

Prologue

Starke, Florida

Carefully, the man moved the control stick forward, the powerful electric motor humming as it strained to carry him down the barely distinguishable road. The large rear tires of the wheelchair rolled easily over the small pieces of gravel, creating a soft crunching sound as the man sped away into the enveloping darkness. Occasionally, he would have to move from one dirt lane to the other to avoid a small stick or rut and he did this more by feel than sight, as lighting was limited in the country darkness. The trip would not be a long one, nor did he expect to encounter anyone.

In the distance, he could hear frogs calling to each other, their cacophony of sound piercing the quiet; a staccato burst of noise only they understood or could comprehend. Once he heard an owl call to its mate and, after several seconds, it was answered, signaling the hunt had begun. They were the only intruders on his solitary quest; the only spectators to his silent ordeal. Other than the nocturnal animals, the trip was proving to be uneventful. Another half mile and he would be there, able to break free, to find release. The burden plaguing him for the last year had been immense, suffocating. Freedom loomed and he could feel his heart flutter.

Johnnie Atkyens let his wheelchair roll to a stop and he stared at the object clutched tightly in his hands. All the secrets he had uncovered about the truth lost for ages was documented inside the watertight box. All his knowledge reduced to scribbled words on parched pieces of paper. He knew men would kill for the truths he had revealed, that he had 'rediscovered.' It was information that could not be shared; not allowed to be misused. Not by him or others. Johnnie rolled his head back and stared at the night sky, causing the breathing tube trailing from his nose to flutter briefly in a gentle breeze. The tube was attached to an oxygen tank. A small metal shelf had been constructed behind the large tires and the sterile bottles of air had bought him a few more precious minutes of time. For his life now was measured in minutes, not years. Weakly, he sucked in another lungful of air.

Peering at the darkness closing around him, Johnnie watched a silent bolt of lightning arc gracefully across the Heavens before disappearing, leaving the eerie

blackness to consume him. The phenomenon was called 'heat lightning' by the locals and he did not know if it was the correct name for the spectacle. It was lightning with no sound, no roar. Heat lightning was said to portend rain, but other than the occasional breeze, the night was still, humid. Aside from the frogs and owls, deathly quiet. A wry smile curved across his face and then disappeared, as the mere act threatened to drain his last reserves of energy.

Finding a strength he thought had abandoned him, Johnnie moved the control stick and the wheelchair shot along the narrow road. The box was held tightly in his arm, clutched protectively like a precious gift. This was his last adventure, his last heroic deed and he must not fail. The welfare of mankind, the very existence of life, depended upon his success. The contents must not fall into the wrong hands or the world as we know it would be lost. Forever. Nervously, Johnnie turned his head to peer into the stygian night to see if he had been followed. It was a futile gesture, but reassuring. Locating no one, he visibly relaxed and continued.

Coming to the end of the trail, Johnnie turned off the lane and moved the wheelchair to the shoulder of the road and onto some grass. The dew on the green blades shone like tiny jewels and he silently admired the beauty. Forcing his eyes away from the landscape, he looked straight ahead. Lying in front of him was a large catfish pond, at least three acres in size. The middle of the pond was the deepest. Years earlier, Johnnie had rented a backhoe and dug the pond himself, sloping the bottom down to the center. Somewhere in front of him a catfish struck the surface and he could hear the splash of water.

Applying pressure to the joystick, Johnnie eased the wheelchair forward, hoping to control his approach to the edge of the water. The first twenty to thirty feet was done in safety and then gravity took over. Cresting a small mound of dirt, the wheelchair picked up speed and Johnnie was not quick enough to pull back and engage reverse. As the wheelchair gained momentum, Johnnie could see the pond rapidly approaching and he panicked. Slamming the control stick to the right, the powerful electric motor dug the front wheel into a sharp turn in the high grass. There was a moment of delicate balance as the odd-shaped-craft-turned-ATV moved onto its large right rear wheel and suspended there for several seconds. Like an animated movie, it toppled slowly over, throwing Johnnie forward to the pond's edge.

When he regained his wits, Johnnie found he was lying on his back with his left leg partially immersed in the pond water. Luckily, his breathing tube was still in place. Frantically, he reached around for the box and found it within arm's reach. Like a woman holding a small child, he grabbed it and pulled it to him, tears temporarily clouding his eyes, sobs racking his fragile chest. So close. He could have lost it all. Fighting down the emotion attempting to rob him of his senses, Johnnie forced himself to a sitting position and pulled the box onto his lap. Not much time. Already his breathing was labored from the exertion and he could feel the life drifting out of his sixty-two year old body. Time was of the essence and the will to act took control. His body may be failing him, but his mind was as sharp as ever. A wicked grin touched his face and his eyes burned bright. He would have the last laugh.

Reaching inside his coat pocket, Johnnie removed a small rubber tube and placed it snugly around the box. Activating a small CO2 cartridge, he watched as the tube fully inflated within seconds. Next, he removed a small glass vile from his front breast pocket, unscrewed the cap and poured the contents on top of the rubber in several places, making sure most of the liquid was absorbed by the top portion of the material. With the task accomplished, Johnnie knew the hardest part was yet to come.

Half dragging, half crawling, Johnnie turned his body away from the water's edge. Finally reaching the pond, he placed the box on the surface and gave it a shove. He was rewarded with seeing the box float away from him, buoyed by the tube. The breeze had returned and he could dimly see the box moving slowly to the center of the small man-made lake before it disappeared from sight.

Rolling over, Johnnie dragged himself partially out of the water, but was unable to go any further. His disease wracked body would not respond despite his frantic urging, his muscles unable to obey his mental commands. Giving up, he lay on his back and stared at the night sky, his breathing becoming more labored. He could not give up now. Victory was almost his. He must hear the sound he longed for, the music that would finally release him.

The mild wind current moved the box along to the midpoint of the pond, bobbing it along like an errant cork. Nearing the middle of the water filled basin, the slow

acting acid finally ate through the outer layer of the rubber inner tube. A small hiss, gradual at first and then louder, allowed the air to escape and water quickly rushed in. Losing its buoyancy, the box sank quietly beneath the opaque water, coming to rest on the muddy floor.

When Johnnie heard the sound of the escaping air from the tube, a smile covered his face and a sparkle lit up his eyes. All he could do was done. All he could hope for had been accomplished. It was left up to another now. The secrets of the ages had been entrusted to a man he had never met. A man he trusted could carry the burden. It would take strength, determination, and courage. Johnnie hoped he was up to it and more, for the demands would be strenuous, the perils many.

In the remaining hours of his life, Johnnie thought about all the wonderful people he had met and the marvelous places he had gone. There were a few regrets, but not many. Life was full of twists and surprises. A chuckle escaped his lips. It was the journey to the end he had enjoyed the most and he had saved the greatest surprise for last.

Morning found him on the bank of the catfish pond, his eyes closed and a smile etched into his face, as the sun started its daily ascent.

Johnnie Atkyens had finally found peace.