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THE SILENT CONSPIRACY

A novel outline by David Boles

The story began in North Loup, Nebraska, a village of 300 people built along the Northern slope of the lower Loup Valley river basin. The North Loup economy was fed by two items: alfalfa and livestock. Alfalfa was the most profitable but, because of the weather, it was also the most unpredictable performer. The livestock, however, never disappointed: Livestock was never in short supply, but with the government's farm subsidy, one could earn a break-even living raising animals for slaughter.

The man who made certain the livestock stayed healthy enough to sell, was veterinarian Clay Creighton. Clay, 31, was a robust man with meat hook hands and gentle fingers. His eyes were the color of Blue Jay wings: speckled sapphire with flecks of black and white. The weather had tanned his face mahogany and creased it like distressed leather.

May Day was hotter and more humid than usual for Nebraska. The thick air had backed up along the Colorado Rockies and, since it had nowhere to go, it fell and helped stain shirts with perspiration.

Clay stood, dug his knuckles into the small of his sweating back and tried to loosen the knot his muscles tied there when he pulled a calf from the birth canal.

Mrs. Stewart, her shoulders stooped by the hard labor of farm life, entered the pasture carrying a May basket. Clay wiped the blood from his hands and accepted her gift. As he peeled back the ribbon on the paper basket, he found a check made out in his name for \$10,000. Mrs. Stewart begged Clay to take her money if he'd also take a request of hers to New York City. Mrs. Stewart told Clay that before God gave her back to the soil, she wanted her daughter Lizzy to know that she had always been loved to the death.

Clay didn't want to see Lizzy again. She left North Loup partly on account of him. Lizzy threw him over for a greater life in New York. Mrs. Stewart begged him to go because he's the only one around who understands Lizzy's language. He's the only one she ever trusted. Clay finally agreed on one condition: Mrs. Stewart had to take her money back. Clay tore the check into pieces and threw it like confetti. Mrs. Stewart winked and said, "I hear New York is just like Nebraska. Except in neon."

New York City. Lizzy Stewart taught from a cramped classroom in Hamilton Hall at Columbia University. Lizzy's hair flowed across her face like sheets of wheat bowing to the wind. Her hands were a silent and graceful testimony to the grasp of her speech: American Sign Language. Lizzy signed to her students that Deafness was not a handicap. She explained that Deaf people hear with their eyes and feel sound through the vibration of the water in their bodies. Lizzy taught her class that lipreading was only

65% successful because, just like fingerprints, everyone's lips were different. She silently mouthed the words "milk" and "beer" without signing, and asked them to tell her which word she was pronouncing. Less than a third guessed right. She urged her students to practice their signs for the open-air graduation ceremony tomorrow at Columbia. Her class would sign The National Anthem for the Keynote speaker: The President of the United States.

The curtain of night had fallen around Manhattan when Clay arrived by Greyhound bus. Neon glowed like popsicles on a blistering Summer afternoon. Dressed in Oshkosh B'Gosh overalls and a National Corn feed cap, he struggled to fit in to the crowd. The greasy smell of street sausage was thick in his mouth. He began the long walk from 42nd and Broadway to Columbia University at 116th and Broadway.

As he walked, he purchased an "OPP" cap, a Yankees sweatshirt, and a new pair of sneakers. Clay, now feeling disguised as a New Yorker, danced with a group of kids at 69th and Broadway; set a run over cat's leg at 83rd; and ate dinner at Tom's Diner on 112th. Clay set up bivouac at Riverside Park near Grant's Tomb. He wanted to see Lizzy again in the new light of morning.

Lizzy went to CBS News and helped producer Gary Lance review a videotape of the President of the United States. Whenever the President came back to the White House via helicopter, CBS taped the President in a close-up shot. The helicopter blades covered any words spoken but, with the right angle, an expert lip reader could translate what the President said. Lizzy reminded Gary that lip reading was inaccurate, but she thought the President said something about a "threat" and how he was "concerned about its effect on the people."

Gary asked Lizzy for more detail. She squinted at the President's lips on the screen, but a Secret Service man stepped into the frame and blocked her view. As the Secret Service man shouted at the President, Lizzy tried to lip read him, but Gary wasn't interested in the Secret Service because, "They always yell at the President" and he turned off the video tape.

The next morning. On the roof of Butler Library, Lizzy had filled wire cages with Homing Pigeons as part of her Ornithology PhD dissertation on the "Trainable Memory" of these birds. Butler Library overlooked the entire Columbia campus. Lizzy spent many days there with her birds and watched the world pass by below her.

200 yards away, on Low Library's roof, Lizzy's assistant used a mirror to catch and reflect the sun into Lizzy's eyes. The homing pigeons were excited by the sun's glint off the mirror. Lizzy signalled back with a mirror of her own that she was ready.

The Silent Conspiracy by David Boles

Lizzy released the birds! They formed a chevron in the sky as they flew toward the reflected sun at Low Library.

Lizzy followed the pigeon's flight through her binoculars. They safely landed at Low Library. The birds now had to be rewarded with feed, counted and repositioned in their cages before their return flight. Lizzy had ten minutes to spend before the pigeons flew back.

Lizzy cupped binoculars to her eyes and searched for interesting conversation while she waited. She scanned the crowd of students sunning themselves on Low Library's marble steps. Lizzy focused on one pair of lips: "Test... not ready... Mrs. Carl..." *boring*. She searched a sea of moving mouths for some interesting conversation, the same way her mother used to spin the dial on the radio to find a good song: "Budweiser"... *nope*... "Sex with Maryanne"... *interesting, but not in the mood*... "Mumph inat growed"... *chewing food -- gross*... "The Giants'll win 'er all"...*ugh*... *now into the shadows*... "Kiss me"... *nice*... *now through the leaves... here's a shaft of light on lips*... "Assassinate the President."

A coldness dropped hard into her stomach. Lizzy refocused her binoculars and tried to include the face of the speaker. His lips were thin. A delicate scar split his upper lip into two pinkish half-moons.

The lips moved: "I'll do it here. On national television. The World Trade Center was nothing. I'll be the most famous martyr since Sirhan."

Lizzy dropped the binoculars and fought her heavy chest for a breath. The man who planned to take the President's life was the same Secret Service agent she saw shouting at the President on the CBS News videotape last night.

Glint! Lizzy struggled to follow the agent. Flash! Light flared in her binoculars! Her associate on Low Library was signalling that the pigeons were ready to return. Lizzy grabbed her mirror and flashed back a reply. The pigeons were freed!

Instead of following the slant her pigeon's willow bracket in the sky, she pulled the binoculars back to her eyes and spun back to where she'd last spied the Secret Service agent. Gone. No! She found him! And he was peering back at her through his own pair binoculars! *Read his lips, Lizzy... "Roof"... he saw me... "Problem"... got to get out, girl.*

The pigeons were back! She ducked, skittled sunflower seeds across the roof and watched as the Agent raced across the Columbia campus to intercept her at Butler library. As she turned to clamber down the stairs, Clay Creighton was upon her! Lizzy screamed!

Clay offered a bouquet of wild flowers. She turned him around and nudged him down the staircase.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

Clay tried to explain, but Lizzy kept cutting him off with more questions. Together, they stumbled down the spiral staircases until they hit the basement. Lizzy shared what she witnessed. Clay was cautious. Lizzy insisted he help her. They constructed a plan. First, they'd check out the CBS News videotape again to see if Lizzy could read the lips of the Secret Service Agent for more information.

Lizzy led Clay to a secret passageway in the library's basement. She used to go out with the Chief Custodian of the University and their early dates consisted of exploring these uncharted bowels that dissected the belly of the campus. As Lizzy and Clay escaped from the library, they re-connected their lives. Clay told her he came to New York because her mother asked him to relay a message.

Lizzy was angry! "Why won't mother won't let go? She's stuck to the land. She wouldn't even learn sign language. And, she eats red meat! Why did you come here?"

Clay said, "Because I was asked."

Clay voice interpreted for Lizzy when she called Gary at CBS News. Gary demanded to know why she needed to see the tape again. Lizzy had no choice but to tell him what she saw at Columbia. Gary agreed to meet.

In the editing room, Gary enlarged the section of tape where the Secret Service Agent spoke to the President. Lizzy couldn't read his lips! Every the Agent shouted at the President, he bracketed his hands around his mouth to help his voice travel over the constant thump of the helicopter blades.

But wait! There was a second where the Agent turned his full face to the camera. Gary froze that frame and enlarged it on the monitor. Gary computer enhanced the Agent's face.

Lizzy couldn't believe it! She leapt over the editing console and placed her nose against the image of the Agent's chin on the monitor. She closed her eyes and sighed. "It's not him." She moaned, "It isn't the same guy I saw from the roof of the library." Silence. Lizzy tried to smile. "There's no scar. Everything's the same but the scar." Clay helped her down and wondered, "How could a guy cut his lip and have it heal into a scar in less than 24 hours?" Gary flicked on the lights.

The CBS Security Guard buzzed the editing room and said that Gary's guest from the Secret Service had arrived.

Lizzy stared through Gary. "Who's here?"

Gary told her he asked a friend of his to come over and check out her story. Lizzy thrust Gary a fist. Clay stepped in and caught her punch. The black and white security monitor flickered as the image of the two Secret Service Agents and the Security Guard appeared.

Lizzy stopped. She pointed at the small television screen. "It's him. The one with the scar."

Clay and Gary looked back and forth between identical Secret Service Agents. One was a giant face frozen in color on the editing screen before them; the other was a fuzzy, black and white image shimmering with life on a five inch monitor above them. A voice crackled over the intercom. "Open up! It's Special Agents Hughes and McRae."

Gary whispered, "Waitaminute. I don't know either of those guys!"

The editing room door was blasted open by a spew of orange fire from a double barrel shotgun. Gun powder stung eyes and clouded the air. Gary was thrown back against the editing bench.

The two Secret Service Agents pushed into the room

The Security guard reprimanded them, "Hey! I have a key!"

Agent McRae turned and fired the other barrel into the Security Guard's abdomen, killing him.

Agent Hughes grabbed Lizzy and said, "So you're my Peeping Tom?" She scratched his eyes and struggled for the door.

Agent McRae shoved the butt of his shotgun into Lizzy's shoulder and knocked her down. Clay grabbed Agent McRae and twisted his neck until it snapped. McRae slid dead to the floor. Agent Hughes struggled to get a look at Clay through the blood flooding his eye.

As Hughes reached for his gun, Clay clenched his meat hook hand and delivered a crackling punch that split the Agent Hughes' pink scar into separate, bloody pieces.

Clay gathered Lizzy in his arms. Together, they fled into the night as outlaws.

Clay found refuge on a garbage barge. As they sailed down the Hudson River, Clay set Lizzy's broken collarbone. It was difficult for her to sign, so she finger spelled with her good hand. Under the stars and in the midst of Manhattan's trash, they rehashed their past and planned their strategy to save the President. The people who wanted the President dead knew Lizzy. They knew her face, her schedule, and her life. Clay was the only card left to play. He was the unknown Ace hiding up an unwitting President's sleeve.

Clay told Lizzy about his horror at having killed the man who'd claimed to be Agent McRae. Lizzy said he'd stumbled upon the unanswerable conundrum of living.

"When is it right to sacrifice one life for the sanctity of another?"

Clay finally revealed Mrs. Stewart's request.

"Your mother wanted you to know that you are loved to the death." Lizzy cried and talked about her mother. Clay hugged her. Then, they reminisced about their past, the Nebraska weather, and the price of alfalfa back home in North Loup. They kissed deeply and discovered the warmth of a distant, but familiar, passion.

In the meantime, the evening news reported a failed assassination attempt on the President's life by Lizzy Stewart and an unidentified accomplice. The reporter said Secret Service Agent McRae and a CBS Security Guard were killed in the attempt.

Back home in Nebraska, Mrs. Stewart watched the news of her daughter's demise on television. A \$2,000,000 reward was offered for Lizzy's capture. She prayed Clay found Lizzy first.

Special Agent Hughes gave a television interview and assured the world that, "In spite of International terrorism landing on the shores of America, we, the American people, and our President shall not cower nor hide from the celebrated rituals of our Democracy. The President will give the Keynote address at Columbia University's graduation tomorrow as planned."

While the camera zoomed in on Agent Hughes, no scar on his upper lip was visible! His lip wasn't even split! Agent Hughes finished, "I personally guarantee the safety of the President of the United States."

At dawn, Lizzy and Clay climbed from the garbage barge and entered the IRT subway through a secret door near the water's edge. They snaked their way through maintenance tunnels and emergency evacuation passageways until they reached Columbia.

Graduation Day!

Columbia Yard was decorated in the school's colors: white and robin's egg blue. The morning sun sparkled in the dew. College Walk's emerald lawn was close cut and trimmed with rippling streamers. 500 portable chairs crouched on the great lawn and faced the reviewing stand in front of Low Library. Secret Service Agents prowled the rooftops. Other Agents peered from classroom windows, strolled the cobblestones of College Walk and sat in the audience disguised as graduating students.

The Chancellor of Columbia University thanked the families for attending. He introduced the President of the United States. Every major television network carried the event live. As the President took his place behind the podium, the faculty and students gave him a standing ovation. The Secret Service crowded around him even more. Alma Mater, a giant bronze statue, overlooked Columbia Yard from her throne on the Low Library steps. Alma Mater's scepter glistened as she stood a silent watch behind the President.

The Columbia Signing Singers were asked to stand and lead the assembly in The National Anthem. Clay Creighton was part of the group as they took center stage on the reviewing stand. As the crowd sang and Clay signed, he saw the who claimed to be Special Agent Hughes guard next to the President. Agent Hughes' upper lip was bruised purple and bound together with stitches. Clay scanned the crowd. He blinked away sweat from his eyes.

Directly below the reviewing stand in a subterranean tunnel, Lizzy blindly felt her way along the wet passage. When she rounded a curve, light stretched through a manhole cover and illuminated a figure slumped in mossy, standing water. Lizzy got closer. Although she couldn't recognize it, The National Anthem resounded above her and echoed around her. She peered at the figure for a sign of life. She clasped her hand over her mouth and silently screamed!

It was Special Agent Hughes! His hands were bound. His eyes had been punctured and drained with a syringe. He was damp. He shook. His lip was not cut. There was no scar.

Lizzy untied his hands. He begged for help. She read his lips: "Can't see." He asked her to talk to him... to identify herself. Lizzy took his hand, opened the palm and traced letters with her finger:

"D-E-A-F. N-O V-O-I-C-E."

Agent Hughes nodded his head. She drew more letters in his palm.

"L-I-P R-E-A-D."

He nodded again and spoke slowly. Lizzy positioned his face near the shaft of light so she could read his lips better.

"Kill. President. Brother. Imposter! Took. Badge. Get. Help." Lizzy took his hand and placed the palm against her cheek as she nodded. He smiled. He pulled a gun from its holster and offered it to her. She took his hand again and he felt her shake her head.

Agent Hughes nodded. Lizzy pulled the Columbia "All Access" pass from his jacket pocket. He narrowed his eyebrows. She gave him the pass. He flexed the pass in his hands. His fingers slid across the plastic for any bump or ridge of familiarity. Finally, he understood, grinned, and gave it back to her. Lizzy tacked the pass to her shirt and left to get help.

The National Anthem was finished and Clay sat down with the other signers. He searched for a sign from Lizzy. Nothing yet. He checked his watch. 11:25. She had five minutes. Clay peeked at the President as he shuffled his notes for the Keynote address. The man pretending to be Agent Hughes checked his watch and patted the gun hidden in his shoulder holster.

The President began his Keynote address. The statue of Alma Mater watched in silence.

Lizzy came onto the roof of Butler Library and into the sunshine. Her homing pigeons recognized her and cooed a hello. She wore a CBS News jacket and had pulled a 60 Minutes hat down shadow her face. Lizzy made eye contact with CBS News producer, Gary Lance. His eye was bruised from the fight in the editing room, but he winked at her anyway. Television cameras were set up on the Butler library roof. Their unblinking eyes were trained on the President 200 yards away.

As Lizzy walked to greet Gary, a Secret Service Agent stopped her and demanded a pass. Gary shouted that she was with him.

The Agent repeated his demand to see her pass. Gary choked back a smile when Lizzy flashed the "All Access" pass she got from the real Agent Hughes. Lizzy was waved on.

She hugged Gary and looked down at the spectacular sea of white and robin egg blue rising and falling below her. She pulled a small mirror from her jacket, caught the sun's reflection, and angled the sun down into the crowd. It was 11:30.

"There it was!" Clay's palms were moist. "Lizzy's ready." As the President spoke, Clay leapt to his feet and screamed, "Nooooo!"

Every Secret Service Agent's head snapped toward Clay. Clay plucked a tiny mirror from his breast pocket. He jumped, not at the President, but at the Agent Hughes imposter. Clay plunged the nail he'd attached to the back of the mirror deeply into the imposter's chest.

Lizzy's homing pigeons were excited as they watched the sun spark off the mirror piercing the imposter's chest. Lizzy flung open the wire cages. In a burst of rustling wings, the birds ripped from their cages, formed a sharp arc in the sky, and homed in on the glinting mirror 200 yards away.

The imposter drew his gun and aimed at Clay.

Clay screamed, "Mr. President! Drop down!"

A shot!

Clay fell from the reviewing stand and crashed hard onto the marble steps of Low Library.

The imposter turned.

The imposter aimed at the President's head.

The instant he began to pull the trigger, Lizzy's homing pigeons were upon him. The imposter fell back, squeezed wild shots off into the air, and impaled himself upon Alma Mater's sharp scepter.

Secret Service Agents hustled the President to safety.

The Chancellor asked the Columbia Signing Singers to lead the crowd to calm by singing America The Beautiful.

The pigeons scavenged the imposter's corpse for their reward.

It was cold on Happy Jack Mountain in North Loup, Nebraska. Happy Jack was the highest peak in the lower Loup River Valley basin. This was the only place in Nebraska where lush hills and mountains actually roamed and rolled beyond the horizon.

Lizzy stood over a fresh grave.

She signed a silent prayer and cried for the loss of her mother.

Using his good arm, Clay pounded a wooden cross into the earth as a simple headstone. His other arm, pierced and stung by a bullet, was still in a cast.

The Loup River rushed below them.

Whooping Cranes formed a chevron in the sky.

Lizzy took Clay's hand.

The sunrise cracked the horizon.

The Whooping Cranes landed on a sandbar.

The cranes cawed with life as they bathed in the water.