CHAPTER 7

I was a little annoyed at accepting a responsibility I hadn't asked for and wasn't sure I wanted. I had worked over thirty years so I could retire. I just wanted to enjoy my remaining years doing what I wanted.

As I felt my consternation rise, I asked Henry, "What if I don't want to be the guardian?"

He laughed and said, "It can be very interesting and rewarding, besides he continued, you don't really have a choice."

"I don't? Of course I do. Who's going to force me to stay here watching over this place?"

"Did you read all the fine print before you signed the purchase agreement for this property?" he asked.

"Well, no, I guess I skimmed it, looked like regular legalese to me, why?"

"One of the provisions was to abide by the covenants as set forth by the original owner of the house, that would be Sven. Don't panic, I felt the same way when my father told me of my responsibility. It's not that onerous, at least in a time sense. You don't have to be here all the time. It's just that once you make the commitment you must keep it"

"Or what?"

He paused for a moment avoiding an answer. He looked at me, and in a fatherly tone said, "The guardians have a 'brotherhood.' They support each other and provide additional training for new 'apprentices'. In this case my responsibility is your initial training.

Advance training will be done as needed," he said.

"How long will this take?"

"Well, with a smart fellow like you, just a few days to get the hang of it. Once you're comfortable, you'll see less and less of me."

"And where will you be going?"

"Well, I'll be visiting friends for a while and then eventually I'll die. Since I'm nearly ninety, I'll most likely be gone in a few years, maybe less", He continued, "you on the other hand are only in your mid-sixties, you'll most likely last for another twenty, maybe thirty years!"

"But you still haven't answered me, what if I refuse to be the guardian?"

"Once a guardian is selected we pretty much know what kind of person they are. If they violate their covenant the 'brotherhood' will take care of things," he said.

Apprehensively I asked, "And how do they take care of things?"

"If you prove unworthy, your portal is taken out of service, so to speak, until you are replaced. All those who depend on it must wait until another worthy guardian is found. Since you would be in violation of the covenants, the property reverts to me or my heirs," he said, "My responsibility, or the brotherhoods', would be to find another worthy guardian."

"And what happens to me?"

"You will be taken by the brotherhood through this portal to another. That portal is specifically provided for only one purpose."

"And what is that?"

“It leads to sort of a ‘way station’ for unworthy guardians.”

“And how long must an unworthy guardian stay at this ‘way station’?"

Henry looked at me solemnly, his blue eyes stern and said, “Until they die.”

I choked a bit and asked, “How many unworthy guardians are there?”

“None”, he said, “The place is there, but there have never been any unworthy guardians, do you want to be the first?”

“No”, I choked, “Please tell me my responsibilities and how this works. I think you have many friends waiting to see you.”

CHAPTER 8

Henry continued long into the night telling me the history and purpose of the portal. He explained, "Sven had been able to purchase the acre of land surrounding the portal from the lumber company before it was logged. It was only after agreeing that Olga would continue to cook for the logging crew, for at least one year, that the owner would agree to the sale. Sven was a reasonably good lumberjack, but he was over forty years old. He was also a bit of a dreamer and didn't partake in the rough lifestyle of the younger men. Olga on the other hand was an excellent cook. Her wonderful meals were the main reason many of the men didn't leave the camp to work for other lumber companies. While his wife remained at the camp Sven built this portion of the building."

"How did he manage to finance the purchase of the property and buy the materials to build this building and eventually the house if he wasn't working?" I asked.

"That's very interesting," Henry said, "The old giant told Sven that before Europeans came to the Northwest there are many thousands of inhabitants near here, we used to call them Indians, now they're known as 'Native Americans.' They were dispersed throughout this area. They lived with and by the land. By the time Sven arrived here all but a few hundred had died from the diseases carried from Europe such as measles, smallpox, and tuberculosis. The natives didn't stand a chance since they had no immunity."

He continued, "Sven used the portal to travel back to the time when there were few white settlers here. Since this area teamed with wildlife at that time, he was able to take steel axes, knives, fish hooks, and other similar goods he'd purchased in Seattle to the natives to trade for furs. From the mid-1600s to the early 1900s furs were especially valued by the Chinese. Yankee trader ships regularly left for the Orient loaded with these furs and returned with gold and Asian goods for sale in America. Sven simply use his 'time advantage' so to speak, to parley his goods at the most opportune time. Within a few years he had built up considerable wealth that allowed him to construct the house and do a lot more."

"A lot more?"

Henry continued, "Yes, Sven was never a greedy person, once he had sufficient funds for his needs he used much of the rest for charitable purposes. Little is known of his philanthropy because he did all his work anonymously. He and Olga didn't really want the attention. They simply told their friends that a rich uncle had died in Sweden leaving them enough money to retire early."

“Wasn’t it hard for Olga to be left alone in a logging town while Sven was away?”

“No, that wasn't a problem, you see when you leave through the portal you have the option of deciding when to return. You can even return to the same time you left. It can be as though you were never gone. Olga would come here to this shed after work and then she and Sven would leave through the portal. They could be away for weeks, and nobody would know. Sometimes they even went back to Sweden for a visit!”

I was puzzled; I asked Henry if they could choose to go somewhere other than a past time here in Snohomish.

Henry stated it was possible, but it took some further instruction from the Giants for Sven to figure out how. He learned that each portal has specific locations on each side. Some portals take you to the same place, just to other times. Other portals take you to other places, and some take you to both... other places and other times.

“How do you know where they are and where they go?”

Henry paused for a moment and then with a twinkle in his blue eyes said, “That’s the job of the guardians. It is they who will tell you where other portals are and their purpose. You as a guardian will be responsible for who travels through your portal. Did you notice when I pulled you through the portal that there is a space between the curtains?"

"Yes,” I answered, "It seemed to stretch forever, I only glimpsed it for a moment when you pulled me through."

"If you pause in the portal you can connect with other portals. Instead of moving forward you move to the sides or up or down until you reach another opening. These can take you to other places and times. I will explain more later, that it's a lot to grasp in one night."

Feeling a bit overwhelmed at my newfound responsibility I was grateful I didn't need to learn it all at once.

“It’s nearly morning; both of us need to get some rest. I’ll meet you here again tomorrow evening.” With that he opened the big doors and disappeared. I locked the doors behind him and walked to the house and my bed.

Even though my body ached with fatigue, my mind was racing. I lay on my bed considering all the possibilities before me. The last thing I remember before falling asleep was glancing out my window and seeing the sun rising over Mount Pilchuck.