

Chapter 4

Jim woke early and was on the road before sunrise. Driving south toward the corridor, it was still early morning when he saw a breakfast restaurant with several classic automobiles in the parking lot. There was a Ford Ranger pickup, a Chevy Bronco, and a Jeep, all well maintained and modified for off-roading. Jim pulled into the parking lot and stopped the Jeep. "Hopefully we can find someone here, to help us find gas and get across the corridor. You'll have to stay here again, though, Smudge."

Inside the restaurant Jim took a seat at the counter and ordered a syncafe and couple pieces of toast with peanut butter and honey. The food arrived quickly, and although the bread was not made from wheat, the peanut butter did not contain any peanuts, and the honey was not foraged and stored by bees, it all tasted okay. Across the room at a round table sat a group of guys who Jim guessed were the owners of the classic vehicles. They were older and dressed more or less as he was: ball caps, old bluejeans, and hooded sweatshirts with early 2000's logos. They were getting up to leave so Jim left cash on the counter, took a last swig of his syncafe, and walked out behind them.

Jim had deliberately parked near the other classics and as he expected the guys stopped to look at his Jeep. Walking up behind them he said "Mine's a 2000, as close to stock as I could keep it, except for the interior."

A guy in a Detroit Tiger's ball cap responded "It's pretty nice. You've got puncture proofs on it... what kind of engine?"

"Yeah, the puncture-proof tires ride a little rough, but it's good not to have to carry a spare when I'm out and about. I put a QuadraSync Universal Liquid engine and drivetrain in it a while back. I still run gasoline, though, when I can get it," Jim replied.

"We all run gasoline," said a guy wearing a hooded sweatshirt with Ford embroidered on it in script letters. "Mine's the Ranger over there."

"I've got the Bronco there," said another man, wearing a sweatshirt imprinted with the old catchphrase 'Friends don't let friends drive Fords.'

"You guys are setup for some serious off-roading," Jim said. "Where do you go around here?"

Detroit said "There's a place just south of here. Used to be called Fort Custer Recreation Area, but it's not really managed any more. Lots of trails in there, fun to dink around in."

"That sounds good. Any place I can get gas?" Jim asked. "I'm on the road for a few more days." He let Smudge out of the Jeep and watched him wander among the group of guys, who didn't really take notice.

Detroit spoke up again: "If you head east on the crossroad there you'll get to the old Battle Creek airport. It's not used too much by airplanes, but there is gasoline there, for airplanes, but the manager, Earle, normally lets us buy it for our vehicles. Earle gets in early and leaves early, so you better get going if you want to get some today."

"Thanks," Jim said, opening the door to his jeep, "that's great. One more thing... I'm making my way south and I wonder if you all know a way to the other side the corridor. I don't want to use a transport or anything."

Bronco took a step forward and said "There's a trail in Custer that goes that way, to an old wildlife tunnel they built under I-94. The trail to get there isn't easy to find, though. Not many people go through it. But if you keep making your way south you should come across it. They built the tunnel a long time ago thinking that deer and whatnot would use it to get to the other side instead of trying to cross the roadway. It's not in great shape; I haven't been through it in years. That's probably your best bet, if you don't want to use a transport."

The other guys nodded affirmatively. Detroit said "That's the way to go" and Ford said "I've been through there, it's janky but kinda fun. Dumps you out on more trails which you can ride to get to roads again, near a town called Climax."

"Thanks guys. I'll head that way," Jim said, patting Smudge on the rump to get him to jump back into the Jeep. "If you're off-roading later, maybe I'll see you in there."

Jim found the general aviation entrance to the airport and the small terminal building where he hoped he would find the airport manager. Although the airport didn't seem to serve as a passenger transportation hub any longer, there were large storage tanks and pumps for fuel on the tarmac, and lots of drone activity. The individual delivery UAVs looked like insects leaving and returning to their nest. Jim parked and said "Come on, Smudge, let's go find Earle."

The interior of the terminal looked like it was last remodeled in the 2020s or so. The furniture was old and worn and the walls were decorated with faded pictures of old airplanes and pilots who were probably long dead. There was even an old-fashioned pinup board with printed flyers advertising aviation services and aircraft for sale. General aviation had always been slow to change.

The airport manager was in an office around the corner from the main entrance. He was deeply reclined in his office chair and a soft knock on the door startled him, almost causing him to tip over backwards.

"Are you Earle?" Jim asked.

"Yeah, that's me. Who are you?" Earle asked when he recovered his composure. His voice had the gruffness of someone who wasn't accustomed to having visitors.

Jim introduced himself and without wasting time got right down to business: "I ran into some guys down at Weber's restaurant; they told me you might have gasoline for sale."

"Gasoline for what?" Earle asked. "I didn't hear an aircraft come in."

Jim explained that he needed gasoline for the Jeep, that he needed to pay cash, and even that his five-gallon canister had been stolen the day before, hoping it would spur Earle into making a deal. But Earle wasn't moved.

"The pump is self service. You need your comdev to get fuel. Everyone does. There is no way I can take cash, the City won't let me even if I wanted to."

An abrupt dead end. Unsure about what to do next, Jim took a few steps away from the office. At the same time, Earle got up from his desk, grabbed his jacket and walked toward the exit, but before leaving he turned back to Jim and offered a workaround: "Look, I'm heading out. But you can wait around here for a while. Maybe one of the owners will come in. You might be able to get one of them to buy you gas at the pump, and you can pay them cash. Maybe. Most of the airplanes that fly regularly are down G row over there." Earle pointed vaguely to the West end of the airport and just before he walked out said "I don't want that dog on the airfield."

Jim waited in the terminal after Earle left but there was no activity at the airport or down hangar row G for quite some time. To occupy himself he rummaged through the knapsack for his notebook and added some notes about the trip so far today. When he was done, thinking that maybe he would not be able to get any gasoline after all, he closed the notebook and as he reached to put it back into the knapsack an envelope slipped from between the notebook's pages. Jim picked up the envelope and turned it over in his hands. It was yellowed with age and a bit worn around the edges, but the canceled postage stamp was still affixed and the handwritten address on the front was his. Somewhat reluctantly, he removed the two-page letter and decided to read it again. Although the

ink was faded, the handwriting was flowing and meticulously neat making the letter easy to read, especially since Jim knew the words almost by heart.

July 7th, 2041

Dear Jim,

Thank you for making the trip down here, it was so great to see you last weekend. The hike in New River Gorge was spectacular! I'm still tired and sore from that and everything else.

You asked so many questions about things, while you were here. I answered as best I could, on the fly, but now I've had more time to think and thought I could let you know more about where I am.

No, I haven't spoken of you to my mom or my sister. It's hard to explain, but I just don't feel like telling them about you right now. Maybe later? I don't know. I am sure they would understand, and that they would like to know about you—and of course to meet you sometime—but since I'm not sure where we are going, I don't feel comfortable with the mixing of worlds. Not yet at least. I hope you understand.

And about where we are going... I wonder why we have to be 'going' anywhere. I like what we are doing now. Yes, it's too bad that we live so far apart and can't see each other more frequently. But you have your work and I have mine, and the way it is now, when we are together, we are completely with each other. No phones, no distractions, just you and me, the rest of the world tuned out. If we spent more time together, we would lose that, I'm sure of it. And my job and family are here. The job is new and exciting to me, and I don't want to leave home to be closer to you. I know too that you couldn't leave your home to live here. So what we have is what we have. I love spending time with you when we can be together. Let's keep on doing what we're doing. I also hope you can understand this.

You know, you were right about the messaging. It took some getting used to, but saving thoughts and writing emails—or even a letter, like this one, even though it’s not as good as one of yours—is better than sending and receiving thought fragments in messages. I mean, yes, it’s nice to get a message and a picture from you from time to time, to know you’re thinking about me, and to share tidbits of our days, but I do know you think about me (and you know I think about you) and your emails and letters are always so enjoyable, even though I have to wait for them. Maybe the waiting makes them better. Kind of like the way it is when we are together after waiting to see each other, compared to what it would be like if we saw each other every day.

But still, I can’t wait to see you again! I really like your idea to rent a sailboat on Lake Michigan someday. I’ve never slept on a boat, or been sailing, for that matter. It sounds so fun. Let’s do it!

Love, Rachel

With a pang of melancholy, Jim folded the letter, placed it back in the envelope, and slipped the envelope back in between the pages of his notebook in the knapsack. And looking out the window of the terminal he noticed down G row that a set of hangar doors was now open. Jim hurried out the door with Smudge at his heels and made his way toward the open hangar.

As he approached, Jim could see a man working around an airplane, an old taildragger that was painted bright yellow.

“That’s quite a museum piece,” Jim said as he walked up to the hangar.

The man looked up from his work and replied with obvious pride “It’s a Piper Cub, built in nineteen forty five. She’s an old girl but still flies.”

“Nineteen forty five? Really? That’s amazing. Mind if I take a closer look?” Jim asked.

“Not at all, come on in,” the man replied.

The airplane’s skin was taut fabric and the interior seemed to be original, although there was no way the original materials could be in such nice condition after more than one hundred thirty years. How could this thing still fly?

“Name’s Tom,” the man said. Jim introduced himself and the two shook hands.

“How do you keep this machine in such good shape?” Jim asked, still marveling at the airplane’s condition.

“Well it’s mostly in the hangar out of the weather and I don’t fly it all that often. It’s been recovered, repainted, and repaired many times over the years. And the engine has been replaced a few times,” Tom explained, looking more often at his airplane than at Jim.

“How can you get parts for the motor and all?” Jim asked.

“Back in the thirties and forties finding parts got pretty hard. There weren’t any manufacturers making the engine or airframe parts anymore, and the salvage market had all but dried up. But nowadays parts are pretty easy to get. Just need the specs and you can have just about anything three-D printed. And it’s not too expensive either. What’s harder is to find people who know how to work on these old machines. The other thing is that everything on the airplane is simple, especially the engine. No electric system. No vacuum system. Just four cylinders, about a hundred horsepower. Simple doesn’t break often and when it does, it’s usually not too hard to fix. Fuel, air, spark... that’s about it. Hey, do you want to go for a lap around the patch?”

“That would be great,” Jim said, “if you have time.” It crossed his mind right away that if they could fly over the off-road area Jim might be able to scout a route to the wildlife tunnel. “But I also have something of a problem,” Jim added. “I’m on the road with my Jeep for a few days—it’s a classic, not as classic as your bird here, but it’s pretty old—and I

need to top off my tank with gasoline. The thing is, my comdev isn't working. I only have cash. Wonder if you'd be able to get me about ten gallons of gas and I'll pay you back cash."

Tom hesitated for a moment but then said "Sure, I can do that. Help me get the airplane started and I'll get you some gas. Then we can go for a short flight around the area. You ever hand-prop an airplane?"

"No," said Jim, "but I've seen videos."

"You want to take the dog to the Jeep," Tom asked?

"Nah, he'll be fine here." And looking at Smudge, who was now sitting at the front corner of the hanger, Jim said "Smudge, you stay here."

Tom pulled his airplane out of the hangar and pointed it down the taxiway. He demonstrated how to hand-prop the airplane and had Jim practice a few times with the ignition off.

"I think you got it," Tom said, as he climbed into the front seat of the Piper Cub. "We'll get it started and I'll taxi over to the pump and meet you there."

Jim heard a few clicks as Tom flipped switches in the cockpit, then the hiss of fuel as Tom stroked the primer pump a couple times. Tom said "Breaks on, mags on" and then yelled "Contact!" Jim pulled the prop through with a quick, firm effort, remembering to step back and away from the propeller in a smooth motion. The little engine started on the first pull and ran smoothly while Tom taxied away.

After the Jeep and the Cub were topped off and Jim was squared up for the fuel purchase, Jim hand-propped the airplane again and climbed into the Cub's cockpit. The Piper Cub is a two-seat aircraft with one seat in front of the other. This time Tom was in the back seat. Jim fastened himself into the front and put on the headset.

“Can you hear me?” Tom asked.

“Yes, loud and clear. Do you hear me?” Jim replied.

“Loud and clear. Anything you want to see when we’re up?”

Jim explained to Tom what he was looking for in the off-road area as they taxied to the east end of the airfield to takeoff to the west. After running through a short checklist, doing an engine run-up, and making an announcement on the radio, Jim taxied onto a runway marked 23L and advanced the throttle. The little airplane accelerated smoothly, the tail lifted up, and then the Cub began to climb.

“Hey Tom,” Jim said with some urgency in his voice, “there’s a bunch of drones up ahead, do you see them?”

“Yeah, don’t worry about those. The drones are autonomous and receive input from local radar, so they will get out of our way,” Tom said as he banked the airplane slightly to the right to fly due west, parallel to I-94. And sure enough, the drones maneuvered out of the Cub’s flight path like schooling fish avoiding a predator.

The I-94 corridor stretched in both directions as far into the haze as Jim could see. According to the Cub’s altimeter they were flying only about fifteen-hundred feet above the ground. Cars and trucks flowed steadily in both direction, bunched together on autodrive into long lines. All eight lanes—four in each direction—were nearly completely full with traffic but the collective autodrive system kept it all flowing steadily at highway speed. The roadway was impressive from the air. And the extent and density of commercial and light-industrial development that lined both sides of the corridor was imposing. Jim could see no place that might make a suitable spot for an emergency landing if the need arose.

Flying over the off-road area, it was easy to see the trails from the air because the leaves were off the trees. The network of trails was not well organized, but Jim saw a way to get into the trail system and got the lay of the land from the overflight.

"There's the tunnel," Tom said, "about a mile ahead at our eleven o'clock."

"Oh yeah, I see it," Jim replied.

Tom did a few steep-banked turns over the area before turning back toward the east and the airport. They flew around more or less aimlessly for another twenty minutes or so—Tom even let Jim fly for a bit—before they returned to the airfield where Tom landed the airplane and taxied back to his hangar.

After they had pushed the airplane back in the hangar and were out of the airplane Jim said "Well that was really great, Tom. Thanks so much for taking me up for bit. Is there anything else I can help you with before I head out?"

"Nope, all good. It was great having you along, and it was fun to have a mission," Tom chuckled. "Normally I just go up by myself and wander around low and slow."

"This is quite a machine you have here," Jim said, taking a step back and looking over the airplane one last time.

"Thanks! Good luck on your drive; I hope you make it through the tunnel. If you're down this way again, stop by if you want."

"Sure thing," Jim said, as he started to walk back to the Jeep with Smudge following a step behind.

Jim drove into the off-road area following the entrance he saw from the air, and made his way along bumpy two tracks to where it seemed the tunnel would be. But when he found the tunnel, he had second thoughts about going through it. Made of cement, with a circular cross section about twenty feet across, wet, heavily pitted with age, and completely

dark, the tunnel looked more like a drainage culvert than a wildlife passageway. This must have been included in the I-94 corridor design, Jim thought, to appease environmentalists, and in that, it maybe succeeded. But it seemed unlikely that animals actually used the tunnel. This was the only way further south, however, so he put the Jeep in four-wheel high, switched on the headlights and the light bar on the roof, and started in.

Trash lined the tunnel's edges and the walls were covered with graffiti as high as a hand could reach. The tunnel was straight, but arched slightly upwards, with its high point about halfway in. Building it this way kept water from accumulating, but made it so the end of the tunnel was only visible in the last five-hundred feet or so.

Although the passage was unnerving, it was uneventful, and on the other side, Jim followed more trails and two-tracks to the south and eventually came to a regular roadway which passed through the small town of Climax and then into the open countryside of Southern Michigan and Northern Indiana where travel was easy. The region was flat, and in the fields where corn, soy bean, and other food crops used to grow abundantly, wind turbines now spun to generate electricity, some of which was used to make chemical analogs of corn, soy bean, and other food crops.

Jim stopped the Jeep at the top of an overpass in Northern Indiana crossing Interstate 80/90, which was not nearly as busy as I-94. From the top of the overpass he could see in the distance to the south an abrupt change in the countryside: the green-brown fields which sprouted tall, white wind turbines gave way to what looked like a smooth, almost continuous, grey-black surface that undulated gently following the flow of the landscape.

Ahead was one of the solar-energy fields of the Central Midwest Power Authority.