually and as a team. So, I'm also prepared to guarantee all of you access to one of the country's best job placement services upon successful completion of the project.”

“That's smart,” Sam said, “but I also want to know how you plan to finance this project. I need to know the money is coming from legal sources.”

“Roland is much more than just my boss—he’s my friend,” Bill answered. “We each have access to each other’s emergency funds, moneys that can be used to pay for medical or legal services, or anything else if one of us gets in a jam. It is all legal and drawn up in black and white. I can show you the contracts if you want.

“Now let me tell you why this job is so important.”

They talked for the next hour, with Bill filling in details and emphasizing the importance of Roland Swanson as the CEO of The Swanson Fund to the thousands of investors who trusted him to protect and grow their investments.

“Will you do it?” Bill asked, finally.

In truth, Sam had reached his decision shortly after Dr. Hayes' phone call the night before. Since retiring, he'd been bored. Getting back into action was what he needed and wanted, even if it was just a private security job. As McKee talked about the project, what Sam really heard was the level of excitement and commitment in his voice. Roland Swanson was more than McKee's employer, he was a friend with a problem, and worthy of a lot of trouble and expense. It wasn't clear yet how far McKee would be willing to go in this charade, or even what his real motives might be, but protecting both Swansons was the job Dr. Hayes really wanted done—even from McKee himself, if necessary. This might prove to be interesting. Again, he just nodded his head.

### The Webster Family

“It might not have occurred to you,” Sam said, “but we can't have Mr. Swanson wandering around the country using his own name. That would make it too easy for people to figure out who he really is. He needs an alias that he can easily remember, one supported by proper documentation and an online history to back it up.”

“How are you going to do that without government involvement?”

“There are people I know who can do things like this. They'll be expensive, but they'll keep their mouths shut. Besides, they won't know who the identity is for. Does Roland Webster work as an alias for you?”

“Sounds good to me,” Bill agreed. “Let’s also use the Webster name when referring to anyone in the Swanson family.”

Sam continued. “Something else we need is a name for this overall project to make it easier to refer to. How about the Seeker project, since that’s what Roland will be doing—seeking a new purpose for his life?”

“Yes,” Bill affirmed. “And Anchor for Lillian.

“Are you going to be able to put your team together in two weeks?” he asked.

“It may be a problem finding enough people right away, but I can always continue with the staffing after the project starts” Sam replied.

“That's true, but make sure you have enough people to get started properly. We'll meet again in a week to see how you're doing and to begin coordinating with some of the other people who'll be involved,” Bill said.

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a folded page and handed it over to Sam. “Here are the names of people I'm planning to bring in. I know them all personally and would normally trust them implicitly. I hate to do this, but I think we should do at least a minimum amount of background checking—you know, criminal records, employment histories, credit records, that sort of thing. Oh, and I'd like a rough check on their lifestyles relative to their income and assets. My schedule for talking to them is also there. I'll need your input on the first one by tomorrow morning.

Sam smiled. He would have done all that anyway, but it would be nice working for someone with some brains. They spent the next hour brainstorming, with Sam raising as many questions as he answered. The first names on Bill’s list to check were Roland and Lillian, but the actual first name Sam decided to check, though Bill didn’t know it, was that of Bill McKee, himself. He was determined to not allow himself to become involved in a scam, however innocent it appeared to be.

### Tracking the RV

It wasn't the kind of place that Bill McKee normally frequented. He had expected the meeting to be held in the office of Russ Lakeman, CEO of **Lakeman Electronics** in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The meeting had started in Russ’ office, but it hadn't lasted long there. Russ wasn't the kind of guy who could sit still at a conference table and coolly talk business. His energy levels and enthusiasm for any problem in his field were too great for that.

At only thirty-two years of age, Russ perfectly fit Bill's preconceived images of both an electronics engineer and an entrepreneur—right down to his wrinkled white shirt and a pocket protector full of pens and pencils. Bill had met Russ the previous year when Lakeman Electronics went public. McKee had visited their combination office and laboratory to decide how much of the initial stock offering the Swanson Fund would purchase. What he had found impressed him. It was a sound startup, with good books, great products, and dependable customers. And while they did some work for the Defense Department, mostly satellite telemetry stuff, it was only a small percentage of their bottom line.

After a few minutes of pleasantries, Russ decided the conference room just wouldn't do, and he had taken Bill into his personal laboratory. As the CEO of the firm, the lab was Russ's prize perquisite, and he had equipped it with a variety of meters, power supplies, and other unknown bits and pieces of electronic gadgets. On one wall there was a large marker board full of what looked like circuit diagrams, not that Bill could make any sense of them.

“So,” Russ said, “you want to be able to track this vehicle wherever it goes in the United States, Canada, or Mexico.”

“Yes, but not just the vehicle,” Bill said, “the driver too, when he is not in the vehicle. His movements are going to be unpredictable, and I don't want there to be any possibility of losing track of him. Is that something you can do?”

“The vehicle part is easy. The Defense Department put up a network of satellites a few years ago that lets us figure out where anything is located on Earth to within inches. It's called the Global Positioning System, or GPS for short.”

Bill looked confused. “I’ve heard of the GPS, but I don't think I understand how it does that. Do you mean the satellites can keep an eye on whatever the military wants them to track? That may be great for the army, but what good does it do us?”

It was Russ's turn to look confused, then his face registered amusement. “No, you've got it backwards. The satellites don't track individual objects—they just send out extremely precise time signals that the objects can use to figure out where they are. Each object has a receiver for these signals and calculates its location from what it receives. The system was designed to help ICBMs and smart bombs navigate, but there are a lot of civilian uses now.”

Bill wasn't sure he got the point about smart bombs. “So how big and how expensive is the receiver, and what kind of a computer does it take to do all the calculations?”

Russ was in his element. He pulled out his smartphone, called up an app, and handed it to Bill. “That's exactly where we are right now,” he said, pointing to the screen.

What Bill saw was a series of numbers that stated their latitude, longitude, and altitude.

“Some guys used one of these to navigate dogsled teams all the way to the North Pole,” Russ added.

Bill was impressed. “I guess I'm with you so far. We hide one of these things in the vehicle, and that way it always knows where it is.”

“Right.”

“But how does it help us know where the vehicle is?” Bill asked.

“No problem. It is, after all, a cellphone, which is itself a computer. You can call it to find out the vehicle's location, or you can have it call you periodically and tell you.”

“That could have a lot of interesting possibilities. I can see where a long-distance trucking company might find that useful.”

“Oh, is that what you want this for?” Russ asked.

“No, it isn't,” Bill answered curtly. “As I said earlier, I can't tell you what this will be used for exactly. Do you have a problem with that?”

“No sir, I don't, but you should be aware that I keep confidential records of all the work we do, and they can be subpoenaed if anyone in law enforcement needs to know more. Other than that, though, I keep my mouth shut about what we work on.”

They talked for another hour about all the things Bill wanted the “gadget” to be able to do, some of which suggested themselves as they discussed his basic needs. It really would have been better to be more open about the project, but compartmentalizing information was one of the basic security measures Sam Robbins had taught him.

Russ Lakeman's proposed solution was a hidden cell phone with lots of memory. It would be packaged with an independent power supply in a case about the size of a pack of cigarettes. Without any user interface components, like keyboards or displays, it really didn't have to be any bigger. It would be programmed in a language that was ideal for embedded systems. This was the only way Russ thought the programming could be done in time, and it would also allow the programming to be easily changed, if there was any need. Bill wasn't sure he'd need all those capabilities, but the overall project was far too important to take a chance of missing something they might need.

Russ Lakeman, being of significantly more than average intelligence, had no trouble figuring out that the problem was to maintain a close electronic surveillance on someone driving around the country. Bill had finally said the vehicle was an RV that was currently being renovated and that Russ’s men would be needed to install the new electronics in it. The money was right and there was a nice bonus if he could meet a very tight schedule. Still, that didn't seem to be much of a problem since all the components he needed were readily available and just needed to be wired together in a small box.

### Maria Singer, talent agent

McKee used a limousine service to go from his office in Stamford to the **Take 3 Talent Agency** in midtown Manhattan. The receptionist escorted him directly into the office of Maria Singer who was expecting him. He had known Maria since they were in elementary school, but he’d still had Sam do a quick check of Maria’s finances and reputation to be sure he could trust her.

All these years later, Maria still took his breath away, with her dark eyes and raven hair. While they were the same age and had been friends from their teen years, Bill knew he'd never had a chance with her romantically. The boy who lived next door to Maria was two years older and had his own car—a Chevy Corvair for heaven's sake. At that age Bill had had nothing to compete with.

Bill hadn't heard anything about her for twenty years when they'd met in Las Vegas at a conference on investing in the entertainment industry. She was working for a talent agency and he for a major hedge fund. They'd talked on the phone a few times since then, but the right deal just hadn't come along. However, her agency represented an impressive number of professional screen writers, directors, stuntmen, actors, and other entertainment people—a few at the tops of their professions, but all on the way up—and that's what attracted McKee to her now.

Maria's office was modestly sized but tastefully furnished, the walls hung with original paintings and watercolors by Itzhak Tarkay of women with blue eyelids lounging in cafés. Bill hardly noticed them; his attention was drawn completely to Maria, who was wearing a rose-colored silk blouse and a black, floral, A-line skirt. She walked toward him with her arms extended. Clearly, she expected a hug, and that was all right with Bill. It was the closest he'd ever gotten to her.

After preliminary chit-chat, Bill got right to the point and told her what he wanted. “I have this client who is a bit eccentric—but he also has good instincts about what will make money. He's decided that middle-aged people are tired of entertainment that doesn’t reflect what their lives are all about. You know, it is all teenage or twenty-something love stories or police procedurals. But they are just as hungry as ever for stories about mature people involved in interesting situations. Anything, really, as long as it involves people of their own generation.”

“Interesting,” Maria said, “a series of stories about middle-aged people having identity crises.”

“Sort of, but with a central story that runs through all of them. Something like a soap opera, but more like a miniseries in terms of quality and development.”

Maria leaned back in her chair. “And the central theme?” she asked.

“The story has two interrelated threads,” Bill answered. “The first is a road trip. A wealthy, middle-aged man is traveling around the country in a motorhome looking for something to give meaning to his life. And the second thread is about his divorced wife who lives in Manhattan. She is still angry with him but misses him. The long-term arc of the story is that their friends are working in the background to get them back together.”

“I think I can save you some money,” Maria interrupted. “The basic formula of a road trip has been used a lot. You remember the old *Route 66* series, don't you? Or a half dozen other series? I don't think it would be all that easy to sell it again.”

“That was my initial reaction, too,” Bill said. “The basic idea may be hackneyed, but how many truly original story lines are there anymore? It's what you do with them that counts, right? *West Side Story* is *Romeo and Juliet* at heart, but they're not the same story. And the same with Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen*; they have elements in common, but again, they’re not the same story.”

Maria did not look at all convinced. “That's true,” she said reluctantly. “I suppose someone could freshen up even the most tired cliché. So, what's going to make this series original? Just the fact that your traveler is rich and able to buy his way out of every problem?”

“Not exactly,” Bill replied. “For one thing, he can't get at his money because all his assets have been frozen. And for another, he doesn't know that a friend is arranging all kinds of interesting and stimulating experiences for him behind the scenes. And the same goes for his wife—whatever it takes to get them back together.”

“Kind of like *Fantasy Island*?” Maria asked.

“Yes, but not so hokey. Everything must be completely realistic and believable.

Maria still had serious doubts, but she wasn't about to dismiss a rich investor based solely on her own opinions: “Let's say that this idea has some possibilities… What do you want me to do?”

“To begin with,” Bill said, “I want the names of the most imaginative writers you can find to sketch out a few story lines. And if I understand how these things work, I'll also need a producer to manage the project, and a director to make things happen. Eventually, we'll also need actors and a variety of other people, but I want to keep this small for now. Can you get me a list of key people in a couple of days?”

“This isn't going to be cheap,” Maria said, wondering how far Bill was willing to go.

“I know, but if you can deliver what I need, I’ll approve it.”

Maria smiled. “I won't have any trouble. This town is loaded with talent waiting tables and looking for work.”

“Great,” Bill said. He took out a checkbook, wrote a check for one-hundred-thousand dollars as a retainer, and slid it across the desk to Maria. Her eyes opened wide when she saw the amount. “This shows my confidence in you, Maria. The job is yours if you want it.”

Maria stared at Bill across her desktop: “Okay, it’s your money. I’m in.”

Bill simply said, “Send me names and resumes as soon as you can. I'll have them vetted and make my selections. In the meantime, don't talk to anyone about this project.”

“Don't you want me to at least see if they're available?”

“Not yet,” Bill answered. “I'll let you know when to contact people—and how I want them contacted.”

“You're the boss,” Maria said. “Now, do you have time for lunch?”

The **National** restaurant, on Lexington Avenue is popular with people from the entertainment industry for its menu of fresh fish. Maria had no trouble getting a table in a quiet alcove. Bill ordered the Scottish Salmon and Maria the Mediterranean Branzino.

*What is this really about?* Maria wondered. *What is he not telling me?*

At the same time, Bill was thinking: *Should I tell her the whole story? About Roland and Lillian being the real-life characters of the story? Don’t I have to read her into the whole plan eventually? Why not do it now so she can help me set up the first Lillian scenario?*

Maria could almost see the gears turning in Bill’s head, but she waited until he was ready to speak. When he glanced up from the table and looked in her eyes, she knew he had come to a decision.

Bill began slowly filling her in on Roland’s sad state and why he, Bill, needed to get Roland back to his normal, energetic, decisive state of mind.

“Does this change your mind about being willing to work with me on this project?” he asked.

Their food arrived, giving Maria a few moments to think: *Does it matter that we’ll be working with real people, and not just with actors? Not really. Is a TV series ever going to be developed? Or is that just a come-on to get me involved? Does it matter? Not really.*

Over the course of the meal, Bill answered all Maria’s questions. She could see his commitment to his friend and the extent to which he was willing to go. And yes, a TV series was a possibility. “Why not? The purpose of a hedge fund is to take risks that could return exceptional profits,” he said.

Over dessert and coffee, Bill told her of the first scenario he had planned for Lillian, one that could be done almost immediately if Maria could find him the right kind of actor. “He needs to be in his mid-forties, handsome, intelligent, utterly charming, good at improvisation, and from out of town. Do you know of anyone like that?”

It took Maria only a few seconds to retrieve the name of Daniel Dubois, an actor from Los Angles who did well as a stand-up comedian in nightclubs. At one time, she had been tempted to have an affair with him. He also did occasional commercials on the West Coast but had never managed to land a major role in either TV or the movies. He would love a week-long gig in Manhattan at what would be for him extremely high pay.

Maria watched Bill get into his limo. He already looked tired; something was driving him hard. This whole business was so strange. She knew it wasn't beyond him to do a favor for a friend, but this was much more than that. Bill had once told her that he was the number two man at the Swanson Fund, a large hedge fund; that he was Roland Swanson's right-hand man. Still, the whole project seemed so fantastic.

She returned to her office and looked at the check on her desk. It reminded her that she now had work to do to earn McKee's money, and she suspected there was a lot more to be made. *In fact,* she thought, *the basic idea of a rich man driving around the country in an RV looking for new experiences might make a decent TV series, especially with the extra dimensions of his ex-wife, a security team, and a company of actors in the background setting up scenarios. Who could tell?*

### Reginald Brightman, butler

Bill awoke with a gnawing fear that he’d forgotten something important. He had been so busy making arrangements for Roland’s RV trip that he hadn’t given any thought about how Roland, himself, was doing—whether he was still just vegging and watching soaps.

 As expected, Roland’s home phone was answered by Reginald Brightman, Roland's butler. Much to Reginald's surprise, Bill arranged to meet him for a drink at a Starbucks café in Stamford. Social contact with one of his employer's associates was not something Reginald ever expected, regardless of the general affability of that person. He had been trained as a butler in England and had worked there for many years in one of the great houses of the aristocracy. It was only by chance that he happened to be available when he learned that an American billionaire was looking for a butler. All else being equal, a billionaire was much better to work for than a mere millionaire, especially one having financial problems.

Reginald was seated at a table in the café when McKee arrived. “Sorry I'm a bit late.”

“That's quite all right, sir,” Reginald answered, surprised that Mr. McKee had bothered to apologize. He'd never understand American ideas of social equality.

They ordered drinks, and while waiting for them, McKee casually asked about Roland.

“Oh, much the same as always, I'm afraid. He only eats junk food, drinks too much, and we have trouble getting him to shower and change clothes. I've no idea what's to be done about him, poor man. He's sunken to such a low state.”

“Still, something needs to be done,” Bill said. “Don't you agree?”

“Yes, sir, I do,” Reginald confirmed. “Do you have something in mind?”

“I do, and I'll need your help,” Bill said.

“Anything, Mr. McKee. You can count on me.”

“I'm sure I can,” McKee said. If Swanson were ever institutionalized, Reginald's cushy job would disappear into thin air. “Mr. Swanson will be taking an extended, therapeutic trip in a motorhome. However, he is not yet aware of this fact.”

Reginald was unable to conceal surprise from his normally expressionless face. The comings and goings of his employers was not something he felt he had any right to comment on, even with his face. But this was extraordinary.

“He'll be staying in campgrounds and other such outdoorsy places,” Bill continued, “so he'll need sturdy, casual clothing along with appropriate toiletries. Can you assemble this kit without his knowledge?”

Reginald nodded. “With the greatest of ease. As I said, he seldom leaves his study these days.”

“Fine, then please do so and deliver it to Mr. John Sweeney at RV Adventures,” Bill said, handing him Sweeney’s card. “Tell him it’s for the Seeker project.”

“There’s one other thing I need you to do,” Bill added. “I need you to keep me informed as to Roland’s state of mind until he leaves on this trip.”

“What do you mean by ‘state of mind’?” Reginald asked, wondering what he was getting into.

“Nothing surreptitious,” Bill said, “just if he shows any indication of changing his behavior, of seeming to decide what to do with himself.”

“Fine, that is harmless enough. I can do that.”

“Here's something for your trouble,” Bill added, sliding an envelope containing ten hundred-dollar bills across the table. “And your absolute silence in this matter.”

Reginald snuck a peek in the envelope. “You are most generous, sir. You can be assured of my complete cooperation—and silence.”

*That isn't likely,* Bill thought, *but it never hurt to grease appropriate palms.*

“There may be other such services we need from you over the next month,” Bill said, “to encourage Mr. Swanson to start on his journey.”

Reginald gulped hard: *What have I gotten into? Now that I’ve taken the man's money, there is no backing off. I’ll have to be careful to protect myself.*

### Father Greg, counselor

Bill chartered an executive helicopter at Westchester County Airport for a quick flight north to Saratoga Springs. It wasn't yet racing season there, and he had no interest in sampling the Spa's sulfurous mineral waters, but Saratoga had another resource of immense value to him. He was met at the airport by Father Greg Holly, who drove him to the **Saratoga Coffee Traders** café in town. A man of keen intellect, and considerable charisma, everyone Father Holly met instantly loved him.

Eschewing his roman-collar and dressed in a plaid collared shirt with tan slacks and cordovan loafers, Father Holly was in his mid-forties, five-feet-ten-inches tall, solidly built but not an athlete. His sandy-blond hair and bushy eyebrows framed an expressive, friendly face. He selected a table in a quiet nook.

Bill was happy to be meeting in person someone who had been an online friend for several years. “Yes, it has been a long time, Father Holly. How long have we been sending each other emails? It's got to be three or four years, anyway.”

“At least that long, and please, just call me Greg, like all my other friends.”

“How did we meet? Do you remember?” Bill asked, taking a seat at the table.

“Indeed, I do,” Greg said. “It was in an online forum on investments. You answered a question I had about government bonds. You can imagine how surprised I was when I later learned who you were.”

“Yes, well, I occasionally help people online, but then, so do you. And that's why I'm here now.”

“The Roland Swanson problem, I presume,” Greg said, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, I want to tell you what I have planned, and then enlist your help in an important part of it,” Bill confirmed.

People came and went in the café, as Bill spoke of his plans. Many of them were Father Holly's parishioners and normally would have greeted him with considerable warmth. He was extremely popular, but this afternoon they saw he was deep in a discussion with a stranger, and they respected his obvious need for privacy.

“Incredible!” was Greg's reaction when Bill finished. “It’s over-the-top, but I really can't see any problems with either what you're trying to do or how you're trying to do it. Of course, the devil is in the details, as always. How can I help?”

“I need someone to do for Roland what you've done for me, and I don’t think anyone could do the job better than you,” Bill said.

“I'm not sure I follow you, Bill. What is it that you want me to do?” Greg asked, not sure what to expect.

Bill paused, a frown on his face, himself not sure how to ask Greg for what he wanted—what he needed— him to do. “I want you to keep in touch with Roland, to communicate with him, and to help him past the rough spots.”

“You don't mean I should take the RV trip with him. So, you must mean communications via email. Does he know how to use a computer or how to email?” Greg asked.

“Actually, he doesn't even type very well. You're going to have to teach him everything, and then hope he takes the bait—in fact, you're the bait. I'm hoping he'll want to communicate with someone, and that you'll become his best buddy online.”

“I guess I could do that,” Greg said, “but I've never even met the man. How do you plan to arrange it?”

“That part is easy. Who is a lonely camper most likely to meet and get to talking with? Another lonely camper, of course. We'll set you up in another RV—say a nice pop-up trailer. That's something a priest could afford. And then we'll arrange to put you in adjoining campsites. The rest will be up to you.”

Greg grinned: “This is beginning to sound like a challenge. However, I already have a pop-up camper of my own. I often go out in the summer—only during the week, of course, since I have to work on the weekends.”

“Great,” Bill affirmed, “we'll plan the start of Roland's trip around that. Now, though, there are a couple of other things we need to talk about.

“I want you to pick out a new laptop computer for Roland and install all the software you think he'll need or even might like to play with. When you're ready, ship it to John Sweeney at **RV Adventures** in Stamford. Tell him it’s for the Seeker project. He'll make sure it's stowed properly in the RV.”

“That part sounds like fun. What else?” Greg asked.

“I'm not sure how you'll feel about this, but I need to be kept informed about Roland's mental state, and even, to some extent what he's thinking about.”

“You're right, I’m not comfortable with that,” Greg said. “Spying isn't part of my repertoire. It would be like violating the confessional, which I won't do.”

Remembering the Catholic Church’s rules of silence regarding confessions, Bill backed off from what he had initially hoped for and said, “How about if we leave it to your judgment to tell me whatever you think I should know and that you can freely tell?”

Reluctant to go even that far with what someone told him in confidence, Greg looked Bill in the eyes. “That's probably ok, but I have a sneaking suspicion I'll regret it later.”

“And finally, Bill said, “we need to talk about your pay.”

“Oh, that's not necessary. Like I said, I go out camping anyway.”

“True, but it may take a couple of days to get you two together, and then I want you to keep in touch with Roland for the rest of his trip. That'll take several hours a week over as many as six months. You deserve to be paid for all that. And I'll want to consult with you several times. How does a twenty-thousand-dollar retainer sound?”

“That's half a year's regular pay for me. It's much too generous.”

“No, I think it's about right. You're going to earn your pay with Roland.”

### Jessica Roth, TV producer

The next day, Bill McKee was back in Manhattan, sitting in Maria Singer's conference room. Sam Robbins was seated on his right; he had been introduced as an associate. The young woman across the table from them wore a severely cut, dark-blue, knit business suit by St. John, an off-white silk blouse, and an elaborately tied, floral silk scarf. She wore a minimum of makeup. Her chestnut brown hair was short, straight and shoulder length. Altogether, it was an appearance designed to impress a potential employer more with her professionalism than her considerable beauty.

In this case, though, it wasn't necessary. McKee had her dossier on the table in front of him. It contained her resume, Maria Singer's recommendation, and Sam Robbins' security assessment. He had studied them carefully; he glanced at her resume now to gather his thoughts. “Ms. Roth, you have impressive credentials in the entertainment business, especially for someone so young. However, it doesn't appear to me that you have ever overseen an entire project all by yourself.”

It was a question she had been expecting. “That's true on paper, but on my last project, as the associate producer, I had complete responsibility for everything except finance, which I do know how to manage.”

“Yes, that's what Maria told me, Bill said. “While I don't personally recall ever having seen the show *Country Affairs*, it did have complimentary reviews and a loyal following. Why did it fold?”

A frown appeared on Jessica Roth's face: *Mr. McKee must already know the answer to that question. He must be looking for my reaction to it.*

“I'm sure you are aware that Michael Firesmith, the star of the show, died of a drug overdose. It wasn't possible to go on under those conditions.”

McKee nodded thoughtfully, wondering if she had the imagination and flexibility to handle unexpected changes: “I can imagine that would be a difficult problem. Did you consider any alternatives that would have allowed the show to continue?”

Jessica nodded affirmatively: “Yes, of course. There's so much money tied up in the production of a TV series, we had to. Unfortunately, none of them were acceptable to either the sponsors or to the fans we polled. We reluctantly concluded it was time to fold.”

McKee paused in his questioning: “So now, I presume, you're looking for the big break that will put your name at the top of the production credits.”

She smiled: “That's safe enough to say.”

So far, so good. Now for the crucial question: “What if I were to tell you that this project may never reach the airwaves?”

Her smile faded as she answered: “I'd say that was normal for new concepts. There's always a large margin of risk, but if the basic concept is good, risk can be alleviated by good management and careful staffing... especially by great writing.”

Bill then switched topics: “What do you think of our basic concept?”

“It has possibilities,” she said, “or I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you.”

“However?” Bill demanded.

“However,” she continued, ‘audiences might find it difficult to keep track of two, independent plot lines—one for the protagonist and the other for his ex-wife—and see how they could ever come together in a new relationship thanks to someone manipulating them in the background. The viewers might find it pretty confusing unless we use a lot of flashbacks and put a lot of focus on the people who are making things happen for them.”

 *Ah yes, the viewers,* Bill thought: *Is it time to put an end to that bit of fiction? If I come right out and tell her the truth, will I lose her interest? But what if a TV series could eventually be produced from this idea? Is that at all realistic? Would Jessica Roth be here if it didn't have any potential? The Swanson Fund has never invested in media productions, but this might be interesting. After all, taking risks is what a hedge fund is all about.*

“Assuming we can deal with those issues,” he said, “and we can negotiate a mutually acceptable contract, are you interested in pursuing this project further?”

“Those are broad assumptions, but yes, I’m interested,” Jessica confirmed: “However, I must tell you I will demand complete management authority. There can be only one boss, and that will have to be me. You and your client will have to be silent—very silent—partners.”

Bill stared into her intense eyes: “That will be acceptable for phase two, but for phase one I cannot give up ultimate control,” he said.

Jessica stared back at him. She had made her bid for the freedom she knew would be needed to make the project a success, and now McKee was balking: *Is it because I’m a woman, and still, at twenty-eight, young for the job? Or does he know more about my handling of the Michael Firesmith fiasco than he admits… that I was the one who pulled the plug on the series when I learned its director was also on cocaine?*

“What do you mean by phase one and phase two?” she asked.

It was the question he had expected: “Let's say phase one is a prototyping phase, and phase two is the real production.”

This piqued her interest: “Oh, you mean pilots. Well, there usually is a bit more involvement from the investors at that stage in a show's development. That would be okay if any suggestions were brought to me personally.”

Not being in the entertainment industry, himself, Bill had forgotten about pilot shows: “No, that's not what I meant by phase one. If you want to do pilots, that'll be part of what I think of as phase two.”

Now she was confused and looked it.

Bill continued: “It's time I tell you a bit more of what this project is all about. Yes, we are interested in a TV series based on the concepts I've outlined, and as you and your writers develop it. But that is phase two. Phase one is for real. It is my client, himself, who will be taking to the road in a motorhome to rebuild a badly broken life, hopefully with his ex-wife. And we are the ones who will be secretly staging a series of events designed to stimulate both Roland and Lillian and challenge them to pick up the pieces of their broken family.”

Jessica struggled to comprehend the totality of what she had just heard. *Phase one would be for real!* She wasn't entirely sure that it would do the clients any good—or any harm, for that matter—but she knew that real life had a way of outclassing fiction; it was so unpredictable. What a fabulous chance this would be to pick up ideas for the show? What would real billionaires actually do under these circumstances?

“You've managed to astonish me, Mr. McKee… When do we start?”

Bill smiled. He was going to like working with Ms. Roth. She was someone who could quickly assess a situation and reach a decision, good characteristics for a chief executive. Quickly, he filled her in on the plan and together they reviewed the director and the writers that Maria had lined up. All of them had been checked out by Sam Robbins and his quickly expanding security team. Jessica made her recommendations, and Bill accepted them without any further discussion.

Later that day, Jessica met with Sam for a basic education in security management, something Sam had insisted on for all the project's key players. Jessica quickly concluded that a security team led by someone like Sam would have to be an integral and interesting part of the actual TV series—professional men and women who looked a lot like the ruggedly handsome Sam.

 “First off,” Sam said, “I want to cover a basic item of extreme importance to security. You now know who the principals of this project are—we couldn't hide that from you—but no one in the project is ever to mention their real names, not under any circumstances, not to each other, not to any of your subordinates, and especially not to anyone outside of the group.”

Sam paused, as if to drill what he had said into her skull with the power of his eyes.

“So, what do we call them?” Jessica asked, “Mr. and Mrs. X?”

“That's the basic idea,” Sam said, “when we refer to them among ourselves, we'll use the code name Seeker for Roland and Anchor for Lillian, and the aliases Roland and Lillian Webster with anyone else. If you ever need to identify them to anyone, that's who they’ll be, Roland and Lillian Webster. And the same goes for their kids, Emma and Bobby Webster. As far as we are all concerned, they are all members of the Webster family. We're going to a lot of trouble to create that identity. It'll hold up to anything short of physical testing.

### Seeker project kickoff

Bill McKee sat at the head of the conference room table in his office at the Swanson Fund in Stamford, Connecticut. At his right were Sam Robins and Father Greg Holly, and at his left were Jessica Roth, project producer, Allen Freeman, project director, and Marilyn Hofstadter, chief writer.

Bill brought the meeting to order. “I want to thank you all for joining me today. We've made a lot of progress in the last week, but there's still a lot to do. As I've told you, I cannot and will not give up the responsibility for the success, or failure, of this project. But I also know that I can't pull it off by myself. That's why you're all here. You have difficult jobs to do, but you can't do them alone, either. We must work as a team. We must coordinate our efforts.

“Let's begin with some progress reports. Do you want to start, Sam?”

Sam nodded. “I've been able to hire only three of the security people we'll need. There's plenty of good people available, but they're not necessarily willing to be away from home for months at a time. I'll have to keep interviewing throughout the whole project. In fact, I may have to use some local people as we move from location to location.”

“That would take you away from the action a lot,” Bill said, “I really want a security person on call at all times.”

“That's what I figured,” Sam said. “I went after the best people first, and I've set up a chain of command. There'll always be a Watch Officer on duty. Amanda Page will oversee Anchor’s detail and I will oversee Seeker’s. Amanda will report to me.”

“Great,” Bill said. “Continue.”

“Before you do,” Allen Freeman interjected. “I knew there would be security people involved, but this is beginning to sound like a military invasion force. How many security people are there, and what is their role and authority?”

“Good questions,” Bill said. “You know this whole operation is risky. Our goal is to provide Seeker and Anchor with around-the-clock protection, but to do it in such a way that they are not aware of us. Your people are going to make things hard for the security team, but what you do is what the project is all about, so they'll have to stay out of your way. However, you must help them do that. And that means planning all your operations with security in mind and keeping the security team informed about what you're doing—on a minute-by-minute basis if necessary.”

“The key is that there can't be any surprises,” Sam said, “because surprise means something has gone wrong.”

“That's fair enough,” Allen said, “but what about authority? Does Sam have veto power over what we do?”

“Not as such,” Bill said, “but you darn well better listen to him. This whole project is a balancing act. We need enough security to protect Seeker and Anchor, but you also need enough freedom to get the job done. When an operation is underway, Allen, as operations director, will be in complete charge, subject only to my veto.

“Do you have anything else, Sam?”

“Just one more item,” Sam said. “You're all going to be hiring a variety of people for various aspects of this project. Tell them only what they need to know about their specific part of the project. Also, they all need to be cleared by security before you can tell them the details of any operations. The level of checking we're doing takes a few days, so give us enough lead time.”

Sam turned to Bill. “That's it for now.”

“Good. Thanks Sam,” Bill said. “Jessica, do you want to go next.”

“First,” Jessica Roth said, “to keep everything legal, I've created an S-Corporation named New Beginnings*,* Inc. Its listed purpose is to create TV shows. Roland is the sole stockholder, even though he knows nothing about it. Bill and I are listed as its directors, with Bill as the CEO. I've also bought director’s insurance and $10 million of liability insurance in case something goes drastically wrong. This company will do all the hiring necessary, receive all income and pay all debts of the project, including payroll to all of you.

“Beyond that, I've hired three people to work on production tasks under Allen’s direction. They'll be doing everything from accounting to costume and props acquisition. Right now, one of them is working on the first Anchor operation, the second is acquiring everything Seeker will need in the RV, and the third is coordinating the work on the RV itself.”

“What shape is the RV in?” Bill asked. “Last time I saw it, it was a real mess.”

Allen answered, “Mr. Sweeney's men have taken you at your word and they've replaced everything but the shell, which really is a mess. They do not understand, however, why anyone would want a new motorhome that looks all beat up. Mr. Sweeney told them to shut up and do what they're told.”

“I also had them reinforce the doors and windows and install intruder alarms monitored by the Lakeman electronics package,” Sam said. “Hopefully, it won’t be needed, but better safe than sorry.”

“What about the equipment from Lakeman Electronics?” Bill asked.

“I checked on that yesterday,” Allen said. “They say they'll meet the deadline for the hardware, but they're a little worried about the software. We went over their plans, and I told them to delay a couple of features we don't need right away. They can be downloaded later. Our dear Mr. Seeker isn't going to be able to turn over in bed without us knowing it.”

“Doesn’t that invade his privacy?” Greg asked.

“You can have privacy, or you can have security,” replied Sam, “but you can’t have both. In any case, we’ll be judicious in our monitoring.”

Bill turned toward Allen, who he had just met. Reading his resume, Bill had been impressed by the number of shows Allen had directed, several of them with good ratings. Now, he took his measure of the man and liked what he saw. Late-forties and in good physical condition, Allen was just under six feet tall, had medium brown hair and a closely trimmed beard and mustache. For the meeting he wore dark slacks, a light-blue plaid shirt, and a navy-blue cashmere pullover. “Your turn Allen. I believe you've hired some people, too.”

“That's right. I'll have an assistant director working on each operation. Their primary job will be to assemble the actors and stunt people we'll need for each operation and to rehearse them. The trick will be to keep enough operations in the pipeline. We don't want Seeker to hit dry spells where nothing is happening, and he gets bored and discouraged.”

“How's the first operation coming?” Bill asked.

“I'm not very concerned about the first Seeker operation,” Allen said. “All we're trying to do is link him up with Father Holly in some campground, and then it's up to Father Holly. If anything, I'm expecting to learn from this operation. It sounds easy, but we just don't know what problems will come up.”

“Or what problems Seeker, himself, will cause,” Father Holly said.

“Yes, that's one of the toughest things we have to deal with,” Allen said. “It's not like he's an actor who will do what he's told. People have a way of being unpredictable.”

“Especially when they're as intelligent and quirky as Seeker,” Bill added.

“How true,” Allen said.

“Anyway, we're concentrating on the second operation,” he continued. “What we have in mind will be as simple as the first operation, but it will take more effort, planning and coordination. We've got to learn to crawl before we try to run.”

“And what about the first Anchor operation?” Bill asked.

“Conceptually, it’s quite simple and it’s already in motion, Allen said, “Maria Singer found Anchor a real piece of eye candy, an actor who is as charming and intelligent as he is good looking. The tricky part was setting him up with a realistic back story and housing him in an apartment in the Upper East Side of Manhattan that looks like he’s been living there for years.”

“He understands that his role is to charm her and then give her a good reason to dump him, right?” Father Holly asked. “And that reason would be what?”

“A day at a casino watching him compulsively gamble should do the trick. She knows about the grief that her sister Winifred had with a gambler. It’ll be a complete turn-off of any romantic ideas she might have.”

“Thanks Allen,” Bill said. He then turned to Marilyn Hofstadter and gave her a nod. This was also his first meeting with Marilyn, who fit Bill's mental image of a writer. Five-six in height, she had light brown hair, was slightly overweight, and her suit was a subtle brown plaid. What completed her appearance were heavy, black-rimmed bifocal glasses with a second pair hung from a chain around her neck for computer work.

“As Allen said,” Marilyn began, “the first two operations are pretty well planned out and written. For me, that was the easy part. The hard part was figuring out what to do next. Bill laid out our objectives and a strategy—the motorhome trip for Roland and men for Lillian to compare with Roland—but now we need to break that down further into a series of goals that can be accomplished with specific operations. Fortunately, I'm getting a lot of help from Father Holly.

“My next step will be to hire a couple more writers to begin writing operational scenarios. For each operation, we'll have several possibilities outlined for how to start it, how to flesh it out, and how to end it. That's a lot of variability, but remember, to a considerable extent we must take our cues from our clients. We don't want them to ever feel like they’re being manipulated. At best, we can present them with people and situations that they can react to, and hopefully learn from.”

“Great,” Bill said, “but won't the writers wonder why they're not just writing a straight-forward screenplay, instead of so many possibilities?”

“I thought of that,” Marilyn said. “What I'm telling them is that the show will be highly interactive with audience choices throughout each episode.”

“Interesting,” Bill said. “Has this been tried before?”

“It has, but it still feels experimental, which writers like.”

Turning to Greg, Bill said, “You're last, but not least Father Holly. How about explaining what your job will be.”

Father Holly, who had been leaning back in his chair, sat up straighter. “Yes, I suppose some of you wonder what a priest is doing here. First off, it's not to act as a censor on your operations. Except for the first operation, I won't be directly involved. If everything goes well, though, I'll be able to do something no electronic sensors can do. I’ll be able to get an idea of what's happening in Seeker's head, and even provide him with some guidance. This will help us to better tailor our operations to his needs and to determine whether we are accomplishing anything.

“Please bear in mind, though, that there are limits to what I can do. I can't tell you what Seeker doesn't tell me, and I can't say anything my role as a priest would prohibit. Bill’s wife, Simone, who is Anchor’s best friend, will be playing a similar role for her. Simone and I will be conferring as developments occur. Hopefully, that will allow us to provide Allen and Marilyn with useful feedback.”

The conference room fell silent as people pondered what they'd heard from each other.

“That's it in a nutshell,” Bill said, “We're trying to mess with the lives of two highly intelligent people. It's an arrogant thing to do, but necessary. I know some of you are more interested in a follow-on TV series, but remember this, if we fail with Seeker and Anchor, the whole thing collapses. They must come out of this enthused about life and willing to take chances, wanting to make a life together again. They are the ones who must be convinced that we accomplished something worthwhile, and that a TV series is worth doing—and financing.

“Today is April 28th, and May 1st is our kick-off day for Seeker. That gives us only three days to complete our preparations. We all have a lot to do.”

### Epilogue

 With Bill McKee on the conference call were Simone McKee, Sam Robbins, Jessica Roth, Allen Freeman, Marilyn Hofstadter, and Father Greg Holly.

 Bill began the discussion, “It’s been a month since Roland left on his RV trip. I thought it was time for a review of what’s happened and a discussion of where to go from here. Jessica, why don’t you go first?”

Jessica Roth briefly regarded the notes she’d taken in preparation. “The Seeker production company is fully operational. Maria Singer is doing a fantastic job getting us the people we need, which is no surprise given what we’re paying. We’re spending money like there’s no tomorrow. It’s a good thing Bill has access to Roland’s deep pockets. In any case, we’re tracking to the six-month budget Bill and I had worked out. Meanwhile, I’m working on getting us studio space and video equipment for the actual TV show.”

“Sam,” Bill said. “Your security team did a great job getting Roland out of Connecticut where he could grab loose assets, first at his house and then at his yacht.”

Sam cleared his throat. “We still don’t know what he grabbed at his grandfather’s cottage on Candlewood Lake. He was trickier than we had imagined. The only clue we have has to do with Newman’s department store in Albany. He did go out for lunch with Jack Newman, an old college friend, but the curious fact is that Newman’s is next door to a coin dealer. He may have had some valuable coins hidden at the cottage. In any case, he seems to have solved his immediate money problems.”

“What else is he doing to earn travel money?” Bill asked.

“He has a sales deal with Newman’s. We observed him selling T-shirts and hats in Lake George, but after that, he’s been going to small towns where he looks for stores where he can set up a sale directly with Jack Newman. He must be getting a commission.”

“I had thought financing the trip would be more of a challenge,” Bill remarked. “I guess I underestimated Roland in that regard.”

Sam spoke up, “we did have a dicey moment when Megan’s father, Frank, showed up and demanded his daughter. Fortunately, Mike Millhouse and I were there and able to discourage him. However, I don’t believe this is the last we’ll see of him; he may have a grudge against Roland. We’ll keep an eye out for him.”

Bill continued, “Sam, the way you handled that, Rawlins’ blackmail attempt, and then the kidnapping, were superb. You stopped them and then made sure the criminals would be out of the picture for good. Still, it’s too bad we couldn’t turn them over to the police, especially that creep Rawlins.”

Marilyn Hofstadter commented, “We’ll be doing episodes of the TV series about all of these episodes. but we’ll stretch them out to make them more dramatic. And you can be sure there will be a nasty lawyer, too.”

“Allen, the episodes you’ve actually directed have worked out well,” Bill said.

Allen entered the discussion: “The meeting with Father Greg worked out, but I’ll let him talk about that. I have to say, though, making something happen when Roland is on the road, and we don’t know where he’ll end up is remarkably difficult. In fact, it would be impossible without Sam’s crew constantly tracking him and monitoring him.

Bill agreed: ‘You’re right, Sam and his crew do a lot more than just security.”

“It was a good thing Sam was so close to him when that crazy survivalist was going to attack the RV with a hunting knife,” Allen said. “Roland was very kind to that poor woman and her daughter. The scene where she was reunited with her parents was very emotional—we recorded that from the RV’s outside pickups.”

Marilyn added, “I’m looking forward to scripting that scene.”

Allen continued: “We were barely able to get someone into the campground on Lake Ontario to observe him. His stopping there was completely spontaneous. I have someone following him at a distance in a camper, so we can jump in wherever he stops. Of course, we have to change out the camper and its team after every stop, which requires a lot of work from the production staff.”

 “It worked out well, though,” Greg Holly said. “The time he spent with the Kruger family really opened his eyes to the family life he has been missing. By the way, Bill, were you able to help Bruce and Marilyn Keefer find new jobs?”

“Yes,” Bill answered, “good jobs with promotions, but not in the Niagara area. It just isn’t into electro-chemicals like it used to be.”

“Is there any way we can tell Roland? And what about the veteran he helped? Or the widow he helped in Penn Yan? He’d feel good about all that.”

“Not really,” Bill replied, “at least not now. But sure, after the trip is over, I intend to come clean and fill him in on everything we do.”

“Our big success was at the KOA campground in Niagara Falls,” Allen continued. “Roland really fell for Sandra, aka Vivian, and her kids. And I think she did for him, too, though she didn’t admit it. She can turn up the heat in any man’s psyche. That’s going to make for some steamy episodes.

Bill chuckled: “I hate to say it, but that’ll just boost Roland’s reputation as a lady’s man.”

“I’m not sure that’s something he would want,” Greg continued.

Allen paused for comments about Roland’s reputation to die down. “We kept close watch on what he was doing in Penn Yan, which was remarkably generous. He was so much into what he was doing with the people he met there that we decided not to interject anything else.”

“Generous? Yes, but smart,” Bill said. “He turned a charitable act into what could be a good investment—if he goes forward with his other plans for the town of Penn Yan.”

Not being an investment analyst, Allen wasn’t sure what the long-term results of Roland’s actions might be. He continued his report, “The only other thing we were able to pull off was Roland’s meeting with a woman in Allegany park. She got him headed to Chautauqua. He’d spent a couple of days hiking and biking in the park—communing with nature. That had to have been beneficial, but he was ready to move on.”

“His meeting with Lillian in Chautauqua turned out even better than we’d hoped,” Marilyn reported. “Simone did a great job prepping Lillian and then prodding her to take the next step with Roland.”

“At the end, it didn’t take much prodding,” Simone said. “We really only had to stage one episode for her—with Daniel, the eye-candy gambler. She was running other episodes all on her own, with Miles Harrington and Nelson Rawlins as other examples of undesirable men—and then with Charles Martine as one who was attractive but unavailable. “

 “They were finally getting together, but then the kidnapping happened, and Sam had him leave Chautauqua. We had something else planned for Chautauqua. Maybe we can use it somewhere else,” Allen said concluding his report.

“What’s your current assessment of Roland’s state of mind, Greg?” Bill asked.

“As Allen mentioned, I had a good day with him. He talked a lot about what’s bothering him, but not about everything. He still doesn’t know that I know his real identity, but even so, he mentioned being bored with his work and unhappy with the damage it’s caused to other people. We’ve also emailed each other frequently. He tells me what’s been happening but all I can do is encourage him. I wish there were some way to physically spend more time with him.”

“Allen and Marilyn, please look into that,” Bill said.

After a pause in the conversation, Bill addressed the whole group. “So where do we go with the project from here?”

“If this really were a TV show,” Marilyn said, “we’d lay out the arc of the story over many episodes and then start developing episodes that fill in details and advance the story. In fact, we’re doing just that for the still hypothetical TV show. It’s coming along pretty well. I’m sure we would be able to sell it to one of the networks.”

“But this phase of the project is about the life of a real person,” Greg reiterated. “The arc of this story is about Roland and Lillian coming to grips with their own issues and then rebuilding their marriage.”

“Hopefully, Roland will want to resume work as CEO of the Swanson Fund, too,” Bill said.

“That may be your objective, Bill,” Greg said, “but you have to realize that Roland may well develop his own plans, which may or may not involve the Swanson Fund.”

“True,” Bill agreed, “but I’m not willing to give up on that goal just yet. Marilyn, do you think you could develop some episodes that emphasize business and economic development?”

“I suppose, but I’m no economist. I’ll need some help.”

“I’ve got just the gal to help you,” Bill said. “Joan Brown is one of the bright young analysts at the Swanson Fund. I’ll tell her about the TV show and ask her to spend some time with you.”

“Okay, but what about Roland’s personal development?” Greg asked.

“More of what we’ve already been doing, I suppose,” Simone said. “We’ll present him with situations that involve him with a variety of people and a variety of problems. Maybe I can get Lillian involved.”

“This is ambitious, Greg said. “I still have qualms about manipulating someone towards goals that are not his or her own.”

“As do I, as do I,” Bill said.

“When you think about it, what we’re doing is really arrogant,” Greg commented.

“Yes, it is, but it’s necessary. You didn’t see him vegetating in front of a TV for months, as I did.”

“If you say so, Bill, but I’m not so sure Roland won’t get there on his own, now that we’ve given him a proverbial kick in the pants.”