

# The Troubling Relocation of Scotty Atherton

The chilling first person account

A disquieting mystery for grown-ups who have not fully  
set aside the frightening reality of monsters under their beds.

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**1880, Pennsylvania, USA**

**CHAPTER ONE**  
**Disruption and Relocation**

As funerals went, I supposed it had been satisfactory – hole, coffin, minister, tears. There were lots of strangers there all decked out in their Sunday-go-to-meetin’ clothes and all presenting sad faces – the men held their hats over their hearts, and the women sobbed quietly and patted at their eyes with lace handkerchiefs. In all my nine and three quarters years, I had never seen a double funeral – in truth, I had never seen a single funeral. My mother tended to shelter me from things she considered gruesome or possibly disturbing. Most distressing of all, I suppose, I had not been allowed to view the deceased, which seemed most unfair since they were my father and mother – recent victims of highwaymen.

I had suggested several really funny jokes to the minister. He failed to use any of them. My father would have loved them. Clearly, neither my Father nor I rated any consideration in the ceremony. It seemed to have been for the strangers. Mother would have fretted over having Father’s tie well arranged – *it never* had been in life – and her hair perfectly set – *it always* had been.

You would think the minister’s words would have been uplifting and encouraging in flavor but in all honesty, they scared the livin’ bejeebies out of me. Something about their souls first descending into hell and then . . . I chose not to listen

while he detailed their apparently convoluted return trip. It was as if I or my feelings warranted no consideration in the proceedings. I would be sleeping under my bed with six pillows and a club for a week – at least.

Truth be told, I had been terrified since the moment Jane – our maid – awakened me in the middle of the night to deliver the terrible message – ‘Your parents are dead, Scotty’. So far, there had not been a single adult that demonstrated an ounce of what should have been pounds of compassion, soothing words, holding me close, some proof or at least assurance things were going to be alright – for me. The voiced concern was instead estate matters, guardianship inquiries and the proper delivery of their souls to heaven. If I played any part in it at all, I was the clear inconvenience of the matter.

A lawyer had arranged for me to go live with my great uncle, Christian Van Winkle. I hadn’t known he existed until the move was announced to me. I guessed he was rich – the letter from him said I could have my choice of eight unoccupied rooms on the second floor. That seemed friendly. I couldn’t imagine how large that house must be. All that aside, I was still quite angry about having dead parents and thought it unfair to have to just sit there and accept what people were indicating I had to accept. I had no power in it – no say-so about what I wanted or needed – no introduction to what was to come for me.

Run of the mill adults, according to a long-standing matter of fact, were way too bossy and nosey and self-absorbed. Other than my parents, most of them treated kids like we were just miniature adults having all the grown-up characteristics and basic skills, just in less practiced and satisfactory form. They didn’t seem to remember how it was to be a kid. I had my own ideas, wants, needs, and dreams, and was getting to the age I deserved my privacy, as well. I wasn’t sure *why*, but it seemed to be the trend.

Christian Van Winkle – I had never heard that last name associated with my family, Van Winkle. Pretty different from our family name – Atherton – I am Scotty Atherton if anybody really cares. So far, I’d had no say in anything and was referred to as ‘the child’ in almost every instance. I felt like they believed it was in some way ‘unclean’ to refer to me by my name.

Christian was apparently my grandfather's brother – mother's side. That made him a great uncle or some sort of second level something or other once or twice removed from something else. Of all the things I did so well, genealogy was not one of them. Why did it even matter? Apparently, because the one who was the *closest* relative won me as the prize, first or booby seemed to depend on the perspective of the recipient.

It had been my belief that highwaymen had mostly been run out of the east and into the west – after all, it was 1880, Pennsylvania – about as modern and civilized as times got, I figured.

The lawyer's wife insisted I wear my church duds on the stage ride to Philadelphia. Actually, the destination was to be just west of that city on a high hill. I wasn't sure how I had come by that information – I suppose I had been told or maybe I had discovered it as I snooped through the mostly meaningless papers from the lawyer. The dress code seemed dumb to me – it was a private stage with a single driver sent by that Uncle person. Since, sadly, I would be making the two-day trip alone in the coach, nobody was going to see me. I figured I might as well have stripped to my skin – which I just might do if things didn't go well. There was something about naked that drove grownups absolutely mad.

If I found my great uncle congenial, I'd call him *Uncle Chris*. If that weren't acceptable, I'd call him *Uncle Rip* and hope it boiled his risibles. Even through my great sadness, I thought *that* was hilarious – *Rip Van Winkle*

Anyway, I agreed to the travel clothes – hat, coat, vest, trousers, and shoes and stockings, all of which were easily shed once past the city limits.

The night before, I took a bath, washed, and combed my shoulder length blond hair, and admired my blue eyes in a mirror. Father's were brown and Mother's were blue-gray – eyes, not mirrors. I polished my brown shoes and donned my brown hat – brown from tip to toe – well, there were those left-over-from-winter lily-white face and hands and white shirt with the ruffled front.

All my worldly possessions had been packed. The necessities of life would travel with me on the coach – they had been loaded that morning before the funeral. It picked me up at

the cemetery after the service. Brilliant! A kid who had just buried his parents in a heart wrenching graveside service, set down alone in a coach, leaving everything he'd ever known, on his way to a totally foreign world.

My best friends stood off to one side in a group, watching. I waved. They returned it. I guessed they had been prohibited from coming closer to see me off. UGH!

On the seat, there was a large canteen and a basket of sandwiches and other things old women believed were appropriate – apples, carrot and celery strips, raw turnips, hard rolls, and crackers. Where was the pie and cake and tarts, and cookies and hard candy? Old women often smelled good, but beyond that, I figured my life would proceed just fine without them. I was arm-folded, lip-jutting, miffed! I should have been appreciative of their effort. It seemed I was determined to remain angry.

Every mile that separated me from Carson, the only place I had ever lived, made me grow sadder – morose, even.

I loved words. My father had been a physician and used lots of wonderful medical words – I had learned many of them. My mother had been a teacher before they married, and she took great pleasure in forcing me to learn and use words nobody else in the entire universe understood – obelus, peristeronic, acnestis, plenteous, catisflobic (that really wasn't a word but made as much sense to most folks as those real ones). Actually, I really like the sound of that one – '*cat is flo bic*' – so I use it often as an adjective – add 'ly' and it became a magnificent adjective – the catisflobicly splendid essence of the ebullient stripling pachyderm's pseudonym. Like I said, adults had a lot to learn about life. If I *didn't* say that I intended to.

Largely because of my vocabulary, I believe, my teacher encouraged me to write. I asked him what I should write about. He said for me to write about things I knew about. Upon a few moments of sincere and effort-filled consideration, it became clear I didn't know about anything – well, anything but me. So, I started writing in a journal. In it, I got to write about myself. If nine-year-old girls were a representative sample, I supposed of all the things people liked to do, high on their list was to tell about themselves and tell about themselves and tell about

themselves. That's where I've been these past few minutes – in my journal. It should help occupy my time on this terrible trek and help set some of my bad feelings aside. My penmanship had never won prizes, but I noticed my pen had acquired a quiver. That was worth a long sigh and a significant gaze out the window. The coach was comfortable – it was my first coach ride, so I had nothing with which to compare it.

I shed the tie, vest, and coat. I unbuckled my shoes and kicked them off – they were last year's Sunday shoes and way too tight.

I Managed to bring a few important things with me in my suitcases. I brought along a few books. I loved to read. Interestingly, I loved to read best, things I had written. I also typically wrote in the first person. That probably made me the most self-centered writer on earth. It may become the title of my autobiography someday – *All About Me in the First Person*. Smile.

I had read a bit of Nathaniel Hawthorne – mostly at my teacher's suggestion for tips on style. Face it, most 9 ½ year old boys were not that much into adultery. I had to ask my father what it was. My, did *that* open up a can of worms I hadn't intended. I still find myself spitting over it. Those disgusting images just won't leave.

Several hours into the journey, the driver stopped the coach out in the middle of nowhere, got down, and opened the door. It seemed scary. Had the relocation story been a fib? Was I about to be left alongside the road with my suitcase and a basket of sandwiches that smelled like old ladies?

"How about a break to stretch our legs and visit the bushes?"

"Good idea, Sir."

Relief! (Two kinds, actually!)

He followed me to the same bushes. I had a comment.

"I just imagine we should use different bushes."

"Oh, sorry. You modest, are you?"

"Not in the least. I'm just afraid if these bushes get too much nitrogen all at once, it may be detrimental to their well-being."

I wasn't sure he understood my genuine concern, but he moved six bushes to our left. Being smart wasn't always a

socially positive thing.

“Can I ride up with you for a while? It’s pretty boring in the back all by myself.”

“Sure. I always like company. Mama named me Ebenezer but the last time I was called that was at my christening. Please call me Ebb.”

“I’m Scott, but I prefer Scotty with a ‘y’. It is my intention to hold onto that ‘y’ and thereby my childhood for as long as possible. My observations of rank and file adult members of our species does not bode well for growing up.”

“Your mouth is sure full of unusual words.”

“I’ve often been told that, Sir.”

He chuckled and let me mount the seat ahead of him without offering any help. He got major points from me for that. My Father was inclined to let me do things by myself, but he hadn’t around much. Mother would have followed me around with a safety net and pillows if such a thing had not been frowned on by people of stature in our community. Father explained it was her way of expressing her love for me. I had to wonder if it also weren’t her way of protecting herself from heartache in case I got hurt. I was suddenly learning all about heartache. I wouldn’t recommend it.

The word dredged up a mostly humorous memory, however. On one occasion, I overheard Reverend Bassett speaking to my parents about me. He was expressing some concerns.

“Young Scott is far too strong minded to ever be a good Christian. He questions everything. The more people learn, the harder it is to keep them within the Fold. You must break him soon or he’ll bring nothing but heartache to you.”

With those three or four dozen words, the man had lost all the respect I’d ever had for him – and, perhaps, the religion he represented. Mother was far more religious than Father – at least in a public way. From the several diplomas on his office wall, it was plain to see he was highly educated – one of those nemeses of Christianity the Reverend had mentioned. Maybe I was being too severe, but then, maybe I wasn’t.

It was a light coach, so the mis-matched, slender, brown and white team was quite sufficient to the task. Ebb kept them to a walk. My inclination was to push them to at least a trot;



better still a gallop, forcing the coach to kick up and leave a swirling cloud of dust in our wake. I heard that new railroad engines cruised along at forty to fifty miles an hour with a full load of cars. Hard to imagine. What would my grandfathers have thought about that?

“May I ask why you carry a rifle?”

“Highwaymen.”

“I know about them – they killed my parents. Before that, I thought they had mostly moved out west.”

“I’m sorry. Still a few here in the east. Bad men never go away. Out west they’re called desperados.”

“Ah. From the Spanish, I guess. Where do you believe the west begins?”

I could tell that wasn’t a question he was expecting. He needed to get used to that if our time together was to be tolerable for him.

“Kansas, I suppose. Texas and the Indian Territory are out west and Iowa, but it’s a more genteel version of the west. You know ‘genteel’?”

“I do. I was at the top of my class in all subjects. My father was a doctor. I must say I’m ashamed to have been surprised by your use of the term.”

He looked down at me and smiled. I couldn’t determine if it were a, ‘what have I gotten myself into, smile’, or a, ‘how interesting our time together is going to be’, smile. I certainly hoped for the latter.

It reminded me that I knew next to nothing about great uncle Chris, and there beside me was what should be an expert on the topic. I’d find out.

“You must know my great uncle Chris pretty well.”

“Been with him twenty-five years. Thinking it might be time to begin cutting back some.”

“I know nothing about him. Can you fill me in?”

“Well, let’s see what might be useful. He never married. He’s rich as Croesus. Owns most of an inherited steel mill. His personality is a bit – how can I say this? Offbeat, perhaps. He doesn’t necessarily always live within the real world – the one you and I inhabit. He sometimes talks with invisible strangers. When he doesn’t like what they say he can throw terrible tantrums. The rest of us just make sure we are elsewhere.”

I *would* get back to him on *that*.

"Who would 'the rest of us' include, Sir?"

"*Fairmont* is the butler – early forties. I imagine he will become your go-to guy inside. Even tempered, an impish sense of humor, well educated in England, I believe.

"*Gertrude* – second generation German but retains the hint of a family accent – is the housekeeper. You'll like her. She may be a bit overprotective, but it will be worth putting up with that for all the good stuff she brings to the house. She saw fifty some time ago. The thick powder she wears makes it difficult to be more specific.

"*Sammy* is the grounds keeper and handyman – son of slaves – very proud to be a free man and he is one fine grounds keeper. He loves the acreage like it really belonged to him. You got problems with black people?"

"I have never had the opportunity to know any black people, so I have no basis for having problems with any of them. I am looking forward to it. My father said I have a knack for working with plants. Perhaps, we can bond over that interest."

"I like you, Scotty Atherton."

"I like you Ebenezer Jackson and I think that is a *wonderful* first name. Would you be offended if I used it, occasionally?"

"Certainly not, so long as you you're not *offended* by getting thrown in the creek *occasionally*?"

We exchanged smiles. I truly had not understood how sincere he was about the creek. To be on the safe side, I figured 'Ebb' was a really fine name.

"Anybody else?"

"*Wilma* is the cook. Her circumference is her best advertisement. Always has some tasty treat available. Before you know it, she'll have some meat on those bones of yours."

"I like my meat just the way it is, Sir. Look up nine-year-old boy in the encyclopedia and it will be my picture you will find – 52 inches tall, 70 pounds, 26/26/26."

He chuckled.

"Finally, there's *Archibald Ray* – prefers to be called, Archie. He is a huge specimen – tall, wide, muscular. He's the woodsman – keeps the dozen fireplaces in wood and Wilma's

range in kindling. He hunts the forests several times a month and brings in deer or wild boars.

“You have to be understanding with Archie – while he’s long on strength, he’s short on smarts. Never use your quarter words, it upsets him when he can’t understand. Tends to blame the speaker, not himself. Keep to your nickel words. Got it?”

“Yes, Sir. He doesn’t sound like the kind one should get upset. I got it!

“And you are the Stable Man, correct?”

“Correct – Ebb Jackson, one grown son – lives in Michigan. My wife died some years back, pretty good checkers player if you ever get that bored. I’m thinking you are more the chess type.”

“I can lower myself for the occasional game of checkers if the company’s good.”

We exchanged smiles.

“I guess the verdict is still out on that, Scotty. That reminds me, Mr. Van Winkle will insist the help calls you, Master Scotty. No telling what *he* will call you or even if it will stay the same from day to day. Just respond with a smile – my best advice.

“Also, no telling what he’ll require you to call him – the smile thing there, too.”

“As I understand it, he is my grandfather’s brother, but my grandfather’s name on my mother’s side was Thompson. I don’t understand.”

“Fairmont will know better than I about things like that. I wasn’t aware you and your family existed until I heard you were coming to live here. A good day for us, I’m thinking. You will like Fairmont. Just never mention his accent. He will insist it is *you* who has one and will document it with an hour of proof from history books. He’s the smartest of the group here – next to your uncle, perhaps.”

“I assume I will find you are among the wisest.”

Again, he did a face to face and just smiled.

“Any kids in the neighborhood?”

“None within several miles. I do believe there are children at the Simpson estate and perhaps at the Thomasville’s – both within forty-five minutes walking time. They may be older. Lot’s of children in town – Lattimore.”

“Where will I go to school?”

“The plan is for you to have a tutor who will come to Devonshire.”

“What is a Devonshire?”

“The name of Mr. Van Winkle’s estate. One hundred acres of beautiful, rolling, hills. The old stone mansion sets halfway up the highest of them. A stream flows from a powerful artesian spring at the top of the hill, winds down the slope, and joins a stream at the bottom of that hill on the south side of the road. The open area I’ve described is surrounded by forests – also parts of the estate.”

“In a letter, my uncle said I had the pick of eight second floor rooms. Any suggestions?”

“My pick would be the south east corner room. It is not as large as some, but it has windows on two sides for a nice summer cross breeze and a view down the front hill to the south – the stream, a few trees, colorful flower patches in the spring, summer, and fall. If you prefer a view of a pine forest, I’d go with the north east corner room at the rear. All the rooms have fireplaces and can be kept toasty warm all winter long.”

“Is that the top floor – the second?”

“No, there are three and an attic. The third floor is largely occupied by Mr. Van Winkle. The not entirely kind joke is that he saves half of the rooms for his imaginary friends when they visit. He has a three-room suite up there and an office that overlooks the front lawn.

Except for Fairmont, the rest of us help have rooms across the back of the first floor, each also has an exterior door. His is on the front – south east – under the room I suggested for you. My room is on the north east corner – small but more than a man needs. The entry hall, staircase, kitchen, dining rooms, and sitting rooms are spread across the rest of the first floor.”

“Horses, I assume.”

“An even dozen. That will soon be increased by one when Muffin foals next month. Do you like to ride?”

“It’s okay. Back home, things were all so close together, I got places faster by running than saddling up, so I’m not an accomplished horseman, if that’s what you’re asking. I ride often enough that I don’t get a raw groin after a few hours in the

saddle.”

Ebb smiled, nodded, and flicked the reins.

“Looks like an early evenin’ rain brewin’. We’ll do better on the graveled road just up ahead than here on the dirt. Hold onto your hat.”

For the first time, I understood the real meaning of that saying. The horses seemed to enjoy the full out gallop.

He had been right. Within fifteen minutes it was pouring. In preparation for that, he had handed me the reins while he got into his slicker. It rode in a compartment under the seat. He stopped long enough for me to scramble into the back just as the rain set in.

I liked Ebb. If his descriptions of the others were accurate, I figured I’d like them all.

Since my face was already wet, I sat back and allowed myself to cry a while. I had been trying to hide my grief; didn’t know why. It hadn’t seemed acceptable among the bevvvy of adults that had recently dominated my life. I was just nine. Surely, I was allowed to be sad like a kid would be. It settled into a chin-quivering session with those uneven heaves of my chest and occasional gasps for breath. I didn’t attend to the tears. It felt good to just let them flow. It was as if my self-imposed prohibition had finally been lifted – the first ‘sad kidness’ I’d been allowed during that past week.

I felt so alone in the world. For the first time, ‘alone’, became synonymous with, ‘terrified’. I stood up as if I needed to go somewhere – to get away – to find something. The only place I had to go was right where I was – in a coach, somewhere along a darkening country road, during a downpour, trusting my fate to a stranger, on my way to meet another stranger who, as close as I could figure, was to become guardian of me and overseer of my next ten or so years – and he appeared to be a loon – or was that *lune* from lunatic?

I lay down on the seat, head on my hands, and was soon asleep.

When I awakened, sometime later, it was dark outside. The window curtains had been rolled down, small lamp had been lit inside the coach, and I found myself with a cover tucked in about me. I sat up and then knelt on the front seat, sliding open the peep hole to the rear of the driver.

“Just letting you know I’m awake, Ebb. Thanks for fixing things back here – the lantern and the blanket.”

“We’ll be stopping for the night just ahead – the *Bradford Inn*. Good food, good bed, good people. Put what you’ll need in the sack I left on the seat. Arrive in no more than ten minutes.”

I had never stayed in an Inn so became immediately excited. I gathered my night shirt, and clean underwear and stockings. Father, being a physician, insisted that I use a toothbrush on my teeth. It was not an uncommon practice, but neither was it universal. I packed mine along with a vial of soda to put on the wet bristles. I was somewhat surprised at my intention; I had always hated having to brush – I supposed it was more the time it took out of my life than the brushing, itself. I sort of liked the taste of soda. I was told I had nice teeth. I supposed, I should be appreciative that I had been forced to use a brush. Clearly, I still had lots of things to sort out.

I determined that I felt some better. Whether that was the rest or the cry, I couldn’t determine. Probably some of each. Mother said a good cry usually made her feel better. Father had not weighed in on the matter. If, in fact, it made you feel better, I just imagined that after the funeral there were a lot of very happy women back in Carson. Humans were an odd lot.

Ebb knocked on the peep hole and said we were arriving at the inn. I rolled up the curtain and stuck my head out the window to look. It had stopped raining. I figured it would be larger – the inn. Turned out to be two stories with no more than eight rooms on the second floor. He drove us around back and turned the team and coach over to an older man named Curtis. They exchanged kind words over that sort of handshake where they put their left hands on each other’s shoulders. I had not yet practiced that. We entered through a rear door. Ebb seemed to know a lot about the place.

My only information about Inns was from the novel about Moby Dick in which sometimes a half dozen men had to sleep in the same bed. I hoped that was not to be the case – my slender nine-year-old frame might well get crushed.

We were met by a smiling, overstuffed and effervescent, woman who was clearly happy at seeing Ebb.

“Ebby! What a wonderful surprise. I see you have a handsome young companion, today.”

I probably blushed.

“Mildred, this is Scotty, my *newest* friend, in fact. Scotty, this is Mildred, my youngest sister. She and her husband, Bob – Mr. and Mrs. Bradford – run this place.”

“We always have a room for Ebby,” she said offering him one more, long hug.

My first mental image was that of a bed, uncluttered of sleeping men clad in their long johns. I offered a smile and my hand for a shake. She took it. That was my snootiness test. She passed. Well over half the women I’d met, failed, preferring to just pat me on my head – I hated that. I mean, I *really* hated that.

“Glad to make your acquaintance. Your brother seems to be a fine man.”

I hoped that had been appropriate. It must have been, since it moved the conversation right along.

“He better be. His five sisters worked on him for nearly two decades. We’re still not above a good solid backhand if he gets out of line.”

I assumed all his sisters were older than he. We all chuckled. Backhands had not been a part of my life. I wondered if I should practice some avoidance strategy.

They went on chatting. A man, her husband, I assumed, beckoned to me, and took me upstairs to our room – two beds, two windows, two chairs and a table, with a green, braided rug on the floor and matching green drapes and comforters on the beds. It was less fancy than my home had been but several cuts above those of many of my friends.

It felt safe. Until the moment of that realization, I hadn’t recognized that safety had been a concern alongside my fears and sadness. I put my bag on the single bed.

“There is water in the pitcher, there, and a bowl and towel if you want to clean up before you eat.”

I nodded and approached the nightstand. He left. When Mother had spoken such words, it had been a must-do. From him, I figured it was merely an option. I followed mother’s preference. It suddenly appeared like my first night away from home was going to be just fine even without the club and arsenal of pillows.





## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **I Was Surprised at my Sudden Reluctance**

We ate at a long, wide table in a room named, *The Trough*, according to the hand painted plaque above the door. I thought that was hilarious. That night, it was pot roast that fell apart just by looking at it. There were lots of carrots and new potatoes. It all floated in gravy that was thick, brown, and delicious. It didn't take as much chewing as I remembered. There were rolls with butter and jam and both pie and cake for dessert. It was one of the major drawbacks of being nine – far too little stomach capacity for so much good stuff.

My Father had suggested I take turns, eating just a bit of everything around my plate and then doing it again until I was full. That way I didn't miss out on anything. It was my first experience with double crusted strawberry/rhubarb pie. *Where* had it been all my life!

After supper, we sat near the big fireplace in the common room. There was no real need for a fire, but they had a small one going anyway. Ebb handed me the iron poker, which I figured made me the guardian of the flames. He knew about nine-year-old boys. We sang songs and Mildred's husband, Jake, played the banjo. Mildred did a silly dance. Everybody laughed themselves to tears over it. She was not above flaunting her chest bulk, shall we say. It was a good time. For a few minutes I was able to put my sadness aside. It was reassuring my cheeks remembered how to smile.

There were nine of us boarders – all strangers to me and yet not really. We each stood up and told something interesting

about our self. I was hard put to come up with anything interesting about *myself* but settled on the fact I was the dart throwing champion at Gus's barber shop back home – nine bulls' eyes in a row. Jake set a dart board up on the mantel and asked for a demonstration. I hit five bulls' eyes one after another and finished with a specialty shot on which I had been working – while facing away from the target, tossing the dart over my left shoulder with my right hand. Not a bulls' eye but didn't miss it by all that much. Most folks thought just hitting the board was a good accomplishment from that position. I got more praise than was deserved, but I understood they were doing what they could to bolster my sagging mindset. Word of the recent tragedy in my life had spread among them. They were all good people.

I didn't understand for sure why I was so tired. I hardly even remembered crawling into bed. It wasn't a great bed but that didn't seem to matter. I had never found a surface on which I had not been able to sleep when I was tired. The back of the ice wagon might have presented a challenge but in my defense, who in their right mind would try it?

Ebb awakened me at dawn saying we had a long day ahead of us on the road. He didn't change his underwear, so neither did I – probably a first for me. I knew it was a little thing, but it was like a dividing line between my old life and my new life. I guessed that soon a lot of things like that would be up to me. I felt a new sense of responsibility.

With breakfast behind us, we were on the road by six. I sat as shotgun, like I'd heard the older boys call it – right there at Ebb's left elbow. In just the short time I'd known him, I concluded he had been a great father for his son. He asked me questions about things instead of telling me things – 'what do you think about such and such?', 'how would you handle this or that?', 'I've been thinking there ought to be a better way to do such and such, what do you think?' He'd answer my questions. We played a game – 'Collect the B's'. Each time one of us would spot something that began with a 'B' we'd call it out and after so long the one with the most things on his list, won. I kept the tally. It could have just as well been 'Collect the A's or W's and later it would be.

That first game – one-hour limit – we tied at fifteen each.

I'm sure he rigged that, but it didn't matter. We had really funny debates over whether or not my sighting of a 'bold squirrel' and a 'battered flag' qualified as 'B'. In the end he allowed them. We smiled a lot – and laughed. He sensed just what I needed.

Later, I returned to the coach and read and got my journal up to date from the night before. I had taken to adding happy and sad faces here and there to quickly identify the nature of certain passages. There had been lots of sad that past week. That morning there was a pretty even number of each.

My heart held the greatest sadness that had ever beset me. Mostly because of Ebb, I was filled with cautious optimism about my new home. I was concerned about the apparent scarcity of options I had if it didn't work out. Up to then, from my view, the most attractive alternate place to live would have been with Mildred and Jake – not a real possibility, of course.

The lawyer had given me an envelope filled with legal papers, which I had merely scanned enough to verify they were, indeed, legal papers. I searched my luggage for them. It was a large, brown envelope – thicker and heavier than I had remembered.

I removed the many sheets and set them on the seat beside me. The top sheet was my birth certificate. Reassuring to know I had been born. That raised a smile. Father and I always enjoyed absurdity. Mother didn't seem to catch on. She was a realist. Father was an idealist. I was still a dreamer, always looking for options and possibilities. Father said that was how it should be at my age – well, at my brain age.

There were no such things as tests to establish that, of course – how much smarts – although Father said there would be someday – 'Thinking Acuity Tests' or 'Mental Efficiency Tests', he said. Based on my fund of knowledge and the mental processing skills I displayed, he estimated my brain worked more like a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old. He cautioned me that just because I was smart and mentally capable, I shouldn't assume my wisdom was equal to that. He was both smart and wise. I was already missing both of those things. I allowed a tear over it.

On another sheet was my family tree – back several generations. With a few exceptions, everybody on Father's side of the family was dead. The closest one still breathing on

Mother's side was Christian Van Winkle – that's why he won the prize. He had come into the family line when my great grandfather had remarried – he was the come-along son of his new wife. I figured that meant I had virtually no living blood relatives at all. Christian had a nephew – first not second place like me – named Wendell Best – bearing my great grandfather's second wife's former married name. I certainly hoped I would *not* be tested over any of that – complicated and, I supposed, irrelevant.

The upshot seemed to be that the 'Best' guy was the closest thing I had to a relative of any description on Mother's side other than Van Winkle, himself. No clue was given about where he lived. Maybe there would be something further down in the stack.

There was a stock certificate for the *Sterling Steel Mill*. It confirmed that my father had been a 15% owner of the company. I suddenly realized how we seemed to have more money than I figured was generated by his medical practice – the nice house and maid, nice furniture, summer camp, and more clothes than any boy could possibly need. There was a recent update stapled to the certificate, which passed that stock to me upon Father's death – signed by a judge with a fancy, wax seal. There was also a document explaining how that stock had filtered down to him from generation to generation. The complete list of other stockholders included my great uncle, Christian, and that outlying relative – the Best guy. Best had 10% and Christian the rest – 75%.

The financial record for the past several years suggested it was profiting in the vicinity of \$250,000 a year. I recognized that in 1880 that was a *huge* amount of money – the president of our whole United States made \$50,000 a year – close to that of a king, I figured. A quick estimate told me my share would be \$37,500 a year – more money than lots of men earned in *forty* years. That should keep me in stick candy for a while.

At nine, I understood that more money was better than less money, but I had no real idea how much money it took to do anything – well, stick candy was a penny at Mr. Treadway's grocery. If you'd made puppy eyes, he'd search the jar and give you broken pieces free of charge. My friend, Tommy, was the

master of puppy eyes. There wasn't a lot of money at his house. More than once I had seen Mr. Treadway secretly break a piece so he could give it to my friend. He was good man. Tommy often felt lucky when he'd find a penny in the dirt while we were playing marbles. My risibles always smiled. Dad said charity wasn't charity if you took credit for it.

There was also a copy of Christian's will. The attorney had certainly been thorough – and all within one week. That did not reflect the general inefficiency I had been led to believe about attorneys. 'Postponement, postponement, postponement,' my Father used to say. Fascinating to me was the brevity of the will.

'Upon my death, my entire estate is to go to my nephew, Lawrence Atherton, M.D. or, in the event of his death, to his wife, or in the event they are both deceased to their son, Scott Atherton to be shared equally with any other children of that marriage.'

A ton of attached pages went on to outline and document all the legal stuff – properties, bank accounts, investments, and so on. I put all that aside. That was a WOW if ever there was a WOW. The first downside I saw about the revelation was that I had nobody to share the news with. The 'wisdom' thing Father had spoken about came to mind immediately. I *shouldn't* share that news with anybody. My *first* purchase needed to be a safe for the papers. My *second* would be stick candy – perhaps *ten* cents worth all at once considering the recent revelation.

At the bottom of the pile were a bunch of receipts marked paid – apparently all the bills my parents owed had been paid. There was a note that our house and other property would be sold, and the income would be deposited in my new bank account in Philadelphia – bank book, safe deposit key, and account information was included in a smaller envelope. I was amazed at the bank balance – one period, one comma, and eight numbers. [xxx,xxx.xx]

I was at once the richest boy I'd ever known and the saddest boy I'd ever known. It brought on another crying jag. Like before, I just let it run its course. I would have given up all

that wealth to have my parents back. Since that was not a possibility, I needed to learn how to live with my situation. I really didn't have to do anything – just live with Christian and let the other stuff take care of itself. It gave me lots of time to figure it all out. That realization took a load off my shoulders – another saying I finally understood.

Mildred had packed us lunch, so at about noon Ebb pulled off the road and we spread a blanket on a grassy area under a fifty-year-old Elm and ate.

“I'm eager to meet the new folks at Devonshire.”

“And you may be sure they are eager to meet you. It has been many years since there has been a youngster there. In general, they all love everybody. Expect Archie to be a bit standoffish at first. In many ways, he's like a feral pup. My advice is to let him come to you. The women will spoil you to death. Fairmont may seem a bit stiff and formal at first. He really isn't, and he will let you learn that in time. Sammy will let you make the first move – to see in what light you hold a black man. Poor guy. He has to go through that every time he meets a new person. Once that's established, he'll be the best buddy you could ever want – he'll have you fiddlin', dancin', and singin' before you can offer any objection. In general, prepare to be over-protected. You will have to find ways of establishing yourself as your own man – do you understand that?”

“Be appreciatively independent, perhaps?”

“I think you grasp the situation. Once they come to understand that brain of yours, they will begin to see the difference between that and your otherwise nine-year-oldness – if you understand that?”

“Yes, Sir. My Father and I had numerous discussions about that both as a problem and as an advantage. I will always gladly accept suggestions anytime you feel one is called for. I must say I was not aware the quality of my brain was that obvious – I mean that in such a short time you noticed.”

He offered a smile directly into my face. There would be no explanation.

“If I may, Sir, *you* present a puzzle for me. A man who speaks with an educated tongue and yet confines himself to horses and carriages.”

“I graduated high school with high marks. I love horses.

I read a lot. I ride a lot. I believe I have the perfect situation for myself at this phase in my life. And now, it seems I have the prospect of adding even one more bright star to it.”

I figured he meant me. I didn’t know whether to be embarrassed at the comment or just feel good about it. I felt obliged to move on.

“I see. I’m happy for you, then. You indicated Fairmont was educated in England.”

“Yes. Something beyond high school I am certain, but I am not privy to what or how much. Unlike many butlers, he is first generation – it often runs in families. Why he chose butlering, I have no idea. He does not speak of his life before Devonshire. He could have been a prince or a cutthroat.”

He smiled at his comment. It was not particularly reassuring to me.

“I see. Thank you.”

I moved on to another topic but not before a flash of Fairmont as a pirate captain crossed my head.

“I have been wondering how I should be dressed when I arrive. I feel dreadfully uncomfortable in this getup – it was forced onto me by a strange lady.”

“It seems to me you will want to present yourself the way you want the others to see you – to know important things about you from first glance. If the suit is uncomfortable, what would be more representative of the *you*, you want them to know?”

I could hardly believe how good he was with me!

“School trousers and plain shirt, I believe would do what you suggest – just a regular kid with no airs.”

“Then, I’d say go with that.”

“You mentioned the likelihood of a tutor rather than regular school. Why do you expect that? Is there no school close by?”

“The closest school is ten miles away in a small town sitting between Devonshire and Philadelphia – Lattimore – fewer than five hundred souls. I imagine impacting his decision was the ninety-minute journey each way in the winter. Most children of privilege in this part of the state attend private or boarding schools. I imagine that could be an alternative for you to explore with Mr. V.”

“Mr. V. I like that.”

“It simplifies life among the help. Never use it to his face. It might be taken as disrespectful – though none is intended. He is a fine man and is generous in his compensation and charity.”

I probably nodded. That half-hour had been helpful and informative. I felt less nervous about the upcoming meeting. The berry tart for dessert only made it better.

“Thanks for the chat, Ebb. What should I call the others?”

“They all happily answer to their first names – Fairmont is just Fairmont. He has never mentioned which it is – first or last – or what the other might be.”

Perhaps he was hatched – robin, hawk, viper – they only had one name. I smiled again at my foolishness. Father would have smiled. Mother would have sighed deeply, fearing for my sanity.

We put our lunch things into the coach and were back on the road. The horses seemed well rested and had drunk from a nearby stream. I chose to ride inside, expecting a nap in my near future. I wasn’t sure why I was needing so much sleep. Mother would have taken my temperature at both ends and listed a half dozen possibilities to my Father. He would have asked if I felt alright. I would have said yes. He would have said, ‘So, *that*, then,’ and Mother would have continued worrying more quietly.

I did feel fine, so my answer to my own quarry about my sleepiness would be, ‘So, *that*, then’. It made me smile. It caused a few tears to dribble down my cheeks. I wondered what volume of tears a boy’s tear glands could produce over a twenty-four-hour period. This wasn’t going to be easy – life without my parents. They had been very different sorts of people and, although I had not characterized it in that way before, being different in those ways gave me a wide range of choices in my own life. It wasn’t a choice between the right way and the wrong way but presented a buffet from which I could pick and choose – from two approaches that had, in their own ways, led them each to a fine life.

After I changed my clothes, I felt much more like myself. I rolled the suit, et. al, into a wad – the sort of undisciplined wad one would have prepared to throw away. I curled up and was soon asleep – wads sometimes made fine pillows.



I awoke at 2:30 and took out a book. I put it aside in favor of a small box of things from my parents – things the lawyer’s wife had collected for me from the house – Father’s wristwatch among them. I put it on immediately. It spun on my wrist needing another hole in the leather band. I managed that with help from a nail – nine-year-old boys carried a selection of items necessary to their survival and comfort. It was not as nice looking as the punched holes already on the band, but it worked just fine, and for a boy my age, working just fine was always the ultimate aspiration. It was comforting to have that reminder right there on my wrist. It was the very timepiece on which I had learned to tell time while cuddled into Father’s lap.

I read until I noticed the world had darkened to the place it had become difficult to continue without lighting the lantern. I chose to speak to Ebb through the peep hole.

“You hungry yet, Ebb?”

My way of ascertaining what we were doing for supper – a choice between raiding the leftovers in the lunch basket or waiting for the possibility of something better.

“A roadhouse just ahead – maybe five minutes. Your hunger clock seems to be well-tuned to this route.”

“You indicated we’d make Devonshire today.”

“I know it’s been a long day. We’ll arrive before midnight. The others will be waiting. My guess is something sweet and wonderful from Wilma’s kitchen and one grand, sit-around-the-kitchen-table get acquainted session. Mr. V will be in bed and you’ll meet him in the morning at breakfast.”

He had answered more than all my questions – he knew a lot about boys. I suddenly understood why he was walking the horses – an eighteen-hour day with only several breaks. That would be a strain on any horse.

It was *Dilbert’s Roadhouse* – not as fancy as Jake and Mildred’s. There were mostly horses tied up out front – men inside, I figured – more there for a meal than to overnight – bedrolls behind the saddles. I was right. Before entering, Ebb offered one caution.

“The men will be crude and their language more than a little bit blue, but they are good people.”

*Crude* I figured I understood. *Blue* defined itself within the first sixty seconds. I would try to characterize it as

instructive rather than offensive. It would have sprung Mother's garter straps.

There was one long table at which everybody ate. The benches were too low for me but when offered a booster pillow, I declined. It just didn't seem the manly way for a guy to fit in at *Dilbert's Roadhouse*. I sat on my legs, and it worked fine. There was no menu. We ate what they had prepared that night – steak and thick cut, fried, potatoes with bowls of fresh fruit. The men all drank ale. The lady waiting on us brought me apple juice. She had a wonderful smile and smelled fine – certainly better than the men. She had a very large chest.

Several of the men seemed to know Ebb. As the meal was finishing, he looked up and down the table speaking to the group.

"Anybody here up for a game of darts?"

They all looked at the same man – *Davis*, I would learn. I assumed that meant he was the best darter at the table. Davis was a large man of questionable hygiene with an ugly, deep, scar across his right cheek. His smile made it expand into something all quite grotesque.

"Didn't even know you tossed," the man replied to Ebb.

"Oh, I don't know the point from the feathers. It is my young friend here who you'll be going up against."

He stood and moved to look me over. I sat up as straight as I could manage. It could have been frightening if Ebb had not been right there. Ebb continued.

"Only bull's eyes count, five points apiece, shoot 'til you miss, first man to 25 wins."

"What's the wager ta be?" he asked.

Ebb responded.

"Winner leaves here with bragging rights and his good reputation. Loser dances on the table."

I couldn't tell if I were nervous or eager – for me, the feelings were close to the same.

"Well, Davis. You up for a game or not?"

"Don't seem fair, goin' up agin a kid."

"Figured it might add some fun."

"Okay, then. Bein' the good sport that I am . . ." the others all booed, playfully . . . "I'll give him first toss."

The men scattered to chairs around the room. Ebb had

clearly sparked some interest. The owner opened the doors on the dart board – a permanent fixture on the front wall between the windows. He handed each of us six darts – mine red and Davis’s green. He pointed to a line painted on the floor twelve feet from the board. As it turned out, that was my preferred distance.

Davis motioned for me to step to the line. Ebb spoke.

“How about a side bet, Davis – say, five dollars?”

“You crazy? Sure. Five. Milly will hold the stakes.”

Five dollars seemed like a very large bet to me – more than double the cost of the meals for the two of us.

They each peeled off five dollars and handed it to the waitress. She tucked the bills into her chest. The men watched with some interest. Odd, I thought.

“Anytime you’re ready, son, the owner said.”

I stepped up to the line and without loitering for so much as five seconds, I let fly with my first dart. Bull’s eye. A joint, ‘ooo’, rose from the men. Lots of eyebrows raised. They all looked at Davis. Several turned more directly toward the board. I followed that with three more – bull’s eyes. By then, a bit full of myself and tempting fate, I turned around for my over the shoulder shot. The men grew quiet. Several toward the back stood. I extended the moment to milk it for all it was worth. Once set, there was no dawdling. Whish! Bull’s eye! – not center but Bull’s eye. I had appropriately accommodated for the miss the night before and figured I had that shot nailed from then on.

The men applauded and patted my back with such force I expected to spit out my lungs and die from asphyxiation right there on the filthy floor at Dilbert’s Roadhouse. Davis stepped up to me, his reaction uncertain as reflected on his face. He reached out and set me up on the table. He broke a smile.

“A genuine toast to celebrate our young winner. On me.”

He winked at the waitress. I thought that was a nice gesture.

It was served in a tiny glass and was the strangest tasting apple juice I’d ever had – some sort of a fiery bite to it that lingered – and lingered all the way down. I wasn’t sure I’d ever catch a breath again.

Comically, everybody thought, the waitress made a big deal about digging for the bills from inside her blouse. She

stuffed them down my shirt and planted a kiss on my forehead. Two men picked me up and paraded me around the room on their shoulders. It was my first experience with such a group of men. Had I not have been forewarned, I probably would have been terrified. I understood that facing the unknown often did that to folks and, on several occasions, I had experienced it myself – recently, in fact.

Davis did his dance on the table. I clapped for him. We left to applause for me. My heart was thumping. It had been the most exhilarating fifteen minutes of my life. I sat up beside Ebb. He couldn't stop smiling; I couldn't stop talking – it was like my tongue had just taken over.

"Thanks for that, back there, Ebb. It was a first for me, like a highlight I'm sure I'll never forget."

He nodded and flicked the team up to an easy trot. I figured I must have been tired. My vision became just a bit blurry and I felt the need to hold on. My quick conclusion was that *hadn't* been 100% apple juice. It brought the nature of that wink into question.

I had never traveled out in the open like that at night. It was nice – the moon and stars – mainly the darkness, I guessed. It was like most of the world had disappeared. Silly talk. At any rate, it was nice. I felt safe and comfortable there on the seat beside Ebb. He asked me to tell him all about myself, so I did. I enjoyed that; however, it did not escape me that I sounded a whole lot like a nine-year-old girl.

Time passed quickly and before I knew it, he pulled up the team and pointed to the hill off to our right.

"There she stands – Devonshire."

"It was mostly just a silhouette against the moonlit slope behind it. There were dots of light – windows, I imagined. If that were so, it was a huge building. I had a question about that."

"A big house or a mansion?"

"Interesting question. Mr. A refers to it as his mansion. The rest of us talk about coming and going from our house. I suppose that means you get to decide for yourself – mansion or house?"

"For sure it's not a hut, or a shack, or a hovel."

I figured he smiled at that – it was too dark to tell about such things.

“I think a bush-stop would be prudent before we proceed up the lane, Ebb.”

That seen to, he flicked the switch, and we began making our way up the hillside lane, eventually stopping at the front porch that ran the width of the big, gray stone, structure.

I sighed. My *in between* time was over. My new life was right there ready for me to walk into it. I was surprised at my sudden reluctance.

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### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **Frankly, He Seemed Like an Odd Duck**

“I’ll go in with you and make the introductions, then I’ll return and take care of the horses and coach if that will be satisfactory. Like I said, my room is on the north east corner if you should need anything later.”

I nodded. It had been a kind gesture and probably should have garnered more appreciation than it did. At that moment, however, my attention was focused on a huge, lump that had formed in my stomach. I took a deep breath.

There were six long, wide, steps up to the porch. It was fifteen feet from them across the porch to the door. The door was ten feet tall. Suddenly, everything in my life had become huge, while I remained smaller than I remembered. Ebb pushed it open in front of me. I entered a huge hall, as large as the Grange Hall back home. A massive stairway rose at the rear of the wide, open, expanse. There were double, sliding doors on each side close to the front. He motioned me to our left and slid back one door.

Inside stood the help – silent and motionless. I had seldom been silent and motionless in my entire, wakeful life. I waved across my face and opened with something dumb.

“Really, folks, we must stop meeting behind closed doors like this.”

Their sober faces lit up and there were chuckles all around. They moved toward me. The men offered hands to shake. The women offered bone crushing hugs. Not a single

pat on my head. It seemed to be the dining room. Suddenly it hit me – they had been as scared of me as I had been of them.

The shortest, widest, and smiliest woman introduced herself.

“I’m Wilma. Got food waiting in the kitchen.”

Taking possession of me, she put her arm around my shoulders and escorted me through yet another door. She smelled like fresh bread. The others followed. I was for some reason relieved we had not remained in that very ornate, very formal dining room. I had always been a kitchen table sort of guy. One at a time, they each introduced themselves as they took seats around the large, circular table.

“I’m Gertie, Scotty – the housekeeper. I have a room ready for you. I understand you have yet to choose a permanent one. If you want, in the morning, I’ll take you on a tour of those that are available. It’s good to have you here.”

“I am Fairmont, Master Scott, the butler of the house. When you are ready, I will introduce you to all thirty rooms and various nooks and crannies that may be of interest. I am pleased you arrived safely. As you have general questions you will probably want to address them to me. Anything right now?

I saw an opportunity to lighten things up.

“Just one thing. On a scale of one to ten – ten being best – how would you rate my *American* accent?”

The others broke out in knee-slapping laughter. Fairmont enjoyed it as well. I had one more ice breaker up my sleeve.

“I was told the person who kept the smiles going around here is named, Sammy, and that there was something about him that would set him apart from the rest. Let’s see. Gertrude seems to be chuck full of love. Wilma emits the aroma of freshly baked goods. Ebb, whinnies in his sleep. Fairmont seems to have a plank up his back.”

I stopped in front of the only one left. He had the most beautiful black skin I had ever imagined could be. I ignored that, keeping the joke rolling.

“May I smell your hands, Sir?”

They were all enjoying my funning them. He reached his arms out in my direction. A wonderful smile broke across his face. I made sport of sniffing up each arm – fingernails to elbow.



“Ah, yes. The wonderful aroma of soil. That must be what they meant about being set apart. Sammy, I’m Scotty, a budding gardener. Expect me to be at your heels often.”

He offered his hand for another shake – the one with the aroma of soil. Sammy and I were the last to take seats. It was a table of smiles – suddenly relaxed smiles, I suspected.

Archie had still not put in an appearance. I had been told to let him make the first move. I could do that. My image of him was similar to the picture of the giant in one of my books from childhood.

The women were soon setting platters of sandwiches and cookies about on the table. There was coffee and *tea*, and milk for *me*. Sometimes poetry just arises like that from the mundane. Their questions lasted until well past one o’clock. I enjoyed responding to them. They had avoided the obvious event in my life. That would not be good.

“You know, I’m sure, that I recently lost my parents. Although it is sad, it is not a topic to be avoided. You have undoubtedly had more experience in coping with such devastating occurrences than I, and I will appreciate your counsel as you believe it might be helpful.”

I had practiced that – words and delivery. If I was anything, I was always well prepared.

Those hadn’t been my nickel words, but I figured if I was dressed the way they needed to know me, it was only fitting that they also got to know me from the words I spoke.

Ebb had left earlier. Fairmont escorted me up the big staircase to the second floor and, interestingly, I thought, to the very corner room Ebb had suggested. He set my bags at the foot of my bed. He lit a gaslight on each of three walls and cautioned me to not turn the flames below one-half inch. The room immediately moved from dark and dreary to light and dreary.

It was as large as our living room back home. He pointed out the features – windows that could be raised if I liked, the fireplace which was ready to be lit, the bowl and pitcher of water with a glass if I wanted to clean up or became thirsty, a closet and chest of drawers, and the largest bed I’d ever seen. That strange assortment of men from Ahab’s story would have easily fit with room for half a dozen more.

“Breakfast is served at eight o’clock. I will be happy to awaken you at seven thirty if you like.”

“Yes. Please. That is very thoughtful. Thanks.”

Fairmont left. I flipped the lock on the door, something I had never done before in my entire life.

Suddenly, there I was, feeling very much alone in my very foreign-feeling room with its very foreign-looking everything. I hoped that after I unpacked the cartons and crates that were to arrive by livery in a day or so, I could make it comfortable – familiar. I was suddenly wide awake so got a start by putting away the things I had brought along in the coach – mostly clothing and books. The clothes went in the chest and closet and the books on top of the chest. It hadn’t taken long, but I felt my spirits rise – maybe because I had my things there to see and touch and smell, maybe because the transfer of *them*, somehow legitimized the transfer of *me*.

I raised a window several inches – that seemed to connect me with the rest of the world – the one I had left behind. I stepped out of my shoes hesitating about sleeping in my underwear like I had at the inn or putting on my nightshirt. I opted for the nightshirt thinking that would add some degree of familiarity to my strange surroundings. I fluffed two of the three large pillows that lay across the head of the bed and arranged them so I could sit back against the massive headboard and take in my new world. I lay the third across my lap, as if for protection, I guessed. Silly, but it helped.

I wondered things about my uncle. Did he want me there or did he see me as a burden? Frankly, he seemed like an odd duck from the descriptions I had been offered. I supposed that could be either harmless odd duck or dangerous odd duck. I wondered if the lawyer had looked into *that* or if that sort of thing was not a part of such legal doings – just find the closest relative and drop off the kid? I certainly hoped he would at least be friendly and accepting – loving might be too much to hope for. That was the only sort of parent-people I’d ever known – loving, of course. I had lived in safety and joy. I had no idea how to live in danger and fear if that were to become my lot.

I decided I was inventing things to worry about – mother had faulted me for that before. I had wondered, however, how she could be so certain there were *not* such things as ogres

and monsters who had a fondness for spending the night under boy's beds. After all, she could not deny that dust bunnies did.

That provided a modest smile, and I prepared to sleep – pulled down the comforter and sheet, turned off two of the gas lights and precisely adjusted the other to one inch – well above the limit I'd been given. I had always been an in-the-dark sleeper but that night a little light seemed the more comfortable way to go.

I had to say it was a great bed – neither so soft I got consumed by it nor so hard I risked sliding off onto the floor. Another smile. I soon determined that the dancing flames from gas lights projected more disturbing images on the walls and ceiling than the kerosene lamps I was familiar with – long, stark cold blues rather than warm, cheery yellows and oranges. There was an easy solution to that – close my eyes. I did and was soon asleep.

It was nearly four o'clock when I awoke coughing, my eyes burning and watering. My room was dark. The flame had gone out. I rolled off the big bed and managed three windows wide open. I also opened the hall door. I heard the quiet hiss, fumbled across the wall for the gas light, and turned it off. I hung my head out a window until I was breathing properly again, and my eyes had stopped watering. The gas cleared out rapidly. I washed out my eyes and had a drink.

I figured there were two possibilities: a draft from the open window had snuffed the flame or, somebody had entered and blown it out. Neither was reassuring. I figured the gas lights should be safe from drafts or they wouldn't be there. Enclosed like they were inside tall, glass chimneys, I discounted the draft theory – that left the more unsettling of the two. It was possible, I supposed, that Fairmont had entered and blew it out either for reasons of safety or cost, but surely, he would not have left the gas turned on. It was my understanding that gas lights had a safety feature so if the flame went out, the gas flow stopped. I would investigate that in the morning. I needed to determine if I would report the incident.

With the air fresh once again, I closed and relocked the door. I closed the windows and did not relight the lamp. I arranged the pillows so I could lean back against them. I'd sleep sitting up. That was probably illogical, but it made me feel safer.

I did go back to sleep because, later, I awakened to Fairmont's rapping on the door. I called out, for some reason trying to sound wide awake.

"Thanks, Fairmont. I'm awake. Be downstairs shortly."

It had been a short night.

I looked around the room, well-lit at that hour from the morning sun streaming through the windows.

Something was wrong – out of order – misplaced. The large chest of drawers, which sat against the shortest, inside wall, across from the foot of my bed, was standing out at a ninety-degree angle. It most certainly had not been that way the night before when I had placed clothes in it. It had not been that way during the gas emergency.

I got dressed before undertaking an examination of the situation. I figured if I found something that would send me screaming out into the hall, day clothes would be more appropriate than night clothes. I watched the time, so I wouldn't be tardy for my first breakfast there.

I unlocked the door in case I needed a rapid exit. Back home my chest of drawers didn't amble around my room at night as if it had a mind of its own.

Behind where the chest belonged was a paneled wall, just like the rest of the walls in the room – chestnut was my best guess – lighter than mahogany and darker and richer than pine or elm. Following my sudden fantasy, I ran my hands across the surface. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. I pushed in on it here and there. I rapped on it lightly – it seemed solid. I tried forcing the panel up and down and sideways. Nothing!

It was 7:55, so I needed to scoot. I prepared to put the full weight of my body against the front of the large, heavy looking chest. To my great surprise, it swung back into place as easily as if it were the gate on the picket fence back home. It had been constructed to swing. Doubly odd. I would certainly get back to it. I wasn't sure if it were the fright or the oddity of it that seemed more important.

I entered the dining room at straight up eight o'clock. I was used to eating at six with my father before he left to make hospital rounds. It had been just the two of us, which made it special – about the only time like that we had. He was a very busy man.

I had anticipated it would be all of us. It was just the two of us – a man who I assumed was my uncle – was seated at one side of the large, round, table. He motioned to me and patted the chair next to him, to his left. I noted his gentle manner, long, narrow features, and unruly, thinning, white hair. Without anything resembling an introduction or greeting, he began speaking.

“I trust your journey was satisfactory. Ebb tells me it took the better part of two days. I do so dislike cross country trips.”

“Yes, Sir. Ten a.m. on Saturday until midnight last night. I found Ebb to be most efficient and a fine traveling companion. Thank you for providing him.”

“Ebb is a good man. I always send him to collect wayward nephews when I learn of them.”

My inclination was to chuckle, but I truly couldn't tell if his words had been intended as humorous. I settled for a smile and a nod. He leaned a bit sideways in my direction.

“You will find my sense of humor tends toward the absurd. It may take some getting used to.”

“Oh, no, Sir. It was what my Father and I enjoyed between us.”

He looked directly into my face for the first time.

“I never knew your father – a doctor I understand.”

“Yes, Sir. And a very good one. Everybody said so.”

He nodded.

“What do you prefer to be called?”

In light of Ebb's heads up, I had not expected such a question, but the answer seemed obvious without much thought.

“Scotty. I just imagine I will prefer Scott a few years down the road.”

“Done, then. Within these walls you will be known as Master Scotty until such time as you inform me otherwise.”

I nodded as if some form of agreement were required.

It was the first indication anybody had actually confirmed that Devonshire was to be my *permanent* situation. I *had* assumed as much. I felt a great sense of relief even without knowing a whole lot about that situation. I appreciated the significant part my Uncle seemed to be indicating I would be allowed to play in planning my life.

“What am I to call *you*, Sir?”

“When I’m not present, I assume you will soon revert to calling me Mr. V, like all the employees do. I love that, but please don’t tell them. What would *you* like to call me?”

“In my head, I’ve been thinking of you as, Uncle Chris. That’s open for suggestions, of course.”

He put on that distant look a person assumes when he is giving something serious thought. He mouthed it several times. Presently he nodded.

“My father always called me that – Chris – very seldom, *Uncle Chris*, as I recall.”

I chuckled. I liked this man already.

We exchanged smiles that lingered on our face to face for most of a minute – studying each other’s mien, I believe I’ve heard it called.

Wilma and Fairmont arrived pushing carts of food. They arranged it on the table – enough to feed the proverbial Army – scrambled eggs, buttered toast with the option of grape jelly, fried potatoes, ham and bacon and sausage, fruit salad and the largest mug of hot chocolate I’d ever seen – handles on both sides. Uncle Chris had coffee just for him – an urn with a flame, sitting to his right. He pointed to it.

“The reason I had you sit to my left. I assume you don’t partake of the beastly, brown brew.”

“That’s correct, even without the alliteration.”

He smiled. I continued.

“I can go so far as enjoying its aroma – dry or brewing – but our relationship stops there.”

“I like the way you talk – the words you choose, the way you put them together. It suggests both a brilliant mind and a high-class upbringing. I can see we will enjoy many an evening playing ‘*Stump Me*’.”

“I guess I am not familiar with that activity.”

“Probably because I invented it as a child. A game. Armed with Mr. Webster’s dictionary to satisfy disputes, we choose a category and then each present words related to it for the other to define. We check the big book if necessary and assign one point for each one accurately defined.”

“It appears to possess the features of a mental competition in which I will revel, although I assume my

idiosyncratic lexicon is miniscule compared with yours, which is clearly voluminous.

He laughed out loud at my over the top recitation. I was counting on that.

“Where have you been all my life, young man! You certainly hold the potential to liven up this dreary old monstrosity.”

I would test him a bit further. My friend Tommy said I often pushed limits way too far for comfort.

“And, I assume by that, you are referring to this edifice and not to yourself.”

He laughed until tears came. He removed his napkin from his collar to dry his cheeks. He was an easy audience, I had to say that. I had read that easy audiences were sometimes not sincere – that they buttered people up in that way, so they could later take advantage of them. I’d be on alert, but this man seemed genuine.

It might seem irreverent to say it that soon after Mother’s death, but her cooking didn’t hold a candle to Wilma’s. I was having difficulty finding any downside to my relocation – well, there were the mysteries surrounding the chest of drawers and the gas light. For the time being, I would keep those things to myself. It could be some kind of a set-up to test my mettle.

Hmm. If Uncle Chris really didn’t want me here, I supposed it could have been he who tampered with the gas lights. I would not dwell on that and continued the conversation.

“It seems I have met everybody but Archie. Ebb said that would not be unusual – that Archie moved according his own schedule.”

His voice assumed a compassionate tone.

“You will come to like him. Disregard his size and social ineptness. Accept him for the best he can be, and he’ll be your best comrade. You will soon master his vocabulary – use it back at him – he has problems with people he can’t understand.”

I wondered just what kind of problems those might be and what a huge specimen as he was did about them. The general rule had been set – talk with him using his own language – not an easy thing to do at the outset before we had spoken together.

I went for some additional information.

“How old is this building?”

“Built during the mid-1700s. My great, great, something-or-other grandfather built it. Got into the iron and steel business during the revolutionary war and made a killing – in iron and steel, that is.”

Another smile. I returned it. That was some in recognition of the humor and some in approval of the comfortable tone he was setting between us.

“There was a church back home that’s reported to be 150 years old – been burned to the ground three times but the locals still claim its age.”

“Little chance for fire in this old place. All the walls here in Devonshire are solid, gray stone – exterior as well as interior. You’ve noticed that most of those inside have been covered in wood paneling. Dreary at best but provide a softer ambiance than stone.”

“Ever consider painting them – liven it all up a bit?”

“Submit a plan on that.”

I wasn’t at all sure what he meant. Rather than ask, I nodded and smiled. I would ask Fairmont, later. He had said I could – should, even – ask.

After breakfast, I went into the kitchen and thanked the ladies. They seemed surprised. Back home, Father and I always thanked Mother for every meal. I hadn’t even thought before doing it. Wilma put cookies in a round, tin box and said it was for my room and that I should return for refills every time it became dangerously low.

I was returning upstairs when I met Fairmont coming down. We each had something on our mind. I spoke first.

“Uncle Chris said I should submit a plan about something I suggested. What did he mean?”

“Mr. V is not one to make snap decisions. When any of us have a request or a suggestion, he likes to have it in writing with reasons to explain or support it. He then takes it under consideration.”

“Okay. Thanks. I assume painting my room comes under that, right.”

“I would say so, yes, since it would be a first in 130 years. Now, I have a bit for you. There are nearly two months left in



the school year and Mr. V has hired a tutor for you. He is scheduled to begin on Monday week – nine o'clock until noon in the library. His name is Daniel Cutter. I do not know him. He was procured through an agency – from New York City. A former teacher at some college there."

"That's great. He didn't mention it at breakfast. Will he live in?"

"No. He will take a room in town. Said he will provide his own horse and buggy for transportation. He is, apparently, an independent sort of chap."

"Will what I'm wearing now be sufficient for school?"

"Yes, I'd say so. You might make sure your stockings match, however."

I looked down. They didn't. I had been in a state of shock over the dresser earlier. I'd go change. I smiled up at him. He wasn't finished.

"Where are you in terms of growth spurts?"

"Not sure I understand, Sir."

"Mr. V said to make sure you were kept in properly fitting, comfortable clothing. I was wondering if what you have is sufficient. If you are experiencing a growth spurt, we may need to schedule a shopping trip in our near future."

"Been this same size for a while. I expect a spurt may well be coming – hope it is. I'm not tall for my age – I prefer that to saying I'm short. What I have will be sufficient for the time being. That is very kind of Uncle Chris. I have money, you know."

"It is his intention to provide for you. He is an extremely well-organized person – except during his meetings, and for all we know, he may be then, also."

"His meetings?"

"He has periods when he believes people, who are invisible to the rest of us, visit him and he holds long conversations with them – usually out of our earshot. Sometimes they last for several days. Nothing to be frightened about. It's just best to avoid him during those times. He may, in fact, walk right by you and seem unaware of your presence."

He smiled and nodded. We continued on our ways – up and down. Uncle had some sort of a mental aberration. I would study up on such things. My Father said that understanding

how the mind worked and sometimes failed to work was the next frontier of medicine.

Back in my room, I first locked the door. I tended to the stockings. Being a stocking-foot guy, I set my *shoes* aside and focused my *sights* on that chest of drawers. My, that breakfast had been good! Butter and cream in scrambled eggs – who'd have even thought of doing that? I might need those new clothes before I thought. It was worth a smile inside my head. I wondered if other people had those – smiles inside their heads.

I had read stories about big old houses that had secret passages. My nine-year-old imagination was already running with that. There were always levers to move or knobs to turn or sections to depress – something that sprung a panel open.

I began by trying all the knobs on the chest. Nothing. The wall panels in the room were approximately four feet by four feet and were set in place with one by two decorative strips covering the seams. That produced an array of large squares, two high, all around my room between wide baseboards and crown molding. I examined those above and beside the chest. I came upon a recessed button on the right side of the trim strip to the left – down several inches below the top of the chest. Visual examination revealed it had been constructed from a knot. I imagined Gertie had feather dusted it hundreds of times.

I pressed it.

Anticipation!

Nothing.

Disappointment.

I figured there would not be a button in a framing piece if it didn't have a purpose. Knotholes didn't normally move in and out. I looked further. There was a second, similar, button on the opposite side of that strip. I squeezed them between my thumb and my index finger. The right side of the panels behind the chest popped open – an inch out into the room. That pushed the chest along with it.

I was pleased I had found the trigger. I was frightened that I had found the trigger. There actually were such things as secret panels and therefore, I assumed, a secret passage. Suddenly, it seemed that secret passageways were more fun to read about than to find. I pulled on the chest. It swung out into the position in which I had found it earlier. That time, my

examination of the wall behind it allowed me to place my fingers inside the crack that developed when I squeezed the buttons, before. I could pull it forward. It swung like a floor to ceiling door. I lit a lantern and held it up just outside the opening. I was amazed and more than a little frightened at what that revealed.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### A Word to Describe, '*Beyond Terrified*'?

I had already mostly solved to my satisfaction the mystery of the moving chest. Suddenly, the *mostly* became *fully*.

I was staring into a hole but not a regular hole. I was staring into a hall but not a regular hall. What it was, was a concealed passageway three feet wide and six feet high. It was short – left to right the length of that side wall in my room.

A slight draft moved from the room into the passageway. That made me wonder. I opened a window like I had the night before. That draft became a rush of outside air through the room and into the passage. It was like a chimney effect. That, I figured, could have explained how the gas light got blown out. I closed it.

I stepped inside. Holding up the lantern, I could see enough to get my bearings. The walls were gray stone – like Uncle had said. At the front wall of the house – to my left – was a descending staircase. To my right, stairs that rose to the third floor. I assumed it worked its way throughout the building. I didn't immediately have it all figured out, but I did have enough to be worried – somebody having access to my room at all hours of the day and night. There was another panel directly across that passageway from mine – it would open into the room just down the hall.

Here's how I figured it in relation to my chest – well, not *my* chest. During the night, somebody opened the panel from inside the passage. That pushed the chest out into the room

the way I found it. That person did whatever he wanted to in my room and then left, closing the panel behind him. For some reason that hadn't pulled the chest with it, leaving it sitting there. Odd.

Why would anybody do that? Everybody had seen me the evening before, so it wouldn't have been the need to get a look at me. That wasn't true, of course. Archie had not seen me – at least up close. I wondered if it had been him come to look me over.

I could explore the passage system later. My first interest was why the chest had not closed with the panel. I blew out the lantern and closed the panel. I heard it click into place. It was spring loaded. The first look provided my answer – on the back of the chest along the right side was an eyelet. In a corresponding position on the panel was a short hook. The hook and eye had become unlatched – had that been by accident or by intention? If intention, to what end? Maybe to alert me to the passages. No way of knowing why just then.

If not about the passages, then what other possibilities might there be? Maybe as a means of frightening me. Who would want to frighten me? Both that question and the idea behind it frightened me. It wasn't as if I could just pick up and leave if somebody didn't want me there. I positioned the chest back against the wall and hooked it in place.

I wondered if the members of the staff all knew about the passageways. I needed to figure a way to find that out without revealing that I did. First things first; examine the gas light fixture that malfunctioned. I moved a chair under it so I could stand high enough to get a look close up. Hmm. Satisfied I understood what there was to understand, I moved the chair close to another one to make a comparison. Although I had only minimal knowledge about the scientific specifics, I had the general idea correct.

The second lamp contained a small device that slipped around the orifice and blocked the opening. I assumed it worked by heat. When the flame was burning, the heat operated orifice opened and allowed gas to flow. When the flame stopped heating it, it closed. A safety device. The problem fixture had no such safety feature. It looked fairly easy to slip it off. There were scratches on the lamp not having it –

bright scratches revealing the copper underneath the tarnish. They had been made very recently. They could have been made by a knife or screwdriver when that safety device had been removed.

That was also frightening – the idea somebody purposefully tried to kill me. Why me? I was one of the good guys in the world. My Father had once told me the world was better off because I was in it. He was clearly proud. I will never forget that. Whenever I'm tempted to be less than fully proper in my behavior, I think about what he said. It was certainly more effective than the Reverend's 'go to hell if I catch you sinning' messages. It encouraged me to monitor my own behavior and indicated that I was capable of doing just that.

I figured my first duty was to protect myself. I wrote a note on a sheet of paper and entered the room next door. It was modestly furnished and had clearly sat idle for some time. I moved a chair under a gas light and using my knife pried loose the little safety valve. I arranged the note into the glass chimney so it could be read: 'Out of order – no safety valve'.

I returned to my room and inserted the valve into the faulty lamp. I tried it – several times. It worked.

I would make a habit of checking them every night for a while. Fairmont had selected the three to be lit – that left three that had not been lit. I certainly hoped he had not knowingly chosen one he knew was faulty. More and more it was becoming hard to know who I should trust. Before I finished, all six wall lamps had passed my inspection – visual and operational.

I really needed a distraction. Fairmont had mentioned the library. I slipped into my shoes and was off to find it – my hunch was down on the first floor, so that's where I headed. It was going on ten a.m. Gertie was dusting the railing on the staircase.

"I'm trying to locate the Library, Gertie – that is what you indicated I should call you, isn't it?"

"It is. Follow me. It's just north of the corner room that is right under the room you are using."

"I like that room very much and will make it mine if that's satisfactory."

"Certainly. Ebb said you had more things coming. If you

need an overflow area to store things, I'll clean up the room next door on the side of the house. It's smaller. I think you chose the best of the rooms. It is directly above Fairmont's."

She opened the door to the library ahead of me. My, what a library it was. I looked around in wonder. Floor to ceiling shelves lined the walls. More formed a cross right in the center. There were two tables with straight chairs, and four large, overstuffed chairs set adjacent to the two windows along the outside wall.

Gertie left with the promise to help me with anything I needed – I wanted to ask if that included procuring a bodyguard. I didn't. I figured, from her big-boned physique, she'd make a pretty good one, herself. I'd keep her apron strings in mind in case an emergency arose.

A cursory glance around the room suggested the books were more or less arranged by subject matter – literature, mathematics, political science, history, geography, science, religion/ philosophy, fiction, and so on. It was as large as the city library back in my little hometown – mother had worked to get it established in the room behind Mae's Beauty Shop – boys preferred to use the back door. The contents here were far superior. What a wonderful place for my classes to be held. I figured I could find most any piece of information I needed. Libraries were one of the wonders of modern times! Father had said knowledge will save the world and ignorance will destroy it. I was certain he was correct although I didn't fully understand.

It came to me that there might be stairs in a secret passage leading down from my storeroom that would end up behind the wall in that room. I gave the shelves a once over, believing two things: the entrance would be very well disguised, and, that it would be easier to discover from inside the passageway than there in the room. I put that on hold. There were four hanging light fixtures, one over each of the four sections formed by the cross of bookcases in the center of the room. Each table had its own lamp – some sort of oil, I figured, because they didn't smell of kerosene.

I wondered if it were permitted to remove books from the library or if they were to be used right there. I had several books of my own to finish before I'd be in need of anything more. It



was hard to imagine that I had such a library right there, just downstairs from my room. And those big, comfortable-looking chairs – sit in them to read – curl up in them to nap. I could live in there!

I would feel safer after the rest of my things arrived – I had a fine new hunting knife coming – Father approved but Mother disapproved without voicing it. Father's rule won out in such strictly boy matters. Mother was more in charge of clothing, food, routine, and such. I couldn't imagine actually wielding a weapon against anybody, but I had never lived in a world that suggested that might be necessary.

I left the beautiful room and went in search of Sammy. I could tell the way our eyes met the night before that we had already hit it off. It was my intention to arrange times with everybody – 'get comfortable' times.

There were two back doors from the hall that separated my wing of the mansion into north and south sections. On the front were my room, another bedroom, and two sitting rooms. I figured there must be a whole lot of sitting going on there. The help's rooms were off the hall along the back. Those rear rooms seemed adequately sized. If they had originally been built for the help, I figured that spoke well for the original owner – Uncle Chris's great, great, great, grand something or other, I believe was the way he referred to him. Three rooms, including the library, spread north to south across the east wall. I exited through one of those back doors.

Aside from the tall water tower atop the hill, the low, sprawling, stable was the most imposing building back there. I moved toward it and found Ebb repainting a coach, somewhat larger than the one I had used – also black. It seemed Uncle suffered from a severe case of the 'dreary blahs' – if it weren't, it should be a genuine medical condition.

I stopped and passed the time of day. He asked if there was anything he could do for me. I told him he could point me toward Sammy.

"His world begins and ends in that building at the rear of this backyard area, across the creek to the east. You can see the roof just over that low rise. There's a bridge."

I made my way to it – walking, not trotting. I didn't want to appear overly eager. Who knew why! Where the stable was

natural wood, the garden shed was painted dark green. On the front were two doors – a regular ‘front’ door and a set of double doors for wagons and such. One of those doors was open. I heard him singing inside – nice voice, although I didn’t recognize the song. I knocked on the door and peeked inside.

“Mr. Sammy! Are you here?”

“Back here by the windows, Master Scotty.”

I walked toward the light and found a large, glass, hothouse, I believed such things were called.

“How nice of you to come and visit. Lookin’ over the seedlings I’m gonna transplant after a few more days. April in this part of Pennsylvania is not all that dependable, weather-wise. It’s been warmer than usual. That don’t mean we still might not get a short freeze. Want to make sure they’ll be hardy enough to withstand it before I entrust them to the soil and God’s smile.”

I assumed that referred to the sun.

“They look like flowers. Lots and lots of flowers.”

“Five-hundred. They are fire-red petunias – a variety I developed right here. They’ll come alive in four flower beds out front – long, narrow ones, along the lane that winds up the hill from the road.”

We talked while he worked. He was pinching off scrawny shoots. He encouraged me to help. I was happy to. He had a question for me.

“So, what do you think of Devonshire so far?”

“Probably too soon to have definite impressions. It’s the first time I’ve not lived in town, so in that way it feels strange. I certainly like the people here. Still haven’t met Archie. I’m sure I’ll grow to like my room. Love the library. I must admit the little kid in me was hoping for hidden passageways but, try as I will, I haven’t been able to discover any.”

Sammy smiled.

“I been here twice as long as you been alive, and I haven’t found none yet. I think that’s mostly in books.”

“I know. Just such a perfect setting – huge, old, high on a hill, could be scary if I’d let it be. Not looking forward to the first, mid-night, lightning storm.”

He smiled.

“I won’t discourage you from your search. Keep me

updated.”

After a few more minutes, I excused myself and walked back toward the house. I felt bad about the lie, but I figured it was the kind that couldn't hurt anybody. I, also, figured that Sammy's answer suggested the help really did not know about them – the passageways.

Ebb called out to me as I passed the stable. I trotted over to him.

“Got word your things will arrive this afternoon. Sooner than I had been led to believe. Gertie suggests we store things in the room around the corner from yours so you can take your time going through them and find what you want. I believe she's cleaning it – making it ready – right now.”

“She told me she would do that. I think it's a good idea. Is my teacher here, yet? I understand he will be living in town.”

“If he has arrived, he hasn't let us know and yes, he preferred to stay in town.”

“I heard he would have his own horse and buggy.”

“That's right. Come the deep snows of winter, he'll probably stay out here from time to time.

Do you know how old he is?”

“About forty, I think I've heard.”

“Well, thanks for the information. I'm looking forward to getting the rest of my things.”

“By the way, lunch is at noon. Mr. V eats alone in his suite. We hope you will join the help in the kitchen. If not, you can be served in the dining room, of course.”

“Oh, I'd very much like to eat with the help. I'm getting the idea you folks are the people who will become my best friends.”

I left, deciding to circle around the mansion for the first time and see what there was to see. I really was excited about my things arriving. It was less that I needed them than it was I wanted them – for its comfort factor – familiarity factor, I guess you could say. I needed to begin planning where I'd put things. I wasn't even sure what all was coming. I hoped the lawyer's wife had found everything that was important to me. I wasn't sure how she'd know, since, 'The Child', hadn't been consulted.

There was windowsill-height evergreen shrubbery up against the rear and both short sides of the building. Sammy

kept them trimmed perfectly straight and level. I would have preferred a puffier, rolling effect. It would have softened the harsh, stark, lines of the building. Maybe, I'd talk with him about that. The porch ran the entire length of the front.

There were six columns supporting a roof just above the second-floor windows. Above the third floor were dormers where the roof sloped back into a steep peak. It was known as a snow roof – encouraged the snow to slide off rather than stick around adding its weight to the roof. I wondered if there were rooms in the attic or if it were a wide-open space. I put it on my list to investigate. I hadn't been told I could do that. I hadn't been told I couldn't. In fact, I had been given no rules at all – every nine-year-old boy's dream come true; so why was I so uneasy about it?

Looking down the hill to the road out front, I saw the freshly cultivated spots that Sammy was about to transform into flower beds. I could see other spots I was sure would, also, soon come to life as colorful locations around the slope. I turned and looked up at the building; red trim to replace the gray would do wonders for the place – suggest life where none appeared to exist.

It suddenly came to me; I wondered if I were safe just roaming around outside like that. I concluded I was – out there in full view. Did that mean I was less safe inside? I didn't like that question.

I felt more comfortable using a back door – not sure why – less formal perhaps. That front door was still associated with that huge tight ball in my stomach upon arrival. I'd probably get over it.

It would soon be lunch time, so I returned to my room and washed up. Imagine that; washing up without being told to. It made me wonder about bathing – where, how, when. I hoped there would be privacy, at least until I became more comfortable around the new people.

I entered the kitchen at noon. Except for Archie and Uncle, everybody was there. I took a chair between Ebb and Fairmont since I had things on my mind that required their attention.

There were sandwiches – ham, and egg salad – thick cut potato chips, and mixed fruit cups. I had milk. After a few

minutes of general conversation, which included the pending arrival of my things, it broke up into talk between individuals. I turned my attention to the men sitting beside me.

“It seems to me that I need a boss – one person to turn to with questions and who will provide direction when I need it – somebody to check in and out with as I come and go – obtain permission from when that seems to be needed. Ebb, you had indicated that would probably be Fairmont. Is that so? I haven’t been told.”

I looked back and forth between them. Fairmont replied.

“I will be happy to serve in that capacity if you are comfortable with me.”

“Honestly, I don’t know anybody well enough yet to be comfortable about most anything, but it seems to me we could be a good match. Thank you.

“A second question – when, where, and how do I take baths? I’m used to Wednesday and Saturday nights. It’s not that I stink. It’s because I tend to get dirty.”

Guarded smiles.

“That can be arranged. The bathing room is behind the kitchen where heated water is available through a pipe right into the tub. After lunch we can go take a look.”

I nodded. Two weights off my shoulders. A third question came to mind: “Laundry. Will I do my own and if so where and when?”

“Gertie takes care of our laundry. We will get a hamper up into your room. She will tell you which day will be your day.”

Again, I nodded. I felt more at home and in some ways more secure, more a part of things. It was odd what knowledge of rules, baths and laundry could do for a guy’s comfort. I wanted to ask about a key but thought that might seem like I was breaking a bond of trust, so I didn’t. So far it seemed I only really needed that sort of security when I was inside the room and that was easily arranged by flipping the lock.

After lunch, Fairmont showed me the Bathing room. It had a large bathtub on short legs that resembled lion paws. The outside was embossed with flowery swirls and such. I had already been introduced to the small room next door with a sink and a stool that flushed – a luxury I had heard about but one none of the houses back home had. There was one on every

floor, like layered on top of each other – for ease of plumbing, I assumed. It seemed to waste a lot of water, but I assumed it beat the outhouse I was used to – especially on cold, winter, nights.

The livery wagon bringing my things arrived shortly after two. All the men pitched in and helped. Behind the main staircase in the huge entry hall, there was a small freight elevator that had been added well after the mansion had been built. It worked by pulling on ropes that were attached to counterweights. It made the move relatively simple – loaded on the first floor; unloaded on the second. At my direction, we put most of the things in the spare room. I would begin going through it later.

During the move, I got a good idea about what had been sent – the attorney's wife had marked every box with its contents. I must say, it included the things I had hoped for and even more – extra things like a mother would have remembered when she sent you off to camp. Thank you, attorney's wife. I'd write her a thank you note later. Perhaps attorneys got by being inefficient by having wives who were very efficient.

My room did not have a bookshelf, so Ebb and Sammy moved one from the spare room into mine – eight feet tall and four wide – there would be plenty of room for expansion from those I had. She had sent all the books in the house, which, in addition to mine, included Father's medical books and mother's collection of novels. I usually alternated between fiction and non-fiction. That may have been my parents' suggestion.

I thanked the men for helping, offered them a cookie from my tin box stash, and they left. Wilma fed the driver before he left. His name was Willy. I had known him all my life. He told me my friends missed me and that I would be missed in the Dance Off at the Grange Hall Saturday night. I cut a pretty fancy rug and often won. It was one of those happy/sad messages. I waved him on his way.

I had the crates of books taken directly to my room and began setting them in place on the bookcase. I'd sort and arrange them later. My surroundings immediately became more comfortable – more familiar, I supposed. The spines added at least a hint of color to the very bland surroundings. I smiled thinking that in most of those novels about hidden

passageways, it was the bookcase that moved to reveal them.

There was a knock on my door. I opened it thinking it would be one of the men who had been helping me. Instead, standing there was a man well over six feet tall with the widest shoulders and biggest neck I had ever seen. I'm sure I gulped. I had to wonder if his hair had ever seen a comb or had experienced a cut. Properly positioned, I could have easily used one of his hands for a seat. He held a crate marked 'TOOLS'. I assumed it was very heavy. I had no idea why he had selected that one to bring to me. I was pretty sure he couldn't read. Perhaps it was a random choice. He didn't say anything. I did. Silence really wasn't my friend.

"I'll bet you are Archie – I say that because he is the only member of my new family I haven't met yet. Please come in. Set the crate here under the window. You must be very strong."

That done, I offered my hand for a shake – well, my forearm by the time his hand engulfed it. We managed. I had put on a smile right off the bat. He matched mine and spoke.

"I am Archie. You are Scotty. I been watchin' you. I like the way you move – easy. You are tiny."

"And you are not – tiny. You have the best shoulders I have ever seen."

I held my hands way apart.

Another smile. He straightened up a bit making him even more imposing. I figured things were off to a good start. My Father had told me, when in doubt in a conversation, provide a compliment.

"I live in the attic. I like it up high. The windows. See all around."

"Maybe I can come up and visit you sometime."

"Now is a good time," he said.

That had not been my intention. I wasn't so sure about it, but I could see he was going to insist. I will admit, I was more than a little uneasy, even though Ebb had assured me he was harmless and likeable. Ebb, however, didn't know about the chest incident. He entered the hall. I followed, closing my door behind us. We walked to the entry hall. He pointed to the rear. I followed him to the elevator. He was a man of few words.

He managed the ropes with ease as we rose to the attic.

"I like to fish. Do you like to fish?"

“Yes, I do. I hear you keep us all in firewood. That sounds like a really important job.”

“I chop every day.”

He showed me one of his arms – biceps to be accurate. They made mine look like monoceps. They were nearly as big around as my waist, and far stronger. He had a child-like demeanor – more like a four-year-old, I estimated. Like Ebb said, he did seem gentle. I had to wonder how he had made his way to Devonshire. By the time we reached the attic, I was feeling more at ease – my heart had calmed some and I was breathing normally. I figured it couldn’t hurt to have a handy friend his size. I couldn’t imagine how large his bed must be.

He left the elevator first and I hurried to keep up.

His room was sparsely furnished – his choice, I assumed – a chest, a table, a chair, a wardrobe, a bed – huge as I had predicted. It suggested he had few visitors. The floor was home to several, mismatched, throw rugs – his choices, I imagined. The room was small – perhaps ten by twelve. It was bright; the dormer window was six feet high and four wide – much larger than they appeared from ground level. I wondered what the original purpose of so many little rooms might have been. Maybe way back there had been field hands when it would have been necessary to grow the food the estate needed.

He showed me his fishing poles and several axes, which hung on the wall. He explained them.

“This one with the long handle is for big trees. This one with the short handle is for trimmin’ off the branches. This one with the hammer head is for buildin’ and cuttin’ shingles.”

There were also two cross-cut saws, one with large teeth and a smaller one with smaller teeth. He didn’t explain them. It was clearly his ‘office’ as well as his room.

With that, Archie determined the visit was over – almost as soon as it had begun. I had only agreed to come see his room, after all – not stay for tea or discuss politics. He walked me the few yards back to the elevator.

“You can make it go?”

It had been a question.

“Yes, I can. The other men showed me.”

I entered. He closed the wire mesh door.

“Goodbye, Scotty.”



“Goodbye, Archie. Thanks for letting me see your room. I think we are going to be very good friends.”

He turned and left me alone. Clearly, he had believed me when I said I could handle it. I hoped he believed the friend thing as well.

I determined which rope moved the elevator down and began pulling on it. Once started, it was relatively easy to operate even for my 70 pounds of nine-year-old-ness. I couldn't make it move nearly as fast as the men, but slow eventually would get me to the same place.

Oh, oh! Something was not right. It began moving without my help. The speed picked up. Ebb had showed me how to use the brake. I pulled on it, but nothing happened. I was speeding on my way toward crashing into the stone floor, three stories below. What word describes something beyond terrified?

/

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Well, Well!**

I had always been a careful sort and had practiced many innovative safety precautions in my head – including my present situation. I began jumping up and down – as high as I could. My theory was if I were off the floor when it crashed, especially if I were moving upward – a 50/50 chance – my body would be moving downward far slower than the elevator, therefore when it suddenly stopped, I would only have a foot or so to fall. It may not have been scientific, but in the end, it seemed to have worked. The elevator hit the bottom of the shaft with quite a jolt; my feet hit the bottom of the elevator; I tucked and rolled into one corner no worse for the wear.

I just sat there in the corner for some time, breathing hard and looking over my situation. The open cage itself was only slightly damaged – its frame was constructed around six-by-six corner and floor timbers. I got up and examined the door. I could slide it open no more than eight or so inches. Plenty for my nine-year-old profile to slip through.

Gertie was the first to arrive, then Fairmont. I gave my explanation, which, of course, was no more than a description of falling through space for those few terrifying seconds. Ebb and Sammy arrived. The impact had clearly produced a good deal of noise to which I had been oblivious. Finally, there came Archie.

Gertie pulled me close. The men began examining the cage, the brake, and the pully mechanism. Archie had the only

useful observation, which he offered complete with illustrative motions.

“Rope cut up top. Somebody was *naughty*.”

I had to wonder if Archie had that information way too quickly. The ropes were an inch thick – to cut one meant a good deal of effort with a knife. It meant the ‘naughty’ one had to have known enough about the elevator to know which rope to cut – there were four. That rope had to have been cut immediately after I began my descent or, I supposed, it could have been mostly cut through while I was with Archie – just strong enough to hold the elevator in place – with a four rope pulley system that wouldn’t have required much.

I noted that I could only make it move slowly. Since nobody could have known I was going to be using the elevator, somebody had been watching and took advantage of the moment. Maybe, it was meant for Archie, and I was just collateral damage. The bad guy could have been Archie, of course. He might have returned immediately and cut the rope with one, well-practiced, swift swing of an axe. Like a four-year-old, if I had offended him, he’d exact his revenge swiftly and with no real thought about it. It *had* been his idea to get me clear up on the attic level.

Reflecting on the order in which things happened, the culprit could hardly have been any of the other men; they arrived too soon from the first floor and back yard to have come down the stairs from the attic. Maybe not, if they slid down the bannister – I smiled, having been relishing the opportunity to try that myself.

And then there was the outlier – Uncle Chris.

In the end, I seemed to know nothing useful as to whom or how or why. What I *did* know was that I was scared – first gas and then the chest and finally the elevator accident. Who would want to hurt me? Why? Who could I trust? Who could I go to? Nobody, yet. This was not how my tenth year of life was supposed to go. It was certainly not how my relocation was supposed to go. It would become a sad chapter in my autobiography.

Conjecture from the men centered on a worn rope. Wrong-O! They would agree once they examined it up top.

While the men worked to evaluate the cause of the

accident, Gertie took me to the kitchen where Wilma did what she could to sooth my troubled soul with pie. I would learn it was the primary source of first aid at Devonshire. They encouraged me to talk and I did. I let a few tears loose and they clearly didn't think less of me for it. But then, they were females, known to cry when receiving the first gas inspired smile from a newborn baby.

Presently, I told the women that I was going to my room and take a nap. It was going on four. Dinner was at six. I'd see if I could sleep. That really wasn't what was important. I needed to be alone and engage my brain in analyzing my situation. One thing came to mind immediately.

I unscrewed the eye from the back of the chest and screwed it into the permanent panel next to the hook. I hooked them up to help prevent that panel from being opened from inside the passage. Had I not already loaded the bookcase with my books, I would have exchanged places between it and the chest. That seemed like a good project for the near future. None of that had anything to do with the elevator, but it all made me feel safer.

I slipped out of my shoes, lay back on my bed, and managed a world class sigh. I woke up at five thirty, terrified all over again as the vision of the accident broke across my mind. My trousers were dusty from rolling around on the floor of the elevator, so I changed. I washed my hands and face and combed my hair. I noticed my hair was dirty from the dust on the road during my recent journey. I'd take care of that during my upcoming bath, which, I noted, I had failed to schedule.

I slipped into my shoes and cinched up my belt. Being nine and having no trace of a waste, it was an important part of my making-sure-my-pants-wouldn't-fall-down-when-I-left-my-room, routine. I made my way to the kitchen, figuring Uncle Chris would be my companion for the meal in the dining room a few minutes later. I was used to helping Mother in the kitchen, so I offered my services. I liked keeping busy.

"You can set the table here in the kitchen if you want to. Use the plain, white dishes. Mr. V will not be down for dinner this evening, so deal yourself in if you like."

She pointed to the glass front dish cabinet.

I got right at it, remembering how it had been at lunch

time. A place had been set for Archie, even though he hadn't come. I wanted to ask many questions about him, but that didn't seem to be a legitimate topic. I clearly felt closer to Ebb than any of the others. Perhaps, I would ask him later.

Fairmont entered the room and I went to him.

"About that bath."

"How about after dinner? Here, I'll show you how to heat the water. Turning on the flames now, it should be ready by then. Shall we make this your regular time? We are all on a schedule."

"Fine."

"I'll need to show you several things about using the tub – then you'll be on your own, alright?"

"Yes, Sir. That sounds perfect."

He was a good man, alleviating my concerns about privacy before I really needed to have them.

The thickest slabs of ham and the biggest baked sweet potatoes I'd ever seen formed the basis of dinner. There was new-lettuce salad, rolls, cheese muffins, cooked carrots and stewed tomatoes with thick cream and sugar. Who needed growth spurts; I'd probably gain five percent of my weight just from that one meal.

The conversation revolved around what they were doing – Sammy's flowers, Gertie's curtains, Ebb's coach painting, and things like that. I had noticed that there were never discussions about topics I had learned to believe were important – politics, advancements in science, new books, philosophic takes on current events. What I heard seemed shallow – like talking with the barber instead of the newspaper editor. What I missed was deep give and take. I hadn't always understood it, or been able to either give or take, but just having it flowing all around me elevated me somehow. I hoped my new teacher would be able to provide that.

I ate more than I figured I would. Perhaps, that growth spurt Fairmont had inquired about was, in fact, off and running. I loved ham. I loved sweet potatoes dripping in butter. I drank less milk to make sure my stomach had room for those things.

"And what about Uncle Chris this evening?"

Fairmont provided the answer.

"Mr. V is experiencing his 'Meetings'. He never shows

up for meals during those times. I'm afraid you will have to put up with us for a day or two . . . or week. The length of those times is not reliably predictable."

I nodded, more to move the conversation on to less bothersome things than to suggest I understood any of that.

"As you all know, I finally met Archie. Like you said, he came to me. He took me to see his room. He was gentle and soft spoken. I assume there is a story that goes along with him. If I am not to be privy to that, I won't ask further questions."

Again, it was Fairmont.

"Archie is a relative of Mr. V. His parents abandoned him when they realized he was slow. Mr. V. took him in. Will that be enough for the time being?"

"Yes, Sir. Thank you. It is basically what I had surmised."

\* \* \*

The bath went well. It was amazing – hot water from one tap and cold water from the other, so the water in the tub could be mixed to just the perfect temperature. I kept the water hotter than necessary just because I could and remained in the tub longer than necessary. There were towels and a hamper in which to leave them. I had collected new clothes prior to bathing, so when I left that little room, I felt like a new boy. I imagined my hair appeared several shades lighter. I remembered to turn off the fire under the iron tank in the kitchen. Fairmont said Wilma would tend to that, but I figured it was my responsibility.

By itself, *running water* right there inside the mansion was like a wonder to me. There had been no town water supply back home, so it was my first experience with it. I could imagine a house with running water in every room – both cold and hot, even.

I would investigate the water tower later. It had been built close to the creek near the top of the back hill. I figured there was a water wheel that powered a pump that forced the water up into the huge receptacle at the top. It was well above the roof of the mansion, so I assumed it was a gravity flow system. I wondered at what point it had been added to Devonshire. I just loved formulating questions.

My mother had once said I spent so much time spinning questions, I often forgot to wait for the answers. It seemed to

me that questions were the really important things; I could always go back and look for the answers, but I couldn't look for the answers if I didn't have the questions.

It was going on eight o'clock. I met Uncle Chris half-way up the stairs to the second floor. He was looking – staring – straight ahead. I was afraid he'd fall, paying no attention to the steps as he was. He took no notice of me but was clearly in deep conversation. It was eerie. I turned and watched him pass. He moved down the stairs and into the library. So much for my evening plans. I continued to my room and locked the door. I lit three gas lights – that provided the right amount of well distributed light without needing high flames from any of them. A lesson from Fairmont without him having to speak of it.

I left my shoes on. With Plan A abandoned for the evening, I went to Plan B – the one I really wanted to execute, but I had slipped it into second place out of some degree of trepidation. In Archie speak, I was scared to do it.

'Trepidation' was a funny word; just looking at its construction it should be decoded as, 'the act of three pidding'. Father would have smiled. Mother would have rolled her eyes and cleared the table. I missed them so much.

I pushed the chest aside and unhooked the panel. I lit a lantern – the heaviest one, which I figured contained the most oil – and squeezed the buttons that released the panel. I made sure I knew how to open it from inside in case it got closed while I was in it. I had no intention of letting that happen. I, also, set a second, unlit, lantern inside the passageway, just in case.

I entered the passage and decided to go down the stairs, which were toward the front of the house. They were narrow side to side and back to front. They were set at a steep angle – as much ladder as stairs, I supposed. I should have worn my old play clothes. I hadn't, so I wouldn't. There were sixteen steps to descend the ten feet to the first floor.

Assuming the openings would be positioned similarly along the walls, I went to the middle. I was correct. There it was – a break in the stone wall and the addition of the wooden framing and panel. Fairmont's room was beneath mine. I wouldn't enter his room, of course. So, I turned around and examined the opposite wall. I knew it to be an empty room.

I found the latch and pressed it. The panel popped open.



I pushed my mission just a bit further and lit the room with the light from my lantern. I wondered if that room had an opening to a passageway on the far wall as well. I moved across the room and began my search. I found nothing resembling the two-button arrangement in my room so returned and closed the panel behind me. I had noted it *did* have the buttons inside the room.

I found myself in an odd emotional battle; I was scared and yet it wasn't enough to encourage me to stop what I was doing. That was certainly a poor survival mechanism. The list of suggestions for my next chat with God was growing.

Ahead of me, toward the interior hallway, was another set of descending stairs. I was puzzled because I had no indication there was a cellar – no windows or openings around the foundation. It was there, so I figured it needed my attention. Rather than sixteen steps, there were twenty-two. That added to the mystery.

Unlike what I had anticipated – a large open cellar area of some kind – it was another passageway – gray stone all around – larger than the others – seven feet tall and five wide. The ceiling arched – an architectural strategy to support great amounts of weight from above. It angled off toward the rear, following no line of the building. I moved into it. It was filthy with dust and webs and, after a while, dripped water onto the floor here and there. Why in the World didn't I turn back?

I should have counted paces, because I had walked well beyond where the rear foundation should have been – the spot where the drips began, I assumed. Thinking it still might be useful, I began counting from that point, noting my normal pace was about fifteen inches. Forty paces later, I came upon a wooden door across the passageway – it was a two-inch-thick wooden door with large, rust-covered, iron hinges and latch. I was surprised at how easily the latch worked. I was even more surprised to find how easily I was able to pull it toward me. It squeaked – eerily, I supposed – just the way such things were always described in novels.

I left it open and moved through it into a small, underground room, perhaps fifteen feet square and seven feet tall – also, gray stone all around. There were wooden benches built across two walls, and 30-inch-deep, floor to ceiling shelves

set eighteen inches apart across the other two. There was an eight-inch hole in the center of the arched ceiling. It turned out to be a clay stove pipe, which projected several inches down into the room. I couldn't see through it, but then, it was night, so I discounted that.

It made no sense that a tunnel would just come to a stop like that in a room that had been built who knew where – well, forty paces from wherever I had started counting – as good as no information at all.

I took to examining the walls thinking there must be some entry or exit. I found no indication of that. I did, however find a narrow pipe – probably copper – sticking through the wall, five feet above the floor. Its opening was no more than a quarter of an inch. It curved from the wall through ninety-degrees upward – extending a foot into the room. I moved close and examined it, believing I knew what it was. I did!

The pipe had a heat detection shut off valve slipped around the end – like up in my room. It was a source of natural gas light – and probably heat. I had read that a tightly constructed Indian teepee could be heated in cold weather with just a candle. That made me realize it had become cooler. My first instinct was to light it and find out for myself. My second voice said to give that further contemplation. What if the heat from a match opened the pipe and caught flame but when I extinguished the flame it didn't shut off the gas – there was no valve. It had to be quite old and therefore might malfunction. I figured that good judgement had come from my thirteen-year-old self. Perhaps my nine-year-old self should begin carrying a gas shut off valve along with my nail, spoon, tongue depressor, flint, and corkscrew.

I turned my attention to the ceiling, which led my attention to the wall that held the open door, which led my attention to a flickering light way down the tunnel. My heart jumped – I'm quite sure it really did! I turned my lantern down and went to close the door. I had noticed earlier it had two, heavy duty slide locks on the inside, one near the top and the other near the bottom. That told me one thing that only added to the mystery – the locks were designed to keep people *out of* the room, *not in* the room. My earlier vision of it having been a dungeon had clearly been wrong. No reasonable explanation

came to mind.

What *did* come to mind was that I was about to lock myself in a small room, set yards below the surface, with no water or food and the high likelihood a bad guy was making his way down a tunnel intending to harm me.

With the door closed, I slid the locks into position and jiggled it. It seemed strong and secure. I had suddenly run out of plan. I examined the door further hoping for some sort of inspiration. Nothing. I returned to the walls and ceiling, still believing there had to be some sort of exit and suddenly aware I was about to need it.

A few moments later I heard noise at the door. I saw the latch move. The door, of course could not be opened with the slide bars in place. That reassured my head but not my heart, lungs, and gut – rapid beating, rapid breathing, knotted, twisting, innards.

Whoever it was pounded on the door. It was a man's voice that called out – or, *in*, as it were. The door was so thick, I couldn't make out the words. The hinges and locks seemed firmly secured to the rock wall. I could see myself starving to death before anybody could enter. Why hadn't I at least brought a canteen? I often found my mind became quite efficient after the fact.

There was a period of quiet. My fear calmed some as I continued my search. Earlier, I had noticed a three-foot-long iron rod, half an inch-thick standing in the corner near the door. It was round except for one tip, which had been forge-hammered into a square – a cube – an inch in all dimensions. The other tip was sharp to a point. I had attached no meaning to it. At that moment, I needed to attach meaning to everything – did it have helpful potential?

If it did, I needed to find where that rod connected to whatever helpful thing there was. I convinced myself that made sense. It was not as heavy as I expected. I examined the rocks that surrounded me from a new perspective – a hole into which the rod might be slipped to do whatever it might be designed to do. I understood it might just be a leave behind from some former visitor. I needed it be something more than that.

Tears.

At about the same time as I had finished a complete and

uneventful circle of the room in my search, I again heard noises outside the door. I tried to set it aside and began my survey of the ceiling. I turned the flame up in my lantern to make sure I didn't miss anything. There simply wasn't a hole to be found. There was no niche for that little cube to fit into – or the point, for that matter. There was however, that orange, clay, stove pipe extending a few inches into the room. I had ignored it – no idea why.

Before I could act on that, I began smelling smoke and kerosene.

I didn't understand.

I DID understand.

Somebody was attempting to burn down that wooden door in order to reach me. Now *that*, was not friendly. Where was Archie when I needed him – or Gertie for that matter?

I continued my search by inserting the square end of the rod up into the pipe. Dust fell from it as I probed against what felt like screen – something with give, at least. I moved the end of the rod systematically around the outer edge.

Clunk!

I had hit something. I turned the rod slowly, thinking if there were an opening for it to fit into, it would be square, so I needed to find the proper orientation. I understood it might have been nothing more than an extension of one of my fantasy books. Still, it was all I had.

Click! Proper orientation discovered!

It slipped an inch or so up inside something. Suddenly, hope! Suddenly, smoke began seeping under the door – not much but enough to be unnerving. Interestingly, it was pulled through the air up and out that stove pipe – the air supply and exit for the room. Of course! Earlier, I had wondered why it was so easy to breath and that it was noticeably less musty in the room than it had been back in the passageway.

I pushed up on the rod.

Nothing.

More smoke.

I turned the rod to the right.

Nothing.

*Lots* more smoke, some seeping right through the seams between the timbers. I could tell it was burned thin as

skinny flames and spots of white ash appeared on the inside.

I turned the rod to the left.

*Something.* It turned about half a turn.

Nothing more.

Out of exasperation, I tried to force it up.

*Something.*

Never let it be said that exasperation could not be a good thing.

Lots of somethings, actually. It moved up about six inches in some sort of channel. An eighteen-inch square just to the far side of the vent pipe swung up, hinged on the right. A narrow ladder hung at the end of a rope dropped through the opening all the way to the floor. I withdrew the rod. Some sort of a counterweight mechanism, I figured worked that little door. I did think to myself that intrigue was definitely building.

Filled with more than fright about the burned through door and the person on the other side – terror-driven rage, would better describe it – I positioned myself directly in front of the flame engulfed doorway. I raised the rod above my shoulder like a spear and with all my nine-year-old might heaved it straight and true at the door. Amazed, it easily penetrated what little was left of the wood and disappeared. Amazed even more, somebody screamed out in pain – lots of pain!

I didn't wait to see about it. I scrambled up the ladder entering a small circular – tube-like – enclosure some six feet tall. Looking up, there was only blackness – not soft, night sky blackness but hard, harsh, flat blackness. I pulled the ladder up after me. The opening into the ceiling below me closed with a clunk and a jolt – probably counterweights like the elevator – triggered, perhaps, by my weight on the little circular floor. Fascinating notions, but I'd not take time to investigate.

I tested the ladder. It was secure. I climbed up several rungs. I felt yet another hard ceiling above me. I determined it could be raised by pushing on it. I pushed against it gently, while I moved up two more rungs. It was the night sky above me. I was at the bottom of an upward continuation of the circular space from just below. It extended another eight feet. I blew out the lantern and closed the opening below me. Clearly, that passage I had been following through the area beneath the

house, had sloped downward. Between that and the rising slope of the back lawn, that room was set twenty feet below the surface. A true, puzzlement.

There were rocks sticking out from the sides of the whatever I was in. They served as steps. At the top, I carefully peeked over the edge. I was in the old, covered well – the one Ebb said had been dry for as long as he'd been there. I understood why. It had been dry forever.

I slipped over the side and crouched in the shadow. What should be my next move? Somebody was clearly after me with malice in his heart. I suspected he was armed with a weapon of some kind. It was time to tell somebody. Which somebody? One of them might be the bad guy in my life – or his accomplice. My decisions to tell somebody were always over-ruled by my safety concerns.

I put that aside for the moment and decided to make a run for the stable some twenty yards on back toward the rear of the lot – away from the mansion. I bent low and made a beeline to its back door. It was unlocked. I figured it would be. It had a loft where the hay and straw were kept. I climbed the ladder and moved to the side facing the big house. There was a large louvered ventilation square. By adjusting one louver near the floor, I could keep watch on the open space between me and the mansion, which included the well. It sat off to one side, which is why I had paid no real attention to it earlier.

I arranged straw for a bed and pulled a pitchfork in place beside me. I bellied down, chin on my crossed arms, and made ready to stand watch – lay watch – lie watch – recline with vigilance – whatever.

I was interested the man had not emerged from the well – he had the rod. That seemed to tell me one of two things. Either he didn't know about the method of escape, or I had severely wounded him, so he was unable to follow me out. I figured either would do.

My momentary feeling of safety was broken almost immediately. The figure of a man left through a back door of the mansion and headed in my direction. He carried no lantern so I couldn't make out which man it was. He was carrying something in his right arm – it could have been a rifle.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **Drowning was not one of my Top Ten Preferred Ways of Dying**

As the man moved closer, his image grew clearer in the moonlight – it was Ebb. What was he carrying? A pitchfork. Hmm? As usual, he was carrying himself straight and tall. He didn't appear to be wounded. My assailant had definitely been wounded by that rod I threw. I chose not to reveal myself. I lay quietly, not moving for fear it might cause straw to filter down through the wide cracks and give me away – the very cracks I was using to watch what was going on down there.

He didn't light a lantern once inside the stable. He didn't linger. He hung the pitchfork alongside the others and returned to the house. I was relieved those four prongs had not been intended for me. It didn't seem reasonable he was the bad guy; he'd had two days on the road to do that had he wanted to.

Those last twenty minutes had been terrifying – being sealed in an underground room with no apparent means of escape, the man screaming at the door, the smoke and fire, the realization the flaming door was no longer any protection for me, the man with the fork. My mind was huffing and puffing in a world of its own.

Apparently, I needed to sleep more than I needed to keep watch, because I was awakened by the rooster that regularly strutted his stuff across the ridge of the stable early

mornings. I had to wonder if he believed it was due to his efforts that the sun rose each morning. That could be a good kid's story. Perhaps he was really a gloomy Gus, trying to *keep* the sun *from* rising by loosing his ferocity on the world.

It was after seven. I needed to get back to my room without being seen. Short of that, if spotted, I needed a story to cover my early morning prowling. I was becoming a first-class liar – not something to be proud of for sure. I told myself it was a necessary, short term, element of my survival package.

I climbed down to the ground floor and did my best to brush away the straw I had acquired from the loft and the filth and webs that had attached to me during my trek through the passageway. I took off at a trot and would use my early morning run as my excuse if needed. At that hour, Wilma and Gertie would be in the kitchen and the rest in their rooms making ready for the day.

I entered through a back door and moved swiftly to my room. Oh, my! I had locked the door from the inside. Not good. I got that 'caught with my hand in the cookie jar' feeling that every boy knows it – scared with no alternatives. I went to the door to my right – the room into which the secret panel opened just opposite the one leading into my room. I pressed the buttons and entered the passageway, closed the panel behind me, crossed to my room, closed that panel, repositioned the chest, and latched the hook.

As I shed my clothes and cleaned up with soap and water, I found myself trembling. I wasn't sure how I would explain the filthy duds to Gertie if she asked. Maybe something about the attic and Archie. Maybe she'd write it off to my male, nine-year-oldness. I was using the bottom drawer of the chest as my hamper until the real one arrived. It was getting full. I made myself presentable.

I looked myself over in the full-length mirror attached to the back of the door. There was still straw in my hair. I picked it clean and opened the door. Beside it sat my new hamper with a note.

*'Set this in the hall by your door on Sunday evenings. It will be returned Monday evening with your clean clothes.'*

I arrived in the dining room a few minutes before eight. There was no evidence breakfast would be served there. I



crossed the room to the kitchen door and entered to happy greetings. It filled me with an unexpected sense of warmth and belonging – safety, even – things I was afraid I had left behind in the underground room. How nice.

That was interesting. At one level were those comfortable feelings about these people. On another, just the opposite – acknowledging that somebody was doing his best to harm me, and it could be one of those very people. I wondered why I had used the word ‘harm’ when what he was out to do was kill me. Never in my life had I had to worry about my safety – that had been my parent’s job.

After breakfast, I went to the library – opening the door just a crack to make sure Uncle Chris and his ethereal friends were not there. I thought that was the proper adjective. Earlier, I had noticed a large, brown envelope on a table in there. It had Mr. Cutter’s name on it – the man who was to be my tutor. It was the reusable type closed by wrapping a red string around two, round, paper tabs. I unwound it and removed the several sheets.

The first was the contract – signed by my uncle but not yet by Mr. Cutter. He was being paid a large sum. I assumed that meant he was very good at his job. I felt reassured by that.

The second was his resume – mostly covering the period since he left college. There was an address – to facilitate communication, I figured – a Post Office box in Geneseo, New York – a considerable distance across both Pennsylvania and New York according to the atlas.

His birthdate suggested he was forty years old like Ebb had said. He had taught high school right after graduation from college and at three colleges since then – English and Social Studies. I hoped his moves from place to place were *his* doings and not because he had been fired.

There was also a sheet with information for him about me – mostly accurate. I wondered how Uncle Chris had come by that, being he had never been a part of our lives. I supposed when you were rich you could do things the rest of us couldn’t. On the other hand – my mind spun a malevolent scenario involving Uncle Chris, hiring the highwaymen to kill my parents so he could get me under his control. That would have given him time to accumulate information. It broke down quickly at the

point where I couldn't figure why he'd want to get me under his control. He certainly didn't need my parents' money.

My mind tended to do that – devise dark alternatives to good things. Mother had warned me against lingering over them, worrying about my very soul. Father said if channeled properly, they could become fascinating stories. For as different as my parents were, I was amazed at how much they loved each other – one of life's mysteries I figured only puberty would explain.

With my nosiness satisfied, I replaced the sheets in the envelope and put it back on the table. I wondered if right and left-handed people would wind that red string in different directions. I hadn't paid attention to how I found it. Uncle Chris was left-handed. I was right. I supposed that didn't matter. Tommy, my friend back home, said if I would just stop over-analyzing everything, I could increase my productive life span by twenty-five percent. He was probably right. I missed him.

With that behind me, I returned to my room. I really hadn't learned all that much – not sure what I was after. Just getting a preview of the man, I supposed. I had always gotten on well with my teachers once they understood I tended to say my piece about all topics and the best way to shut me up was to just hear me out.

I tried several spots for the hamper and figured it seemed most at home in the corner – hall side of my bowl and pitcher stand. I figured my bedquilt from home would just reach side to side and top to bottom on the bed. I would leave the comforter under it to cover the sides of the mattress to the floor. It was a patchwork of colorful, odd shapes and sizes and would be a happy and comfortable change from the stodgy, dark brown comforter currently in place. It might have been too juvenile; for sure it was 'comforting' (hilarious!).

I searched the crates until I found it. It fit almost perfectly – that was at least ONE thing in my life that did that. The drapes from home were way too small for the huge windows of the mansion. I found my pillowcases – medium blue. It was a snug fit on the larger pillows I was using. I'd see how they felt. I really had no objection to the white ones – mine just seemed more like me. I was the only one of my friends that had colored pillowcases.

My plan was to take my time unpacking things. There was one item I wanted to set in place – the trunk that had been at the foot of my bed since I was six. It had been left in the spare room. As I was dragging it down the hall – a formidable task – Fairmont came by.

“Let me give you hand with that. Special things in there I imagine.”

“Yes, Sir. The place I stash my important stuff. Has a key. My parents never looked inside. It’s not that I really ever had private stuff, and certainly nothing I shouldn’t have, but it was always nice to know I had a place in case I needed one. It was mostly just nice to know they trusted me to have such a place.”

He offered a smile and nod as if he appreciated my sharing that with him. I was happy I had.

I had learned to pick the lock with a hairpin in case I ever lost the key. It was a simple task. Until that moment, I had never considered the pointlessness of the key or even locking it.

I guided us to the spot at foot of the bed. Long before, Father and I had painted it blue – I was a blue sort of guy – my eyes and teeth and all – just funning. Through the years, it had acquired quite a few nicks and scars. I had considered repainting it but each of those marks had a story to tell, so I left it like it was – the keeper of my history. Perhaps, later. Perhaps another story.

I thanked Fairmont and again asked if he had heard anything from my teacher. He hadn’t. As far as he knew, our first meeting was still on for Monday morning at nine.

I moved on.

“What can you tell me about the water tower?”

He put on a confidential tone and leaned in slightly.

“Well, surprising as it might seem, it holds . . . water.”

We exchanged smiles. My question had not been specific enough.

“When was it constructed? From a distance it seems to be powered by a waterwheel. If it is pumping continuously, why doesn’t it overflow? Is it gravity fed to the house and outbuildings? Does it furnish creek water?”

“My best suggestion is for you to go investigate. I’m sure that will be more satisfying than having me tell you all I know

about the system – have thirty seconds?”

I laughed. I was coming to feel more comfortable with him.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Is Uncle Chris doing alright? I’m concerned about him – new to his meetings, you understand. Is he ever in danger during such times?”

“Never a false move in all the time I’ve been here. One thing of interest, however. Last evening, he was climbing the stairs as I was coming down. He was muttering with one of his imaginary friends and said, ‘the youngster is very inquisitive. Don’t let that harm him’.”

“I’ll say *interesting*. I wonder why he thinks I may be in danger of harm. Had he witnessed something? That could be worrisome, I suppose.”

“I didn’t mean to relate it in that manner. I was taken with how, even in his detached state, he was thinking about you and your wellbeing. I have never seen that sort of contact with the real world before. I took it to be a reflection of how important you are to him.”

“I see. That *is* interesting, then. I will receive it in that way.”

Fairmont left. I set my eyes on the water tower. *That* time I took my canteen and my smaller backpack. I smiled – carrying a full canteen to a water tower. The backpack carried my coil of rope, a small, fold-out saw, an axe, and a can of first aid supplies. It was only missing one thing. I stopped by the kitchen.

“I’m going to spend the rest of the morning up at the water tower – learning all its secrets. Figured it might be pretty strenuous on a young boy’s system, you know.”

“You are an imp, Master Scotty Atherton. Got two kinds of cookies and can have a sandwich in a jiffy – how about ham salad?”

“Never had that kind of a sandwich. I’d love to try one. I like ham and I like salad – can’t for the life of me see that combination in a sandwich, however.”

Soon, I was able to see it, understand it, and thanked her, reaching up and planting a quick kiss on her cheek. Believe me, that surprised me as much as it did her. It had been a

commonplace gesture between Mother and me – automatic, I guess, is what I'm trying to explain. I wasn't sure why I felt the need to explain that to myself. Days before, I had characterized the journey to Devonshire as my *in between* period. Clearly, I was still in that transition phase. I must say the peck to Wilma's cheek seemed natural and right. So why was I obsessing over it? Because I was, Obsessing-To-The-Core-Master-Scotty-Atherton, that's why.

She tried to slip several sticks of hard candy into the pack without me seeing it. I did, but I'd not let on; I certainly did not want to discourage such acts of clandestine kindness. I needed to add that line to the back of my journal where I saved wonderful phrases – clandestine kindness. If clandestine meant what I thought it meant, I figured the world needed a whole lot more of it.

I felt like running, so, armed with six inches of stick candy, I picked up my pace to a steady trot. I waved at Ebb as I passed the stable and finger whistled at Sammy who was facing away from me in the doorway to his shed. He turned and raised a hand. Back home, I had been greatly admired for my finger whistle. Lots of my friends had struggled mastering it. For me it had worked the first time I tried. Fortuitous achievement. Another phrase for my journal.

I had not gotten a good handle on how the others were feeling about having me around. So far, it seemed to be, hands off but accepting. Considering my situation, I figured that was exactly right. Distributing my needs among the five of them should not have put an undue strain on any one of them.

The creek meandered down the slope from top left of the long hill to bottom right as I faced it. The most direct route to the water tower was to follow the wagon trail – a straight shot up to and over the ridge. That meant a person crossed the creek twice across log and timber bridges. I had wanted to check out the bridges, so followed that path. Their architecture was interesting. They hung from two, squat, log, side by side, triangles with no supports underneath the deck. It seemed like over-kill to me, but perhaps whoever built them saw it as an art form like trees and flowers. I'd love to crawl to the top of those main supports. Another occasion for that.

The tower stood on the side of the creek nearest the

mansion. The water wheel was in place next to it and was no more than five feet in diameter. It had wide blades – twenty-four inches. It turned on an iron axle and I could see it was kept greased. I wondered whose responsibility that was – my guess, Sammy. The water source was not the creek but a pipe coming from the east – a high volume spring I imagined – perhaps the same one that gave life to the creek. I was relieved knowing I was drinking spring water rather than creek water.

I slipped my canteen and backpack to the ground leaving me free to sink to my knees and examine the pump – some brand of iron, water pump. It was struck with the number, 1851. I took that to be the year it was made rather than some random inventory number. I wondered if that were the original or if it was a replacement. What I found remarkable was that that relatively simple set up – the wheel and the small pump – was able to force the water thirty feet up into the tank. *That* looked to be six feet wide and eight or ten deep and was painted black – to absorb the sun's heat in the winter, I figured – to keep it from freezing. I wanted to get a look up top. There was a ladder that followed the metal pipe from the pump to the tank. The pipe was only one inch wide – another mini-marvel, I figured. It had also been painted black.

It made sense, however. A column of water that high would weigh a lot, so a narrow pipe meant less work from the water wheel. There was considerable flow of creek water against the wheel. The creek above the wheel varied between five and six feet wide – the water was no more than six or eight inches deep. It had been narrowed and deepened so at the wheel it was just two feet wide transforming the lazy, upstream flow into a raging torrent as it passed under and against the paddles on the wheel. It spun at a good clip, one rotation every two or three seconds. I was impressed. That generated a lot of power. Rather than going through a gear box, it was direct drive – less power but more speed.

I was always impressed with man's workmanship from back in the olden days – what they had accomplished without the help of modern methods and scientific discoveries.

I looked up at the tank and prepared to make the climb. From close up like that, it seemed far larger than it did from the mansion. The ladder was only one foot wide. The round rungs

were set ten inches apart. Like the pipe, it seemed quite secure to that leg of the tower – there were four legs, each a ten-inch square beam – several cross braces. It was a short climb. I made it with no difficulty. At the top, I paused to take in the view. I could see for miles – even to that small town to the east just outside of Philly – Lattimore, I believe. The hills beyond, hid the city.

I wasn't sure why the wooden covering over the top had surprised me. It kept out dust and other airborne debris – leaves, birds, squirrels, skinny-dipping nine-year-old boys. I did contemplate that! Close to the side at the top of the ladder, there was a lid or door or what have you – two feet square. I lifted it on its hinges and laid it back to my right. It was heavy. I took my initial look while still standing on the ladder. I was surprised that the tank was only two thirds full. A lantern hung inside just below the lid. I lit it and rehung it on the hanger. It brightened the entire inside with an interesting orange glow, rippled against the walls as it reflected off the water.

There was a two and a half-inch overflow pipe at a point three feet from the top and extending six inches into the tank. It exited the side closest to the creek. When the water reached that height, it left the tank through the pipe and was returned to the stream. Ingenious. I figured the tank probably never ran out of water – became empty. I wondered why the builder had felt it necessary to hold so much water in reserve. The mansion couldn't use it all in weeks – months, more likely. A reserve to fight fires, perhaps, or continue the supply during periods in which the creek froze solid.

The water entered through a pipe about six inches below and to one side of the overflow. It extended some twelve inches into the tank. I could see that like the outlet pipe, it was coated in tar – to reduce the possibility of rust, I assumed. The force of the inflow set the water in the tank into a slow, double swirl – left and right. It was probably set underwater to minimize the force against the opposite wall – sort of like a tuck and roll maneuver to absorb energy when I jumped from a height. That movement would also minimize freezing, I figured. The water exited the tank at the bottom through a pipe attached to the leg of the tower opposite the ladder. From there it ran down the slope underground – probably four feet below the surface to

protect it from freezing in the winter. An additional benefit of that depth was cold water year 'round. The main takeaway from it all was that the setup guaranteed fresh spring water for the mansion at all times.

I leaned over the side of the opening, bending at my waist to get a better look inside. It was lined with what looked to be four-inch-wide, oak, slats applied so close together I assumed they were tongue and groove. As the wood got soaked, it swelled, completing the watertight seal. Ingenious!

What happened next was certainly nothing I had anticipated – not in my wildest dreams, as has probably been written far too often. As I had been focusing on the inside of the tank, and unbeknownst to me, somebody had climbed the ladder behind me. They put their hands around my ankles and flipped my body up over the edge of the opening and down into the tank. I sputtered to the surface in time to see the lid close. The lantern light made things tolerable. The water, heated by the sun, was not as cold as the stream water – I had felt it. Neither was it as cozy warm as my bed at night – a spot I'd have given a good book to be in, right then.

I swam across to the overflow pipe and held myself up, while I took time to think through my situation. I had not been hurt by either the maneuver on the ladder or by the fall into the water. I was a good swimmer, but it seemed swimming skill was not going to figure into the Save-Scotty's-Hide equation. Regardless of any other figures in that equation, 'X' was *going to '=' Scotty's Life*.

The sun's effect on the wooded tank had raised the inside air temperature quite high. I wasn't really in danger of hypothermia – a great term from Father that I had never had reason to make use of before. Those temperature-related things were a relief – in my favor. I doubted if my screaming from inside there would be heard. The men had seen me heading up the hill with my backpack. I had told Wilma where I was going. I had discussed it with Fairmont. Somebody would eventually come looking for me. I'd say I had carelessly fallen in, not yet comfortable sharing about my several, previous, dangerous encounters.

Just as I had not expected there to be a Phase One of 'convert Scotty into a drowning rat', I had not expected Phase



Two, either. The lid opened and a gallon or so of some other liquid was poured in. It was oil and produced a skim across the surface maybe a sixteenth of an inch thick. I didn't understand but figured I could live with that.

I acted on an idea that had come to me only a minute before. I tore off my shirttail and made a wad that was big enough to stuff into the overflow pipe and plug it up. My thinking was that, not being able to escape from down where I was, the water level would rise and eventually, I would float right up to the lid. I could raise it and make my escape.

It meant, I soon would have to let go of the pipe and be on my own, treading water or floating on my back. I could handle that – I was the king of endurance – my friends back home all said so – hiking, running, swimming, talking. Smile. I might be able to stand on that pipe but saw no immediate advantage – that would not put me close to the lid. I would adjust as the circumstances changed.

Waiting for the water to rise gave me time to think – wonder, really. Who would have reason to want to exterminate me? That was probably the wrong question. A better one might be, *for what reason* would somebody want me out of the way? Thinking about it in that way, that *somebody* might surface.

I was the only heir to my parents' estate, so I could see no reason that might present motivation – a competing heir? As one of my way-out, dark, scenarios, there might be somebody out there with a grudge against my Father – failing to save his wife or child from some disease or accident. Since Father was gone, that person had decided to take it out on me. Like I indicated, way-out, and yet, the depths of despair did strange things to people – I had read about it.

Father once told me that the misperception of the value of money was perhaps the greatest cause of evil in the world – that it was to be hoarded for one's own protection or advancement instead of to be disbursed for the good of those in need. I knew from things I'd overheard that he never charged the poor folks in our town for his services. He had been a good man.

That left Uncle Chris. The way I understood it, he only had three relatives – the Wendell Best nephew, whereabouts unknown, me, and the recent revelation that Archie was a

relative. I figured I could discount Archie as part of any complicated conspiracy to acquire the Van Winkle fortune and take over the steel mill. That left the 'Best' man. When I could return to the library, I would search for the Van Winkle family tree and see what light it might shed on the situation. Of course, it might be something totally separate from the Van Winkle money. Perhaps somebody was merely jealous of my dashing good looks. Smile.

My pondering was interrupted when the lid opened a second time. Before I could engage the person in conversation, two hands appeared, a match in one and a stone in the other. One thing became clear, those arms did *not* belong to Sammy. They struck the match against the rock and held it for a moment to catch a steady flame. They let it drop into the tank – *into* the tank and *onto* the oil.

Fire spread across the surface – not a blaze but a low fire no more than half an inch high. Still, that would be enough to burn me to a crisp if I couldn't keep away from it. Maybe it was time to begin screaming.

The water was rising at a steady but slow rate. I was still better than two feet from the top.

The lid closed. By then, I had begun pushing the surface water away from me to keep free of the fire. I had learned the technique in a safety-swimming course at camp the previous summer. It kept my arms busy. Since that splash was a mixture of water and oil, it continued to burn rather than put out the fire. I was able to keep the flames a safe distance from my head. I had to continue treading water as I kept the flame-ridden water at bay. I sunk to my chin, so I was basically floating vertically. My legs were good for any additional support I needed. My hands and arms tired more quickly than I figured they would. They were working at an unnatural position, pushing away from me at the level of my chin as I slowly turned around to keep the flames from the back of my head.

I kept my eyes closed to protect them from possible splashes of burning oil. I really needed to rest my arms. A solution came to mind. I took several deep breaths and slid my head beneath the surface. I would need to splash away a hole in the burning oil when I resurfaced. I was good for a minute and a half – always won breath holding contests with my

friends. It did provide a good rest for my arms and legs.

It was interesting to me; when my head had been above the surface, I had to work to keep it up there. Now, when it was beneath the water, I had to work to keep it down there. I continued that several more times – back and forth between staying below the surface and emerging to replenish my lungs with air. Up to then I had avoided getting burned. Good for me. The flames were dying down – scattered across the surface as the remaining oil pooled here and there – so, they were much easier to keep at bay.

It dawned on me that I hadn't taken time to be scared. That was an inappropriately timed, 'dawning'. At the revelation, I became terrified. What if he were waiting for me when I lifted the lid to get out. A man could easily toss my little body over the side. I was surprised that hadn't been his first plan. Maybe his plan included terrifying me before the kill. He had succeeded. Maybe to keep my body hidden for some length of time while he made his escape. No time to contemplate those things, although that last one seemed most plausible. Odd, that one of several plans to kill me gave me a better chance at survival over the others.

Presently, I was within inches of being able to reach the lid. That did me no good at all, of course. Three inches away was no better than three feet. The fire had burned itself out and had not damaged the wood of the tank – an unintentional but happy combination of my splashing to keep the flames away and the natural swirling of the water. I figured it might even have been a part of the plan – a burning water tower just might have drawn attention to it. Maybe I was giving the bad guy too much credit, although our encounters had seemed incredibly well planned – most on the spur of the moment. Perhaps, I should have put up an anguished scream as if the flames were accomplishing his intent – do me in. I hadn't thought of that. Come on, brain. Get on the stick.

Ten minutes later, I was high enough to be able to flatten my palms out against the lid. Thrusting hard with my legs, I pushed. I couldn't budge it. In fact, it sent me sinking below the surface. I tried several times with no better results. Either it was too heavy – which could have been – or the person – a man I was sure from the hairy arms I had seen – had weighted it

down.

A new problem. When the water reached the top, my head would be covered, and I would drown. The water flooded the lantern leaving me in the dark.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **I Figured I was Still Immune to Adolescence.**

Desperation is the Father of good ideas – or something like that. If true, I should be spewing them like a whale blows water. At a time like this, I should have avoided water analogies. Point: I've never felt this desperate in my life. I needed the old brain to churn out some ideas.

I could always dive and unplug the overflow pipe. I'd wait until the last moment on that. I was at the lid so should be able to figure something constructive toward making my escape – since that was my only way out.

If I somehow survived without escaping, I could switch the cloth plug from the overflow pipe into the opening that fed the water system to the house. When the flow stopped in the mansion, somebody would surely come to investigate. It could take days for all the water sitting in that long pipe down the hill to get used. At least I wouldn't dehydrate. That was like saying a man caught in a burning building wouldn't freeze. My hope, however, was to make some fantastic move during the next few minutes that would free me.

I had a flash. It would be brilliant if it worked. Life had taught me that flashes that didn't work were seldom later lauded as brilliant. I moved across the water to find the inlet pipe from the pump. As I recalled, it extended a foot or so out into the tank. With a big breath to brace me, I would squat, both of my feet on top of that pipe. With all the strength and energy, I could muster, I would extend my legs and propel my body upward,

like an arrow, in the direction of that lid. My palms would hit it. I hoped the force would open it just a bit if only for a second.

From there, my plan was less specific. I was pretty sure it *wouldn't* be enough to lay it back all the way – clear open. I was counting on an inch or so. I would need to use that moment to slide my fingers through the open crack so they would cling onto the edge of the top. I understood the lid would come crashing down on them – my fingers – but I'd just have to endure that, hoping it didn't break them. That would have ruined my chances at being a concert pianist – one more great reason to have refused to begin music lessons the year before.

The moment came. I ducked, squatted, and positioned myself on the pipe. I was really counting on my 'emergency strength juices' to kick in. Mostly they did. I had enough force to bump that lid open several inches opposite the hinges. I hadn't had the precise move needed to make the turnaround and grab the edge. The pressure from the water kept my body from turning fast enough.

Ah, ha! Never say Scotty couldn't lead a horse to the middle of a river and return – or something like that. By that point, I had to tilt my head back to pull breaths from the inch or so of air still available up near the covering. I managed several and sunk to the pipe. That time, however, I turned so when I shot to the surface my back was more down than up and my front was more up than down. After I hit the lid, my hands would be in position to slip into place and grab hold of the open edge without turning around. I had myself convinced it would work. I squatted, offered a brief prayer to the Strength-Juice Gods, and pushed off.

I felt it all happening in those two seconds: My slender body sped through the water at great speed, my hands leading the way; my knuckles contacted the wooden lid. That force-bumped it open, even further than before. Good going, S.J. Gods. My hands caught hold of the edge and I was hanging there, securely, the heavy lid laying on my fingers – knuckles scraped and bleeding. That was alright. I had a hold. I was sure I had lots of blood.

I rested for a moment aware that I had no more than several minutes before I had to leave to remove the cloth from the overflow pipe. I raised myself so the top of my head was

against the lid and managed a pull-up with every bit of strength my scrawny biceps could muster. It was working – my chin caught on the ledge holding my head out of the tank – the lid opened at a forty-five-degree angle behind me against my hair. I let go with my right hand and quickly repositioned it through the opening out onto the top. It was secure. I repeated the move with my left. My legs floated out in front of me. I worked them back below me, treading water.

I gave myself a moment to rest and breath. From there it was a simple move to climb up onto the top. I stayed low, looking around the base of the tower – the bad guy was nowhere to be seen. I sat, wondering, if there was a God, how much of what had just happened was his doing and how much was my doing. Unless his knuckles were raw and bleeding, and his lungs ached, and his biceps were burning, and his back and stomach were scratched from the edges of the lid, I figured *I'd* take most of the credit.

Before closing that lid for a final time, I needed to unstop the overflow pipe. It meant that hadn't been the final closing. It would require one more trip into the tank. I had to hurry before the water started overflowing at the top. Didn't want folks to see that – even my best imaginative fables could not adequately cover such an event. Or, I could tell the truth.

I returned to the ground and secured my coil of half inch rope from my backpack. That time I took my knife and climbed the ladder again – noticeably slower and with more effort than the first time. Still, I tried to hurry.

I secured one end of the rope to the upper rung and dropped the rest into the tank to assist me on my exit. Wet as I was, I felt chilly in the breeze. The sun's rays provided welcome warmth. I looked around below me one more time. Still, no sign of a bad guy anywhere. I let myself down into the water one final time. Interestingly, it felt warmer than before. By then the stuffing was stuck well in place from the pressure of the water in the tank. It took two dives and my knife as a prybar to remove it. I felt the suction build immediately as the water rushed through the pipe and down into to the creek.

With an assist from the rope, I was soon up on the top, relieved more than I had expected. A few tears flowed as I closed the lid. I felt fright building even more. I supposed with

all my attention focused on escape, it had diminished, some. I tried to convince myself all of it hadn't been bad. Among the several reassuring things I had learned during those past two hours, one stuck out – the bad guy was *not* Sammy or either of the women. I had at least one verified good guy and two probables on my side – I *had* noticed before that Gertie's arms bore some hair. Hmm?

My clothes were sopping wet, of course. I figured I was sitting on the ideal place to dry them – bright sun and moderate breeze. I stripped to my skin and laid my things out flat, waiting for nature to perform its service. I laid down and must have slept for an hour. Through no fault of my own, I hadn't rolled off the side. Dumb! Dumb! Dumb!

I turned each piece of clothing over – they were almost dry. I just sat there, exhausted, waiting for the final dampness to evaporate. It was a beautiful day. Twenty minutes later, I was legally attired and ready to make my way back down the hill.

I figured that night I'd be making the second longest entry ever into my journal. The first had been about my parents' deaths and the several days that followed and how I felt completely lost in a world I had never known – a world without the love and guidance and protection of my Father and Mother. I really missed them. Although, those sad things were still with me, I had grown stronger, more confident, maybe. I was no longer letting myself feel helpless. I was sure my parents would have been proud of me. I was forcing myself to keep busy thinking that would keep me from feeling sorry for myself and refocus my energies away from my sadness.

These people seemed nice, but they were never going to replace my Father and Mother. I supposed I shouldn't have expected that. They were doing their best. *Life wasn't fair* – and that didn't come close to expressing my feelings on the matter.

My shoes, of course, had not dried. I'd concoct a story to cover that if it became an issue. By then, they were familiar with me in stocking feet, so, once inside, I shed the shoes. The soles of my stockings were damp from the shoes, but I would make it work. I felt my hair – it was dry. I finger-combed it into a state of nine-year-old acceptability. I didn't yet carry a comb – that seemed to magically appear at puberty – I had studied the phenomenon.



At lunch there were polite questions about my morning. I offered what I hoped were acceptable answers – the bridges, the creek, the wheel, the pump, the tower, and tank. I indicated the sense that I had been appropriately impressed. Just as a feeler, I told them for my next adventure, I was considering exploring that dry well. It earned no responses other than those, isn't-that-cute-pat-a-kid-on-his-head-sort-of-nods-and-smiles. Did they not know, or were they all part of a conspiracy of silence? (That would be a great title for a mystery.) I really couldn't figure it.

I found myself hesitating before taking a drink of water – little did the others know they were sipping Scotty's Bathwater. If they liked it, perhaps I could market it.

I didn't volunteer to help with the dishes that noon thinking there might be something about my appearance or demeanor that would bring my morning adventure into some sort of focus – pruned finger tips, blue lips, ice in my eyebrows. I was pleased with how I had handled the earlier inquiries about my tale. I smiled, as I considered how the meaning of that last sentence would have changed had I been named Fido. What was that word that described my sort of brain – eccentric, bizarre, weird, odd ball. I said *word* not *words*! Father called it creative. Mother just shook her head and prayed with folded hands it would go away.

After the meal, I rescued my shoes and dropped them off in my room before going down to the library. Nobody was there. I wondered if only Uncle Chris and I used it – well, Uncle Chris and those who attended his meetings. I sure would like to get close enough to listen in on those.

The purpose of my trip was to examine any family tree sort of information I could find that included Archie and Wendell Best. Maybe there would be information on Uncle Chris, himself. I actually knew very little about his background. The tree I had had been given earlier was quite limited.

I searched for books on genealogy and found them. There were several volumes that looked promising – both privately published editions. I took them to a table. One seemed perfect – The Van Winkle/Best Families of North Eastern United State of America. There had been a marriage between them back five generations, which took the story back to its

origins in England and Holland. It took some diligence, but I came across several interesting items. I didn't pretend I understood it all.

Archie's parents had been first cousins on the Van Winkle side of the family – last name was Ray. Archie turned out to be some sort of nephew of Uncle Chris.

Wendell Best was a Best on one side and a Van Winkle on the other. The two families met and intermingled at several places along the tree. They traveled to America together, having formed a trading company way back. There was even a daughter of an aunt of William Penn worked into the mix.

It was way too confusing to sort out there and then. It was difficult to figure what of it all might be useful. A few things might be helpful.

I copied down some of it. Archie was almost thirty. Best was forty. Interesting probably only to me was that my teacher was also forty. I was surrounded by *old* people. That became more interesting. They both had March birthdays. Even *more* interesting than *more* interesting, they shared the 15<sup>th</sup> of that month – the Ides of March. Ooooo! Beware of Greek blades!

Quite a coincidence; however, I estimated that the chronology of the two families listed there in that little book, contained well over two thousand people – logic demanded that among that many, a number would have to share birthdays. My knowledge of probability wasn't all that great, but on the surface of it, dividing say 2,500 people by 365 days in a year, got one something close to seven that could be expected to share each possible birthdate – month and day at least.

I had no way of figuring coincidences into my life's history. It made me wonder if anybody there in the house shared mine. I'd find out, even though it would change my universe in no way, whatsoever. There was another one – Uncle Chris and my late uncle Abraham – my father's older brother. It seemed coincidences were not that rare in my life. I wasn't sure where that left me.

One thing, I supposed was obvious: Considering Archie's developmental tragedy, I should steer clear of marrying my first cousin, Isabelle, Atherton. That doubled as a great relief – she was everything in a girl that a nine-and three-quarter year-old-boy spent his hours avoiding – too pushy, too

bossy, too inquisitive, too much the know-it-all, too finicky, too clean, too talkative, too want to tag along, too girly! That did raise the question if a girl could really be too girly.

There were times, I wished Father had not gone as far as he had in his 'talk'. On the other hand, at times like that, I wished he'd have gone further in the area of choosing a mate. Mother would say it was love that pushed all other factors aside and swept young couples into marriage. Father would have suggested a discussion of just what romantic love might be. The answers probably lay somewhere among the hundreds of books in that room. It could wait.

With all the information about my relatives, I became interested in the Cutter man who was to become my teacher. I continued to believe being prepared with some knowledge about him might give me some positive edge in our relationship right from the git-go.

I went to find Fairmont, more and more the person I was letting know about my coming and going. That had been my choice. Still, nobody had fully and clearly defined my relationships and responsibilities. What little had been established had been at my insistence. Seemed backward. It was a few minutes before one o'clock. I found him in his room. The first time I had been there.

It was nicely furnished, neat and clean. He had a small bookcase packed with books (seemed reasonable) – mostly nonfiction – wide-ranging in topics. He had brought the room to life with colorful pictures, throws, comforter and rugs. There was what looked to be a fantastically comfortable chair – the very one in which I found him with a book after I knocked, and he had called for me to enter.

"What I nice surprise, Master Scotty – social, personal, business, or boss?"

I smiled and chuckled. He motioned me to a small sofa.

"No thank you. I came to tell/ask you about my plan for the afternoon."

He smiled, folded his hands across the knee of his crossed legs and waited for me to continue.

"I think it's time I go into town – Lattimore – if you think it's appropriate. I need some fresh air away from here, so to speak. I'd like to see what the town has to offer a boy my age

and see if there are boys with whom I might strike up a relationship – I really miss my friends back home. I'm new to country life and need a bit of time in a town, if that makes any sense. You old people are wonderful, but I'm sure you can understand what I'm telling you."

He chuckled, at what, I wasn't sure. He responded.

"Of course. We should have made efforts to see to it. How do you prefer to make the journey?"

"I haven't yet ridden any of the horses. I figured Ebb could pick me out a good one – gentle enough for a boy my age and yet with the potential get up and go to hasten me out of uncomfortable situations."

"I do love the way you speak, Master Scotty. We need to make sure we talk more often. I suspect you are just brim full of fascinating things to talk about. As you have noticed, there is very little high-class conversation here at Devonshire."

It raised the question of meanings between, 'brim full', and, 'chuck full', but I didn't pursue it.

I shrugged and nodded. It was a mixed message, but he accepted it. I hoped it indicated I agreed but didn't want to disparage anybody's intellect.

"At a trot, the trip will take an hour and fifteen minutes," he offered. "Just stay on the road east. Please plan to be back here by dinner. It appears Mr. V will be back and expecting you to be present. He can be a fine source of meaningful conversation, by the way – a simply brilliant man."

Ah. A brilliant, mental deviant – the stuff horror stories are made from – Dr. Frankenstein comes to mind.

I took a moment to devise a time-line – seventy-five minutes each way was two and half hours. That would give me a good two hours in town.

"Sounds great. I'll make ready and find Ebb. Thanks. You seem to be a cross between my former babysitter and the old man who lived next door – I mean that in the most comfortable sort of way."

"I will try and live up to both of them."

I believed he was sincere.

I offered my hand and we shook. I wasn't sure if that had been appropriate. I had certainly never shaken hands with my babysitter or the old man next door *or* one of my friends and it

seemed he was becoming one of my friends. I would need to evaluate that. There should be time on the ride. One of the best things about a long ride – thinking time. Aside from sweets and being active, thinking was about my favorite thing.

I reloaded my backpack – still had the goodies Wilma had provided that morning – filled my canteen and fastened my knife in its sheath to my belt. It was the smaller of my two packs. I could hang it over the saddle horn and the horse wouldn't even know it was there.

I proceeded to the stable and told Ebb of my plans.

“You and *Wadsworth*, here, will get on famously, Master Scotty. In fact, I've been thinking about him for you. An all-around great three-year-old. Let him get a good whiff of you. He likes being scratched behind his ears and having his belly rubbed.”

His belly was within easiest reach, so I gave that a go. He stepped closer as if to encourage my efforts.

“Be sure to water him at the trough on Main Street when you get there. Once he gets the idea you're on the trail to town, just give him his head and enjoy the scenery. In town, don't tie him up. He'll keep track of you. If you should find yourself in need of speed, gently nudge him with your knee and lean forward in the saddle. He'll give you everything you want. You should be aware that he's quite skittish of rifles and gunfire – his former owner was mortally wounded while riding him. That is why he now resides here with us.”

I nodded.

He proceeded to saddle him up. Things sounded comfortable. I kept hearing myself using that term – comfortable. I figured that was how things should be – a good sign except for – well. It was clear I was leading two separate lives.

“May I suggest you take a slicker in a saddle bag? Rain often sets in late afternoon in these parts. I just keep one in my saddle bag.”

“Whatever you say. The smallest you have, I suppose.”

We took care of that.

“Need a hand up, Scotty?”

“Oh, no, Sir. I got this. My mounting may not be pretty, but it has always produced the desired result.”

Holding the saddle at both ends, I jumped, tummy landing across it. From there it was just a matter of unscrambling my arms and legs and making sure I was facing front. My mount always rated a lot of attention on Main Street back home. I probably could have managed it the regular way but I was a succor for applause.

He adjusted the length of the stirrups. I left with a smile. Ebb matched it with one of his own and waved me on. I looked at the sky. Sure didn't look like rain to me.

Once on the road – dirt with an irregular strip of green grasses and weeds down the center – Wadsworth pulled at the reins. I released them and he broke into a gentle trot. Horses could easily maintain an eight mile an hour trot for several hours – we had ten miles to cover.

I had read there was a train that had averaged more than ten times that speed over a hundred-mile course – one hour start to finish. I understood that due to typical track conditions, most averaged about forty, but still. The modern world was amazing! One hundred miles an hour!

One popular theory had been that a man's body couldn't survive such a speed – arms, and legs would be torn asunder, and eyes would be sucked from their sockets – an image every boy my age savored. There needed to be a word that denoted that sucking sound – 'slurp' just didn't do it. Where's an adequate onomatopoeia when a guy needed it – one of mother's words.

It was a pretty ride: the grass cover showed a variety of early spring, greens; there were many flowering trees – white and red/pink tones, mostly; and wild flowers crept right up to the edges of the road – white, red, yellow, blue. Maybe on the return trip I would pick some for the ladies of the Shire.

I passed by several farmhouses set close enough to the roads for waves to pass between their people and me. I didn't see any kids, or I would have taken a short detour to speak with them – share a cookie, perhaps.

I did my due diligence – keeping a lookout for potential trouble – a bad guy. How I'd identify him I had no idea. What I'd do if I found him, I had no idea. That meant every man had to be a suspect and be approached with caution – an entirely foreign concept to me, formerly the friendliest kid in Carson,

P.A.

Once in town, Wadsworth went directly to the trough, taking his time refilling his tank. I slipped to the ground, into my backpack, and walked the Main Street. Once I determined the horse did, indeed, keep track of me, I went on as if he were of no concern.

I entered the saddle shop, not that I was in the market but just to enjoy the smell of the leather and oils and admire the craftsmanship. I wondered how many stitches it took to make a fine saddle.

I stuck my head inside the telegraph office. For some reason all of them smelled alike – musty. The operator smiled at me even though he was attending to somebody else. I nodded back at him. Friendly.

*Rachel's Ice Cream Parlor* had a tempting sign in its window: Special Today: Double Scoop Dish – five cents. I could manage that. I sat near a window so I could take in all the things that passed by – an excess of wagons and lone horsemen over buggies suggested a more rural, farm-oriented way of life than back home.

The special only came in vanilla, but I liked vanilla.

After a few minutes, the woman from behind the counter came to see how I was doing. She brought a linen napkin and a glass of water. She had seen me dealing with sticky fingers. That was thoughtful of her. I was thirsty. I engaged her in conversation about what I really had on my mind – learning what I could about my teacher, Mr. Cutter. I wondered about the derivation of his last name – a cutter of what: wood, stone, meat, young boys? I gave a shiver and let it pass.

“My uncle is arriving sometime this week and I was wondering where he might have found a room – if he is already here.”

“Three possibilities: *Sarah's Rooming House*, *The Quality Hotel*, or the *Rushford Rentals* – two room places rented by the week. They are all on *Farmer's Road*, one block south of Main.”

She pointed out the window.

I thanked her for the information, drank the melted leavings at the bottom of the glass bowl, and returned the dish, glass, and napkin to the counter. She seemed surprised and

thanked me. I walked a cross-street from Main to Farmer's Road. I looked in both directions.

The Quality Hotel sign was nearly in front of me on a corner. I crossed the street but didn't approach it. I wasn't sure it was a good idea for him to know I'd been sort of investigating him. It might seem strange – get us off to a strained start. I was just eager to get an idea about him – what he looked like, how he sounded, things like that.

My Father would have said, 'inquisitive'. My Mother would have said, 'spoiling for trouble'. Sometimes I wondered how they ever agreed on how to raise me. Maybe they hadn't. Maybe that was my advantage. Heavy thoughts.

Anyway, I believed I was turning out just fine. I hoped that was how they had believed, also. Those pesky tears again. I climbed the two steps to the porch and looked in through the front window. I just gazed in for several moments with no idea how to proceed. The man behind the front desk closed the large register book and stepped away. I didn't hesitate. I entered the lobby and moved to the big book reading down the list of names – I went back a full week. There was no sign of a Daniel Cutter or a six-masted *Naval* Cutter for that matter. My friends would have given that one a well-deserved thumbs down.

I left the Hotel. Sarah's place was just down the street to the east – my right as I stood there on the walk. By then I had a lie – I mean, I had a plausible tale in mind. The large, white, house was surrounded by a modest lawn enclosed by a matching, picket, fence. It resembled an island. I entered. A very pretty lady was sitting behind a large table. There was not a front desk like at the hotel. It was homier – immediately more comfortable. She offered a warm smile.

"May I help you, young man?"

I approached her where she continued to sit. She was neither young nor old. She had hair my color and smelled of lavender. I probably smelled of *Eau de water tower*. . .! I simply loved my sense of humor.

"This will be the strangest request you've heard all week, ma'am. Here's the thing, I have an Uncle coming in from out of state to visit – a family reunion next Wednesday. Really, that's just a story to get him here. It will be his fortieth birthday on Monday, and we wanted to surprise him with a party – he's



everybody's favorite uncle – I suppose every family has one. Anyway, my job is to find out when he arrives so we can convince him to come out to the farm on Monday rather than Wednesday. Sounds kind of corny when I lay it out like that. Anyway, I'm just the kid in this – like a spy, I suppose. His name is Daniel Cutter. Can you tell me if he is staying here?"

My story had grown far too complicated. I must watch that. A good lesson learned.

"What a sweet thing to do – a surprise party. Yes, he came in several days ago – let's see, he arrived last Wednesday and rented a room for a month."

I launched my security plan.

"You look like the kind that can keep a secret."

"I am. He'll not find out from me. He has returned quite late the past several nights. I'm not sure when to expect him."

"Thank you. Knowing he's here, I can let my folks know. It will be up to them from here on out. You are very sweet. May I ask his room number. You know mothers; she will surely ask."

"Of course. 101, straight down that hall on the left."

She pointed.

From where I stood, I could see straight down the hall and out the back window.

"Thanks again."

I turned and left. Perhaps I should consider the life of a conman. Father would have called it quick thinking. Mother would have wondered if I had inherited some criminal tendency from Grandfather Thompson – not the most representative member of our generally law abiding, extended family as reflected in his nick name – Grampa Eight to Ten.

I had to wonder why Mr. Cutter had not let my people know he was here. My people! Get that. I also wondered if I should visit his room – it being so handy right there on the first floor and all. I would be bound to find revealing things. My reckless inner self said, "Do it." My more studied inner self said, "Nothing about that can end up well."

Father had warned me not to listen to that reckless voice – particularly not once I reached adolescence. I was four years away from that apparently dreadful period in a boy's life – all the information I had gathered from adults said so. I figured with that four-year buffer, I probably still had plenty of natural

immunity. I circled to the rear of the big old house.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **Teenagers would make simply terrible horses.**

From the front, I hadn't realized how large the house was – two stories and I estimated eight to ten rooms per floor. Converted as it was to accommodate tenants, it provided permanent and temporary housing for lots of people. I figured Sarah was doing well financially.

The windowsills on the ground floor were just above chin height for me, so it was a strain to get a good look inside despite the fact the drapes were open. What I could see included two suitcases sitting by the door – apparently the only things the man had brought with him. That hardly seemed like preparation for staying in town for the school year. He could have had things in storage, of course or waiting for some still to arrive.

Standing there, it came to me that I wasn't just interested in getting to know him. For some reason, I had become suspicious of him – of course, I seemed to have reason to be suspicious of everybody but Sammy and the ladies. I couldn't put my finger on any one thing that led me in that direction where he was concerned. It was probably an offshoot from the fact I was alone and uncomfortable in an uncertain world. I figured I was suddenly required to be my own protector. That required some degree of suspicion. All of that had been true and reasonable even prior to the recent incidents.

Just to the left of the window I could see a small desk and chair. Under the window I could barely make out the top of a small wastebasket sitting beside a painted trunk to my right. I

figured the trunk was part of the permanent furnishings – its colors matched the room. My how I wanted to get inside. From what the woman – Sarah, I figured – had said, it was likely he would not return until much later.

At the center of the back of the big house was a sitting stoop with a door with a window. I went to it and looked inside. It opened into a hall that ran across the back wall – a common form of architecture in that part of the country – giving up outside room windows for a wind and temperature barrier from both summer heat and the winter cold. I figured it met up with the hall I'd seen from the front room – that would be to my right. I figured two other things – that I could probably enter and reach his room with no problem *and* that when I did, I would find the door locked.

I sat on the step to think not sure if I should be thinking about how to enter his room or why I shouldn't. I spied a wooden crate a foot square. I end-over-ended it to a spot under the window of his room, placing it so I could stand on it. That gave me two options: I had a more complete view, and I might be able to force the window open. Neither were the game changers I had hoped for. The window was locked. From higher up like that, I could see down into the wastebasket. I wasn't prepared for what was in it, but it fired off round after round of wonders within my head.

It was half filled with rags. Not just rags – bloody rags. I knew about bloody rags from emptying wastebaskets from my father's examination room – stiff, blackened, blotches. He had either had a two-pint nosebleed or he had been wounded. My mind rushed to the dubious conclusion I had been the one who had wounded him when I threw that metal rod through the burning door in the room beneath the well. I, also, understood there could have been many other explanations, although I was hard put to name any. It bothered me that I wanted *my* explanation to be the right explanation. Perhaps, because if that were true, I could stop looking for bad a guy – I would have found him. All my new people would become safe – quite a relief.

I jumped down and moved the crate away from the window to prevent suspicion that it had been there. My *generalized fear* had just moved up several notches to *focused*

*fright*. I read in one of Father's books once that *that* should be better – knowing the *specific* source of one's fear rather than just knowing *something* was wrong. Once revealed, a person could take steps to fix it – alleviate it.

Working from that hypothesis, my runaway imagination gave rise to several things that I believed legitimately fell into place: he had reason to know about me and that I was related to a wealthy man; with his birthday being the same as Uncle Chris's nephew – Wendell Best – there was the outside possibility the two were really the same person; if that were so, and if Best was inclined toward malevolent deeds, he could want to get me out of the way of his inheriting my uncle's entire fortune; that might eventually include a plan to kill Uncle Chris once I had been removed as an obstacle to his greedy end plan. I needed to review some of the evidence – and related matters.

First things first; I checked – my pants were still dry. My heart, however, was pounding something ferociously. I felt the definite need to move on. Most of my head told me it was a ridiculous theory and I should forget it.

There was a livery stable across the alley. While waiting for me, Wadsworth had wandered over there to check out the fillies – that was the sort of comment Tommy would have made – he was a twelve-year-old friend from back home. He made many male-female references I had never fully understood.

I approached the horse. An older teenage boy who, I assumed worked there, was feeding him a handful of oats.

"Hello," I began.

It was always good when parts of new conversations were automatically set by convention like that.

"Hi. This your boy?"

"Sure is, *Wadsworth*, by name. I'm Scotty."

"Jasper."

He offered a hand and we shook. Seldom did guys of any age offer their hands to boys my age. He had gained a second point – the first had been his kindness to Wadsworth.

"A fine horse. Haven't seen you around."

"I'm new to the area – out west of here."

"I saw you looking in the window over at Sarah's."

Come on brain. I needed a *really* good explanation.

“My uncle is apparently staying there. I’ve been trying to hook up with him to give him instructions on how to find our new place. He knows we’re out here. We know he’s coming to see us. Just never exchanged the specifics. Complicated family stuff.”

Jasper nodded and smiled.

“Tell me about it. I’m fifteen and living on my own because of complicated ‘family stuff’.

“Sorry.”

“I’m doing fine. Can I deliver a message to your uncle for you – Mr. Cutter, I assume from the window you chose?”

“A good detective, Jasper.”

“I take care of his horse and buggy. Sort of know him.”

“How long has he been here?”

“Less than a week. Came to town on Tuesday or maybe Wednesday as I recall. Maybe I shouldn’t say this, but he’s not very friendly. Doesn’t take time to chat – never a please or thank you.”

“That’s uncle Daniel, for sure. My Father calls him self-absorbed.”

Good follow-through, Scotty!

“I’d add ‘rude’, but that’s none of my business. He pays his bills and offers me the occasional dime for good service.”

“Have you noticed anything strange about his behavior – not even sure what I’m asking?”

“There is one thing that’s sort of bothered me – not really behavior, I suppose. The other morning, he came home clearly hurting. There was a large spot of blood on his shirt – I saw it under his jacket as he climbed down off the buggy. I offered to help, but he waved me off. Also, blood on the seat. Later, I cleaned it up. No words passed between us about it. He stooped over some, holding his stomach, as he walked across the alley to the back door.”

“Thanks. I hope we can leave that between us.”

“Oh, yeah. Got enough family problems myself. Not about to borrow anybody else’s.”

I mounted up.

“Thanks for the oats. Do I owe you?”

“Oh, no. Just love horses – all animals, I guess.”

“Must be why you and I got on so well,” I said, testing his

sense of humor.

He nodded and laughed out loud. I figured I had a friend – even better, a friend committed to minding his own business.

“My last name’s Atherton, by the way – Scotty Atherton.”

“Jasper Wolf.”

He waved, and I urged Wadsworth into an easy gallop toward home.

About halfway to Devonshire, I spotted a buggy headed in my direction. Dilemma: stay on the road and get a look at the driver or move into the trees to my right and let him pass. The first of those was the most attractive – assuming there was a good chance it was the Best/Cutter guy. It was, also, clearly the most dangerous. If it were him, he might surmise who I was – me, out there defenseless, in the middle of nowhere, easy game for a man with a weapon who wanted to use it on me. It was not my dream to spend eternity in a shallow grave half-way between Devonshire and Lattimore. I moved easily off to my right into the woods, thinking a more rapid exit might draw unwanted attention. I did my best to look tall in the saddle by standing in the stirrups. Thought I’d split apart – groin to cowlick.

From my hidden vantagepoint, I watched the buggy pass. It held one man. That gave me virtually no information since he was too far away for me to make out his face. It appeared he was wearing a suit.

I remained in the woods several minutes after the buggy passed in case it *had* been Best/Cutter and he might have figured who I was – considering the direction I was traveling. In that case he could have been waiting for me to emerge from the trees. Why did my mind insist on turning the harmless, usual, into the dramatically, evil? My heart was pumping pretty fast for the little effort I had expended.

I walked Wadsworth back to the road keeping an eye to the east. Nobody to be seen, so I gave him his head, urging him into the gallop of his life. My spine tingled and my mouth dried up. Wadsworth, on the other hand, seemed to enjoy it. I appreciated his effort. I pulled him up a couple hundred yards short of the stable so he could walk it off – cool down – not wanting him to appear overworked when I returned him to his stall. Any boy my age knew the importance of doing that.

Ebb wasn't there, so I handled things myself, the saddle, blanket, and reins, the combing down, the water. I patted his behind and he walked to his stall. I fastened the door, feeling a bit ashamed of locking up such a fine being. I'd have to make time to mull that over later. My, '*Things to Think About*', list was growing long. That was fantastic!

I hadn't eaten the ham salad sandwich Wilma had packed for me. I was afraid a whole day in the heat might have turned it bad – one caution *both* Father and Mother agreed on. I discarded it behind the stable, believing some animal would come to enjoy it – perhaps a cannibalistic wild boar. I chuckled, feeling dramatically better since arriving there at Devonshire. Legitimate or not, there had been more than a hint of sheer terror out there on the road – helplessness. Terror always felt legitimate. Clearly, Devonshire had become my haven – such as it was. Because of the new information, my life seemed suddenly reorganized – some better and some worse.

I was munching on a cookie as I entered the house – my second since arriving – third one eaten counting the one I gave to Wadsworth. He definitely had a sweet tooth. It seemed to be a requirement to be a Devonshire resident. I met Fairmont. He checked his watch.

"Very good, Master Scott. Home with plenty of time to spare. We have all commented on how honest and dependable you are with us. You make it easy to trust you and comfortable to live with."

It sounded a lot like something positive my Father would have said. I did my nod and shrug thing, again feeling a bit ashamed because there *had* been fibs and the immediate future promised more.

I had an hour until dinner so went to my room. I slipped out of my shoes, noting they were dry, and lay back on pillows against my headboard. There were so many things to think about. I wished I could just zoom a message out into the air to Cutter's college to make sure he was really a certified teacher – yeah – like *that* would ever happen. That envelope had not contained any proof he had graduated – just the note he had put on his resumé saying so. Maybe I should get a letter off, even though it might take weeks to receive a response. I could attend to that after dinner if my further consideration thought it



proper.

I turned onto my side, snuggled into the pillows, and fell asleep.

Uncle Chris was in the dining room at six. He went about things as if he had not missed a single meal and asked a number of appropriate questions about how things were going in my life. He had clearly left his 'meetings' behind for the time being.

"Do you play chess?" he asked.

"Yes. My Father always beat me, but he said at my age I should not think of the game as something to win but as an experience from which to learn. I figured he intended for me to apply that approach to life well beyond chess."

"A wise man, your Father. I wish I had known him."

"You would have liked him. The wisest person I've ever known, for sure. I really miss him . . . and Mother, too, of course."

For whatever reason, he didn't respond to that. He went on to ask general questions about how I was spending my time. I told him about arranging my new room and skeletal versions of my time at the water tower and my trip to town. He nodded. I couldn't tell if he was genuinely interested or not. I *would* say, it was easy to maintain comfortable conversations with him. I never felt looked down upon – quite different from many older men I had met. There had not yet been an uncomfortable pause between us.

"Have you heard from Mr. Cutter, my teacher? I assume he plans to be here on Monday."

"No. I haven't. That means I have no reason to suspect he will *not* be here."

I supposed that made sense – to an optimist. I moved on, asking him what some of his favorite books were. He ran with it like a week-old colt that had just found its legs. He went on right through dessert – some bland pudding-like something. When he finished his, he rose and left the room – no goodbye or sleep tight – he just left. It was his style.

I figured it was to my advantage, since I couldn't rightly ignore the dessert in his presence. It was simply atrocious. I went to the kitchen in search of something better. It was just the women and Sammy who were still there having coffee around

the big table.

“Let me guess,” Wilma said. “You need some remedy for that dessert. It was a dish his mother fixed when he was a boy. From time to time he requests it – more for memories than taste, I suppose. Have a seat and I’ll find something more suited for a boy.”

Sammy pulled back a chair next to him and motioned for me to sit. Every encounter I had with him made me feel comfortable. He always seemed genuinely interested in me. I really needed that. On my ride home that afternoon, I realized I no longer had moments in my life when I was not bobbing along just above a sea of fear and suspicion.

“Mixed berry pie, this evening,” Sammy said, “raspberry, blackberry, youngberry.”

“I don’t know about youngberry.”

“I grew up in Arkansas. Youngberries grow wild there. Crossed by nature among blackberries, raspberries, and dewberries. I brought a few starters north with me. Have a small patch of them, here.”

“It is a delicious pie, Wilma. Like nothing I’ve ever tasted before. I assume it’s equal parts berries and sugar.”

It got a good laugh. I had been serious. Never one to give up an advantage, however, I smiled and chuckled along with the others.

After a few games of checkers with Sammy – he was good; I was better – I returned to my room.

I took out the envelope containing my legal papers. I re-read several of them in more detail. The upshot was pretty much how I remembered it; I was the only roadblock between Best and Uncle’s fortune. With Best identified as being in western New York, I should be safe here. However, if Best was Cutter, I might *not* be safe here. With me, it seemed to have become a constant struggle of finding a balance between the worst possibilities and the most reasonable – even most reasonable demonstrated little assurance of my wellbeing. The proper choice never seemed obvious. Maybe it was that smarts vs wisdom thing Father had warned me about. My only alternative seemed to be waiting for evidence and see how things turned out – not a reassuring process for one as impatient and vulnerable as I.

I found it hard to imagine a man would kill somebody in order to obtain a sum of money. If the attempts on my life had been made by Best/Cutter, it meant he had to have good knowledge of the mansion. He had to have known about the secret passages, for instance – something the *help* apparently didn't even know about. It raised more questions than it cleared up. It raised – or lowered – my suspicions more to the level of fantasy than reality.

He had to have known I was coming to Devonshire, so he could have made the effort to learn about the building and to set himself up as my teacher. For some reason, all that effort had been a better approach than just coming after me back home.

I had been told he was recommended by an agency of some kind. I found the name and address in my notes from the envelope. It meant he had to have some influence over whomever had made that recommendation. The theory began to sound too complicated – convoluted – to be real. Those things would have taken months to set up, and, yet it all seemed to have come together in a week – the week after my parents died – the week before I arrived at Devonshire.

It sparked the most terrible possibility of all. He had taken several months to set it up before my parents died – translation: once he had things arranged, he had my parents killed by the highwaymen, knowing I would be sent here. Could there possibly be a more despicable human being on the face of the planet than he? Could there possibly be a wilder imagination on the face of the planet than mine? My Mother's eyes were probably rolling in her grave.

I had to encourage myself to remember that was all just speculation. I had long suspected that my runaway imagination was at once my best and worst trait. Regardless of whom it was, I was in danger. I suddenly experienced shortness of breath.

I had money. I decided I was going to use some of it.

I took paper and pencil to my desk – I had put it under the middle window of my southern wall – and began writing telegrams to gather information.

One, was to the employment agency asking they send a new copy of their recommendation – “A house fire.”

One, was to the postmaster of the town listed on Cutter's application – Geneso, New York – a small place according to the atlas. There had been correspondence back and forth so there had to be a person with some legitimacy – supposedly, Daniel Cutter. I asked to have his mailing address verified to make sure it was permanent. I wasn't sure if a postmaster was allowed to do that.

One, was to the Dean of the Faculty of the college at Geneseo – one also listed on his resume as a place he had taught.

Finally, one to the Dean of the Faculty of the last college he listed on his application as a place of employment– asking for verification of that.

I would go back to town the next morning and send them. If they were not returned that day, I'd have to go back to town later in the week. I asked that their immediate, return response be sent by telegraph, collect. I'd have to see how to do that with the telegraph office. I had heard Father use the term. It should encourage responses.

Apparently, I was going on offence. I immediately felt less helpless – like I was taking charge. I felt very grown up. In the past when I felt grown up, things had seldom worked out well. I had fooled myself into believing I was more capable than I was. I guessed I would soon find out about *that* time.

I took a ten dollar bill out of my cash stash – a hollow book – one that had accompanied me on the coach trip. There was lots left. I placed it in my wallet under the secret flap – my own invention and returned the book to the bookcase.

In the morning, I was up with the rooster, down in the kitchen. I fixed myself eggs and toast and had a glass of juice. As I was finishing my dishes at the sink, Wilma entered the room, yawning and clearly puzzled. Her room was just to the north of the kitchen.

"I'm going into town to see a new friend. Hope I didn't wake you."

"No. It's fine. Hope you have a good day. Can I make you a sandwich?"

"That would be nice. I'm in a hurry."

I hoped that hadn't sounded rude or demanding.

"I can see. Won't take but a minute to slap a slab of ham

and slice of cheese between two pieces of bread. Thanks for doing your dishes, by the way. That's really never necessary. I'm always happy to take care of them."

While she did that, I filled my canteen and added several cookies from the plate on the table.

"Please tell Ebb I took Wadsworth. He said I could ride him anytime I wanted to. It felt like he was saying he was mine. Not sure when I'll be back, but I'll surely make it by dinner time."

She accepted what I said, but I figured she *should* have been skeptical about it. Mother would have had a dozen questions and forced me to sign a contract – in blood – just kidding – about the blood. Smile. I gave Wilma a peck on her cheek and was on my way to the stable – me, backpack, and canteen.

Five minutes later we – Wadsworth and I – were on our way to town. I liked early mornings – it was like the world was painted in pastels – soft, cool, inoffensive. It was like a gentle trial run against the challenges the day would offer. I wasn't sure if those feelings were manly, but I was still a kid, so I figured it was nothing to worry about.

I knew the telegraph office was open twenty-four hours a day. Zack – the telegrapher – slept right there in his office in case messages came in. I had learned the code back when I was just a little kid, so I was able to monitor the messages and make sure they were accurate.

Wadsworth settled into a gentle trot. From time to time he would raise his head and snort as if to say he approved of the early morning as much as I did. I had to wonder about the life horses led. Their entire lives were consumed by doing what they were told to do, and they just did it: stay in your stall, eat, drink, carry a rider, walk, trot, gallop, stand, stay, follow, learn fancy steps, jump the fence. Such a life of subservience just didn't seem right for such a magnificent beast. I was happy I was not a horse. My observations suggested teenagers would make simply terrible horses.

I had to awaken Zeke – well, I probably didn't *have* to, but I was impatient to get on with things, so I did. He was very patient with me. The day before, while I was learning about the town, I had watched him with customers – mostly businessmen and messenger boys. He was patient with *them*, as well. I

arranged for the 'collect' part of it first. There was an extra charge and a deposit required. What was, would be. I began feeding him the individual messages. He crossed out unnecessary words to make them less expensive – a considerate gesture, I figured. He sent them immediately – I waited to make sure.

I headed for the livery where Jasper worked. Humorously, I thought, once Wadsworth sensed our destination, he took the enthusiastic lead – visions of oats, I figured.

We met Jasper as he entered Mainstreet from the alley. He waved first. That made me feel so good – important. I wondered if it were because he was just a nice guy or if he were a lonely guy – maybe, even, because he liked me. Fact was that few older boys *his* age ever had time for a kid *my* age.

"I'm headed for the restaurant – my aunt's place. She keeps me in breakfasts. I'm sure she'd allow me a guest this morning."

"I've eaten but sure. Maybe something to drink. Thanks."

Wadsworth looked back at me as if contemplating his next move – follow me or move on to the stable. I whooshed him on with the backs of my hands. He understood. He was a smart horse. I wondered if he thought I was a smart boy. I wondered if he thought I was a boy – maybe just a runt-of-the-litter horse. Did horses come in litters? Find an absurd path, and my head was sure to follow it.

We took seats at a corner table for two near the side door leaving the better tables for the paying customers. Jasper introduced me to his aunt. Without even ordering, she brought him a platter loaded like it was the only meal he'd get that day. Maybe it was. Another nice person in my world. I opted out of a plate but agreed to a mug of hot chocolate. It came with four slices of hot buttered toast. A guy could never have too much hot buttered toast.

With a fork full of eggs, Jasper pointed toward the front door.

"Hey, look. There comes your Uncle, now!

## **CHAPTER NINE**

### **New Friends. Telegrams. Dessert.**

I thought I was going to faint.

“Can’t explain,” I said. “This is not good. Hope you can trust me.”

I slipped off my chair onto the floor under the table and behind the long tablecloth. I continued talking as I sat back on my legs.

“Please don’t give me away. It could be a matter of life and death.”

Later, I would learn he moved my mug and toast, so they appeared to be in front of him and made no effort to make contact with the man. Still, he approached the table.

Jasper spoke.

“Good morning, Sir.”

“Good morning, Jasper. Need company?”

“Not to be rude, Sir, but I am expecting a friend at any moment. Maybe another day.”

I watched while the man’s boots turned and walked off. Jasper spoke to me.

“He took a table around the corner. You know where the side door is – just to my left. It seems safe if you need to leave.”

“Thanks. I must. Later.”

I crawled to the door, reached up, turned the knob, and went outside. I wished I could have seen the man’s face, but my back had been to him where I sat. I needed to keep away from that man. I needed to keep close enough to that man, so

I always knew his whereabouts. I wondered if he would leave town that morning.

I headed across the wide street and took refuge in the narrow alley behind the rooming house. I sat behind a barrel needing to think. From there, I could keep watch on the restaurant. Wadsworth insisted on standing beside me. I had no reason to believe Best/Cutter might know the animal, but unattended horsy's attention to that spot might be suspicious.

Since I had no way of proving Best/Cutter was *not* after me, I needed to keep away from him. If that theory were proved wrong later, I would still be around and perhaps he and I could become friends. If it were right, I just might *not* be around. My approach seemed prudent.

Jasper left first – from the side door I had used. He stopped on the walk and looked up and down the street. When he spotted Wadsworth, he headed in our direction. Just as if we were a team of secret agents, he dropped to the ground and took a seat beside me. Under less dire circumstances it could have been fun.

"I don't expect answers, Scotty, but what can I do to help?"

"You're a good friend. Here's my situation – the public version. He's not my uncle. That was a handy cover I was using for him. I need to know where Cutter is while I'm here in town, so I can avoid him. At the same time, I need to remain in town because I am expecting replies from several telegrams I sent. They may determine whether he is a good guy or a bad guy. A dilemma, you see – not knowing."

"He has left town every day he's been here. It would seem natural, I suppose, if I went to him and asked if he needed me to get his rig ready. Then you might at least have a timeline to work with."

"That would be great. Thanks. A suggestion: if you'd enter the restaurant through the side door, you could make it seem you were just stopping by his table as you were leaving."

"A good plan. I'll just need a few minutes. Stay put."

He left on the trot.

A man approached from down the alley. I was exposed from the rear. He looked upset. He spied me, moved in my direction and spoke.



“You seen Jasper? He’s late for work. Unlike him. I’m concerned.”

“From what I overheard between him and Mr. Cutter, I think Jasper was talking him into a paint job on his buggy. I assume that’s a good thing for the livery.”

“Yes, indeed.”

His face brightened and he continued.

“I knew there would be a reasonable explanation. I guess I was just worried. His life’s not all that good right now. I better get back then. Thank you, son.”

He turned and left. With some hesitation, Wadsworth followed him. Allegiances seemed to be just as difficult for horses as they were for people. He clearly made the correct decision – not much chance of any oats action from a kid hunkered down behind a barrel.

For better or worse, Jasper left the restaurant with Cutter by his side. They were headed in my direction – well, I suppose in the direction of the livery. Like Jasper had indicated, the man walked favoring his left side with a hand pressed firmly against his lower, right, abdomen. I scooted into the nearby bushes. I had created a problem. It could become uncomfortable if the owner mentioned the paint job and Jasper didn’t know about it. Fortunately, Cutter turned right to Sarah’s and Jasper walked on down the alley. The man had come within just yards of where I was.

“Pst!”

Jasper looked. I figured he’d be on the lookout for me. He stopped but didn’t look down. I spoke from hiding.

“I told your boss you might have been speaking to Cutter about painting his buggy – my way of covering for your late arrival. The man didn’t seem upset upon hearing it; more worried or concerned, I’d say.”

“Thanks. That was Mr. Miller. He owns the livery and during the school year teaches social studies at the high school. I can work with that. Mr. Cutter’s leaving out east within the next few minutes – something about meeting the north-south train due through there in about an hour.”

“Passenger or freight?”

“Usually a combination, actually. From Buffalo, heading south to the Carolinas. I don’t get over to see it often.”

“I’ll contact you later, Jasper. It may be a day or so. Thanks for all your help. Don’t be concerned for me. Like you, I’m getting quite good at taking care of things. I’ll be leaving town by four.”

He walked on. I turned my attention back to the boarding house, assuming he’d leave through the back door to the Livery. I sat back against the trunk of a tree to wait. It wasn’t a long wait. He left without bags, so I figured it was his plan to stick around Lattimore and not head out on the train. Maybe it was as simple as going to fetch his belongings from the depot, things which he had arranged to have shipped to him. Perhaps he was going to meet a band of cut throats he had hired to run me down and do me in. I wasn’t particularly fond of that one.

From my spot in the bushes, I could also see the rear of the livery stable

. Jasper already had the horse hitched to the buggy and led her out into the alley. Wadsworth followed acting quite friendly with the new filly in his life. Courtship – if that’s what it was – continued to be a mystery to me both at the level of relationship and hormones – whatever the heck *they* were. I had certainly heard nothing redeeming about them.

A few minutes later he drove off – east down Main Street, just the way Jasper had reported. One positive thing had come from all of it – I had seen the man’s face from several angles. I believed that I now carried the vision of my maybe adversary. He had medium length brown hair, brown eyes, a pale complexion, all presented on a frail, five-foot seven frame – his boots may have boosted that from five-five. A thin moustache highlighted his upper lip. Nothing about his looks was frightening and yet nothing about his looks was reassuring. He wore a coat, wide tie, and hat giving him a professional air. That fit the description of a teacher.

I had just been yards from the person who I had every reason to believe had already made four, formidable, attempts on my life. I understood there was nothing reasonable about a boy my age going it alone in such a circumstance, but I could see no reasonable alternative. Most boys had family. How was a kid supposed to know who he could trust? Most any adult could turn a boy my size into worm fodder in a matter of seconds.

The back of my mind still harbored the possibility that one of my new caretakers was somehow in cahoots with him. There were just too many coincidences related to his employment and recent activities that seemed to require an inside contact. None of them seemed to have the stuff necessary to harm me and yet who knew what sorts of influences – pressures – such a man might be directing toward one of them. I wondered what my Father might have brought himself to do if my life had been used in such a way – ‘Do this or Scotty will die a horrible death.’ I knew he’d do whatever was demanded of him to save me.

As far as I knew, Ebb was the only one with family. I wish I hadn’t thought of that.

I returned to the telegraph office. Too soon for any response, I figured, but just being that close to the magic wire felt reassuring.

“Anything, Zack?”

“One response. Haven’t pasted it yet. You want the tape?”

“Yes, please.”

It was from the College at Geneseo. ‘NO RECORD OF D. CUTTER EMPLOYMENT STOP’.

That was the first actual verification that any of my way-out suspicions might have been close to correct – a doctored resume. It didn’t mean killer, but still. My heavy heart lightened just a bit. My life, much of which was being lived out within my fantasies, was gradually assuming some believable direction – clarity.

The clicker began to click again. I had the message before Zack handed me the tape. I let him explain.

“The wire to the Randolph Employment Agency has been returned – UD, undeliverable. It does not seem to exist.”

“Actually, not *bad* news, Zack. Thanks. I’ll wait a while over on the bench if that’s okay.”

“Sure. Stretch out and nap if you want. I’ll rouse you.”

I needed to find out how Uncle Chris found out about that agency. My best bet was probably Fairmont – the educated one. Still, if it didn’t exist, probably not Fairmont, unless . . .

I sat. I opened my backpack, thinking I would remove the book I’d brought along to read. Instead, I opted for the

sandwich. I had a humorous flash, considering it as a storybook – bread being the covers.

*The story of how Mr. Ham and Miss Cheese first met, courted, and married – until digestion did them part.*

My closest friends back home would be rolling on the floor over that one – even Ronnie who wouldn't understand it. Talk about an easy audience. My, how I missed them.

I did take Zack's suggestion and spread myself out on the bench, my backpack for a headrest. The sandwich was very good. With ham, I preferred butter to mayonnaise, but if there were a way to load food with additional calories, Wilma would see to it. I wondered how the men all managed to maintain their slim physiques.

After the sandwich, I took a long drink from my canteen. The ham had been salty. I closed my eyes to think, and an hour later I found Zack shaking my shoulder. I sat up quickly, more due to the start of it than understanding what was going on.

"Number three arrived, Scotty."

My head cleared.

He seemed as excited as I was. For those few hours, I certainly had somebody on my side, even though he had no idea what it was all about. It made me consider that the telegrapher in each community probably knew more about the private and important things going on there than anybody else in town. A good story in that.

It was from the Dean at the last college his resume listed as a place of employment. It resulted in another short and sweet response.

*NEVER HEARD OF HIM STOP*

The picture being painted was all quite clear – the resume was fake, false, bogus, phony, spurious – undependable, more specifically. Uncle had been *had*, as I heard the older boys put such things.

A few minutes before noon, the devise came to life again. It was a longer message than the others, and I hadn't paid good enough attention – there had been lots of wires that had not been for me, so my attention had lagged. It was from the Postmaster in Geneseo, about the address Cutter had given for correspondence.

PO BOX 605 HELD JOINTLY DANIEL CUTTER AND

## WENDELL BEST STOP.

Now *that* was interesting. I took it to mean the two were one and the same man. It was possible, of course, Best had hired Cutter to kill me and they shared the box. It would leave Best's hands clean. It also would leave him open to later blackmail probably requiring Best to kill Cutter. Would I make a great writer, or what? My Father had more than hinted at it. At any rate, one or both of them was right there in my new town.

I was only nine years old. This was not supposed to be the stuff of my life. I let a few tears loose before exiting the office.

"Sorry, kid."

I gathered my things, turned, and offered a weak wave. Another nice person in my world. I had to keep remembering about them.

I hadn't asked if the ten dollars I'd put on account had paid for everything. I doubted if he would have said if it weren't. I would settle up another day.

I had asked Zack where the school was. It was only a few blocks away – west and north. I walked it in a few minutes. School would be in session. There were swings and a slide. I spent some time in a swing – mostly sitting. Presently, the bell in the tower rang, and a hoard of kids exited the building – it was noon. Most left the school grounds – home for lunch, I assumed. Several didn't. Two boys headed in my direction waving.

"Hello. You new here."

It had been a statement.

I gave them the mostly truthful story – recently moved to Devonshire and would be taught there starting Monday. They accepted it. We made the rounds of the play equipment together spending time on the swings, teeters, slide, climbing bars. Their story was that it was a short school day and they were from farms. Their people would be to pick them up later.

They loaned me some marbles and we had a good time. They weren't much good. I had to miss shots on purpose to keep them in the game. In the end, I returned all I had to them. It was a good time. I couldn't believe it was going on four.

I made my excuses and left, walking south to Main Street. As I entered it, Wadsworth was heading up the street

looking for me. Earlier, I had shared my timeline with Jasper, and I suspected he had started the horse on its way to find me at four o'clock. Neither of our horses back home had that inclination. I hoped the attorney had found good families for them. Jasper would have made some kid a great older brother.

I noticed Wadsworth's saddle blanket had been turned over, so I assumed Jasper had let him spend the day without it. He was good with animals.

Wadsworth nuzzled me as if he were happy for us to get back together. His nose was wet, so I assumed he had recently watered himself. I mounted up and without so much as any signal from me, he turned toward the road, and we were headed back west toward Devonshire.

My spirits were buoyed up for some reason. Partly, I figured, it had been refreshing just being with guys my age. I supposed having the telegraphed facts provided a basis for relief. It wasn't as if my situation had changed – my life was still in danger, I was sure.

I took a long drink – not really because I was thirsty but because I needed to be doing something. It was one reason I had never been into riding – mostly, *my* involvement played no part in either the activity or the outcome. A sparrow could have performed most of my necessary duties. I liked to be in charge or at least be an important participant in things. I had never enjoyed just sitting and being entertained. Sitting in a saddle and *not* being entertained was far less appealing.

In two months, I would turn ten. Father said it was the age when he would begin teaching me how to handle his rifle. He was a man of peace and wanted me to be as well but, also, to understand that the realities of life – even in the modern era – required proficiency with arms of all males. I had to admit, I had really been looking forward to it. There was something about the power of demolishing an empty bottle at fifty paces that set my innards jumping. Perhaps, if I shared my father's intention with the men, they would see that I learned. I tended to believe I could do things I couldn't, so the wiser parts in my brain said I would wait for instruction.

Although we set a gentle pace, I found myself looking over my shoulder a lot. I'd seen him leave out in the other direction and yet I had to look. It was like, I had to keep looking

because only then did I know he wasn't back there. The rest of the time I knew he might be. I'd have been better off just turning around in the saddle and riding backwards. Like I said, the horse surely didn't need me.

When I arrived at about the same location along the road where I had met him – well, somebody – in a buggy the day before, I spotted a cloud of dust behind me – more than a horse and rider would make. I urged Wadsworth into a faster trot. The cloud was gaining on me. If it were a buggy, I knew we could outrun it, so I kept to a steady pace allowing it to grow large enough to present some more definite form.

Presently, that it was a buggy became clear. Most every fiber of my young being wanted to just wait right there and have it out with the man. I had my knife and ax for protection if it should come to that. The rest of those fibers told me I was an idiot – make that an *absolute* idiot – so I urged the horse up to an easy gallop.

I saw that while my attention had been turned to the rear, two riders had come into sight ahead of me. Could they be two of the men Best/Cutter had hired to do me in? Was I suddenly caught in some sort of squeeze play? What had I gotten myself into?

My inclination was to head off into the woods again. Before I made that move, I noticed one of the men ahead of me was waving his hat back and forth above his head. It seemed friendly. I slowed but continued moving forward. I looked behind me – the buggy was still there, although it had lost significant ground. I looked west. Decision time! The riders were soon to be upon me.

The need for a decision collapsed when I recognized they were Sammy and Fairmont. At that point, I waved back. We slowed as we approached each other and soon stopped.

“Hey, fellas. I didn't expect to meet you out here this afternoon. Everything alright?”

“Everything's fine,” Fairmont said. “Have a good day in town? Meet a girl? Get engaged? Get married? Got kids?”

I thought my cheeks would burst. He seemed different away from the mansion. Less formal. Less stuffy. He continued.

“I'm on my way into town for the evening to see my lady friend and Sammy rode along hoping to meet you so you could

ride back together.”

Sammy explained further.

“Scout, here, hasn’t been getting enough of my attention since spring arrived. I thought this would be a good time to change that – give him a good workout.”

Sounded a lot like when one guy lied and the other covered for him. Whether that was the real reason didn’t really matter. Early on, Ebb had indicated I could expect to be over protected. If this were that, it seemed like a late start. Oh, well!

“Glad to have a trail buddy and meet Scout. Looks to be a fine animal. Fairmont, you be careful; I’ve heard tales about widows and unmarried women in small towns.”

Of course, I had no idea what I was talking about, but it got a good chuckle from both of them, so it must have been about something. At nine, the world that churned around me was often defined by the off limits and incomprehensible.

Fairmont rode on and Sammy turned around joining me. We settled into a trot. The horses seemed happy to be traveling side by side. I had not considered the new men in my life having women in theirs. Why men and women enjoyed hanging out together absolutely baffled me. How could they possibly have anything in common? Father’s talk had clearly left out something very important between meeting somebody you liked and making babies.

We had a nice chat. He didn’t press me on what I did in town. I mentioned my new friend and that I had spent time with some boys at the school playground. Sammy knew who Jason was and clearly approved. I left out about the telegrams and the time I spent under a table, shivering while staring into Jasper’s belt buckle.

“Seems to be a nice little town. I haven’t met a person there who hasn’t gone out of his way to be nice to me. I especially liked the lady who runs Sarah’s rooming house.”

Sammy smiled.

“That’s Sarah Thatcher – Fairmont’s special friend.”

“Small World, like it’s said, I guess. I’d say he has good taste and an exceptional olfactory sense.”

Upon saying that, I figured it had been dumb – not inaccurate but dumb.

I got Sammy to talk about his plans for the grounds and



offered to help as my studies would allow. He said that in addition to the special red petunias, he had, also, created an apple tree that produced six different varieties and promised to show me about grafting. I had humorous visions of a tree that produced, strawberries, chocolate, and ice cream. I figured I had my late evening snack pegged – maybe all that on an open buttermilk biscuit laced in strawberry juice.

At dinner, I asked Uncle what he really knew about Wendell Best – our mutual relative; not much as it turned out.

“His father and I were close as children. He spent several months at Devonshire when he was about your age while his parents spent the summer in Europe. I must say I didn’t like him much – sneaky, lied, rude, undisciplined. He has never married, the way I understand it. My belief is that no woman would have him. He studied law but never practiced. In his younger years he traveled with a wild west show – a trick shot artist, again, the way I understand it. Spent some time in jail for something when he was just out of school – a teenager full of himself, I imagine. I’ve never been with him face to face as adults. Hadn’t thought about him for decades until a letter showed up a few months back. He said he was updating a family history and asked about me and your father. I filled him in the best I could.”

He just passed over the great pun – *best*. I smiled and kept my chuckles to myself.

“How did you locate my teacher, Mr. Cutter?”

“An interesting coincidence. Wendell related that he had just located a cousin that he hadn’t even known existed. Turned out he ran an educational employment service. Later, when I learned you would be coming to live here with me, I recalled about that and contacted him. All done with telegrams. Sealed and delivered in a few days. The telegraph may be man’s finest invention to date – collapses both time and distance. He later sent Cutter’s resume and such by post. Interesting how things happen sometimes.”

“Yes, it is. So, you’ve never met *Mr. Cutter*?”

“No, but Wendell said when he went to interview his newly found cousin about the family tree, this Cutter fellow dropped in and he got to spend time with him. Says he’s a fine person.”

That part of the story smelled, stunk, reeked – meeting the man who would be recommended to be my teacher months before I needed one. Apparently, it seemed reasonable to Uncle.

Everything was settling into one coherent, if terrifying, picture. Lots of quality thought had gone into the plan. I still didn't understand why I hadn't been attacked back in Carson and save all the complication involved in my move to Devonshire. Perhaps he believed he needed to go for accidental death in my case – maybe there was some sort of clause about it. Maybe he had nothing to do with my parents' deaths – the most likely of my theories.

Also, I didn't understand where Archie stood in terms of inheritance. Perhaps mental incompetence was an ace in Best's plan. My belief was that Uncle had created a trust fund that would take care of him forever – perhaps in lieu of any inheritance. I didn't feel free to ask about that. It could be, of course, that once I was out of the way, Archie might be next.

There would be no further information that evening. Uncle Chris finished, stood, and left without further comment. I was pleased and surprised that he provided as much as he did. Perhaps, he was more open about things than I had thought. I guessed I might have unfairly painted him as a crazy old coot based on very little evidence. I did wonder who was running the steel mill. I imagined Fairmont would know, but that would need to wait since he was away wooing that night.

I entered the kitchen. It was the ladies and Sammy, again.

“Pull up a chair, and tell us about your day, Master Scotty.”

That had been Gertie. I really hadn't seen a whole lot of her even though she had done quite a few things for me.

I gave her the same story I'd given Sammy on the road.

Wilma asked for my after-dinner snack order.

“Anything your heart desires, Scotty.”

“You may wish you hadn't offered that.”

Everybody smiled. I went on to describe the luscious vision I had on the ride back from town – strawberries on ice cream served on a juice-soaked biscuit. Without even blinking, she went to work. The end product – stacked high in a wide,

low, soup bowl on a base of two biscuits – was large enough for all of us to enjoy. There were playful sword fights with spoons as we staked out our territories. It was every bit as delicious as I figured it would be. I was finding that time in the kitchen after dinner was becoming my favorite time of day.

I had one question.

“When will Fairmont return?”

“You become his mother, have you?” Sammy asked with a smile and a glance toward the women.

The women snickered.

“Perhaps. It would have been the same question for any one of you, given the same situation, however.”

“Well, just let me say we are delighted to know you care about our welfare,” Gertie said. “You know, Sammy, here, has been concerned about you being out on the road alone and he saddled up to go along with Fairmont to meet you.”

Wilma would not be left out.

“Gertie would have gone, too, but her broom was broken.”

We laughed.

“And you, Wilma?” I asked hoping to put her on the spot.

“I had to stay home and churn the ice cream you were going to request. I see into the future in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“Works for me,” I said. “I do have a question about how you keep things cold – frozen, even.”

“That door leads into the ice closet – filled with a dozen blocks of ice – to keep food cool. Ice wagon comes by once a week. Always keep a supply of ice cream in there. Sammy, here, is my chief cranker.”

“Like a huge icebox you can walk into. Fascinating. Afraid my arms are still awaiting muscles. Once they arrive, I’ll volunteer – I promise.”

I washed the treat down with a glass of milk and made my leave. I hoped they were all being honest in the good feelings they seemed to be demonstrating toward me. Why couldn’t I just believe that?

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## CHAPTER TEN

### My Dance with Death

I had been thinking about it since the morning I discovered it – the chest sitting out into my room. Having given it insufficient consideration, and in light of later events, I had earlier concluded it had been the work of Best/Cutter – just Best, now, I figured. Giving it some amount of additional, more reasonable, thought, however, that didn't fit his style. In all my encounters with him, he had moved right in and tried to kill me. Me, laying there helpless in my bed would have been the easiest opportunity of all.

Thinking back on everything, it seemed far more reasonable that it had been Archie, just coming to get his first, innocent, close-up glance at me. Best was too careful a man to have not checked the connection between the chest and the panel. Anyway, how could Best have known about the passages? It would mean Archie *did*.

Why would Archie have chosen to do that? Perhaps his backwardness required him to make sure he would be safe during that first meeting. Perhaps he wondered if he needed to be jealous of me – somebody trying to move in on his territory – his territory where he didn't have to share his Uncle's attention. Like any four-year-old, he would have done whatever it took to keep himself at the front of that line. Perhaps his long look convinced him I was harmless – he talked about how tiny I was. He made no effort to harm me or even touch me so far as I could tell.

It was possible, however, that both things could be at work – two bad guys, each wanting me out of the picture for different reasons. Archie had to remain a possibility even though nothing since then indicated any evil intent on his part – well, there were questions surrounding the elevator!

One possibility I had not let myself consider had to do with Fairmont living right below me with easy access to my room through the passage in the wall we shared. I had found no motive. He did have a mysterious background, however. I would continue to focus on Best.

I had no proof to present of any of Best's misdeeds – no witnesses and no physical evidence. I needed to figure a way of obtaining some. That was, itself, the only upside of such an operation – obtain proof. The downside was that I would necessarily be putting myself in danger again – but, planned right, within sight of others, would raise that danger to safer. In other words, set him up to expose him as the evil doer. I followed that. Perhaps nobody else would. It needed further thought.

I wasn't ready to go to sleep so sat up reading late into the night. Only when the rapping on my door caught my attention did I realize *how* late – almost midnight. My heart jumped up into my throat – a physiological impossibility but an apt description of the experience. My heart went from a walk to full out gallop in one second. A racing filly with that capacity would have no peers on the track.

“Yes. Who's there, please.”

“Fairmont. Just got back. Saw your light.”

I opened the door feeling the need to explain why I had it locked.

“Still a little unsettled about my new surroundings.”

“Reasonable. I can understand that. I have some news. Just after I left you and Sammy this afternoon, I came upon a man in a buggy. We introduced ourselves. Turned out it was Mr. Cutter, your teacher. He said he was on his way out here to advise Mr. V that he had arrived and was ready to begin on Monday. Since he had informed *me*, he saw no reason to continue so turned back to town. I was in a hurry so rode on ahead of him. I will be interested in your impression of the man.”

“That is a curious statement. Makes me think he is in

some way out of the ordinary.”

“Does that mind of yours ever just accept anything for what it is without suspecting nefarious baggage?”

“Nefarious. A good word. More the intrigue-laden when delivered through the English . . . tongue.”

“You can call it my ‘accent’. I just put on a huff about it with the others for the grand sport of it.”

We broke smiles. Him sharing, that way, made me feel closer to him. I put my finger against my lips as if to promise I’d never tell. I figured we had a bond. He patted me on my back. Other than our initial handshake, he had never touched me. I was used for the man in my life to offer lots of physical contact – pats, like that, his arm around my shoulder, hugs when we met or parted, holding my hand when we were walking together, even an occasional headlock and scalp knuckling. I missed those things so much. Most of all, I suppose, I missed the gentle kiss to my forehead when one of my parents tucked me in at night. It was like sealing a cloak that would keep me safe until morning.

I wanted to ask about his evening, but that seemed like it should stay his private business – just what sort of business, I had no idea nor was I really interested in more than a scholarly way.

He said goodnight and left. I closed and relocked the door – an understandable thing to do according to Fairmont.

What he had related about Best caused me to wonder – proving Fairmont’s contention of my basic wariness about things. Why had Best taken off east on Main the day before if his intention was to ride west? It was a behavior designed to mislead. To have the need to mislead, one either had a con in mind or had to believe somebody was onto him for some actual misdeed and he needed to sow doubt about it. Who might he be suspecting? Certainly not Jasper, and he didn’t know about my suspicions of him. Odd! That seemed to leave the con.

Perhaps he had decided to leave the accidental death aspect and go right for murder. In that case, he’d need an alibi that put him someplace other than the crime scene. Meeting Fairmont on the road probably ruined that – a good thing for me *that* day. Tomorrow, however, had just arrived. Quite frightening. Clearly, the outside doors there at the mansion

were not locked at night. Like I said, quite frightening.

I made a decision; I would take the thickest blanket from my chest of drawers, grab a pillow, and move for the rest of the night into my spare room. Before closing the door to my room, I turned off the gas lights. I plucked a long hair from my head and caught it up high between the edge of the door and the frame. A character named James had done that in a book I'd read. I would see if it *also* worked for me.

In the spare room, I rearranged boxes and crates and made a hidden cave in which I could stretch out and sleep. I folded the blanket into a thick mattress. It wasn't half bad. It reminded me of the blanket caves Tommy and I made when we were little. Since I was immediately asleep, I must have felt safe there.

At seven-thirty the following morning, I returned to my room. The hair lay on the floor. It seemed I had made a good decision. I pushed the door open slowly and peeked inside. Empty. However, the door to my closet was not closed all the way. There was soot on the inside of my lantern chimney – somebody had turned the flame up too high – probably trying to light the whole room with it. The only time I did that was when I needed to cover up damage to my black, leather, shoes – the soot was a natural wonder when it came to staining open scars on leather. Somebody had come calling. I might have just missed another dance with death.

I washed up, changed clothes, and combed my hair. I and my forced smile were downstairs early. Wilma said my Uncle was not feeling well so would not be eating in the dining room that day. I was somewhat ashamed that I would rather eat in the kitchen with the help, anyway. It wasn't that I didn't like him. Perhaps I'd feel differently once he and I got some substantial conversation underway, or we got one session of his word game under our belts. It was mostly the same food – different atmosphere.

I tried not to let my growing fright show. I figured I was doing a pretty good job – smiles, jokes, very little shaking when I moved the fork toward my mouth.

"What's wrong this morning?" Gertie asked.

So much for *that* call. I'd give a cover-up my best try.

"Didn't get to sleep until late. Slept poorly after that."



Nobody questioned it. Nobody necessarily believed it. Fairmont may have also sensed that and came to my rescue.

“He was still up when I got back last night around midnight. We had a short chat.”

We caught each other’s gaze and I nodded ever so slightly. He seemed to understand. That gave me strength to elaborate on my private fantasy that there had been an intruder.

“A couple of times, I thought I heard somebody walking around out in the hall. Maybe my Uncle if he was feeling poorly.”

That had been more of a come-on for their comments.

“Come to think of it, I’m sure I heard the back door open and close – more than once – in the early hours of the morning,” Sammy said.

It didn’t go further than that. They might have bought my idea it had been uncle. At any rate, nobody seemed bothered by it.

Fairmont had one final comment. It was directed at me.

“Sometimes Archie roams about at night. Something about darkness he seems to enjoy.”

Nobody responded. Again, a bit of common knowledge that required none.

“What do you have on *your* agenda today, Master Scotty?” Wilma asked.

I couldn’t determine if it were a sincere inquiry or if she was just moving the conversation on from the night walker.

“Several options, I guess. Got started on an interesting book last evening. I’ll probably finish that. There are some other possibilities.”

“You can come with me up to the cave,” Sammy offered. “I’m going to collect a barrel of bat dung – a great fertilizer for roses. It’s the time of year to stir up the soil for them and add fertilizer for the summer. Already seeing new shoots.”

I nodded. Before I could offer a real response, Wilma broke in.

“Now, Sammy, that’s not fit conversation for mealtime. Bat dung! I declare!”

We men exchanged glances and smiled among ourselves. Neither woman joined us. It was little things like that that were helping me feel like I belonged – accepted as one of the guys. Who’d have thought that bond would have been

sealed with bat dung?

“Did you know it rained last night?” Fairmont asked trying to refocus the already disjointed conversation.

“I heard it,” Sammy said. “The grass needed it. Hope it was more than a trace.”

I finished breakfast with a piece of pie – one of the really good perks of being at Devonshire with Wilma as the cook. They were always perfectly portioned for the room left in a nine-year-old’s stomach.

I scooted the other men out and began clearing the table. Gertie always hummed while we did that. I tried to join in. As duets went, that one shouldn’t have been. We laughed out loud. It was an easy thing between us.

Breakfast had been a nice time with nice people, and yet something was wrong. It was like it shouldn’t be that good. Ah ha. At last! *That* may have been it. I didn’t think it was proper to replace my family with a new family – the opposite, of course, from what my parents would have wanted – hoped for, even. I felt a sense of relief. Still, it would probably take some time for that take on things to feel legitimate. I’d check my feelings about it later.

Parts of the breakfast conversation had given me an idea. I went outside and did a slow trot toward the bottom of the lane where it joined the road, my eyes peeled for what I believed had to be. The dirt in the lane was less hard packed than that of the road. The rain had softened it. I knew what I was looking for and by gollywonkers, I found it – buggy wheel marks at the bottom of the lane. Closer examination revealed one very distinctive wheel mark. The joint where the two edges of the outside metal strip joined bulged and left a deep mark – a ridge that left a depression in the dirt.

My hope had been to just find buggy tracks. The fact one of them had a unique feature was an added extra. My suspicion was obvious, of course. No buggy had come or gone from Devonshire the night before. There was no reason for a buggy to have pulled up into the grass down there at *any* time. Who did I know who had a buggy? One plus one equaled *Best*.

That soon grew out of control and a frightening scenario was born. *Best* had been there the night before, entered my room, and walked the hall perhaps in search of me. He must

have been furious to have gone to all that effort and missed me. It might have suggested to him that I was intentionally hiding from him. He had no reason to suspect I knew that it was he, specifically, who was the bad guy, so I would have just been hiding from *somebody*.

If I could tie that impression in the dirt to Best's buggy, I'd at least be able to prove he'd been at Devonshire during that night – to my satisfaction if nobody else's. I figured he'd have trouble explaining that – taking a buggy ride to Devonshire during a rainstorm at two o'clock in the morning of the night somebody, not of the household, entered my room, used my lantern and searched my closet. How could I preserve that track as proof?

How about a mixture of molasses and sawdust? Mother had used it in art projects – plaques and such; baking hardened it so it could be sanded, worked with a chisel, and such. I went directly to the stable. I borrowed a bucket and scooped two inches of sawdust into the bottom. Ebb used it to cover the walkway between stalls. Then, I added enough molasses to make a thick, almost dry, paste, just the way Mother had. Ebb used molasses to mix with oats as a treat for the horses.

On my way back down the lane, I mixed them together with a thick stick. Whether through luck or intellectual prowess, the mixture was perfect in texture. It was much thicker than a liquid and was easily packed into the depression left by the buggy wheel – maybe a bit wetter than Mother's. I had enough to make impressions at two places just off the road where he had exited it to leave the horse and buggy while he made his way to the mansion. He had parked just up onto the grass. Ah! An added extra for sure – the impression of a boot – deep, where he had probably first stepped down from his rig with all his weight. With what mixture I had left, I made one final impression. There were distinctive markings on the bottom of the heel. The coarseness of my mixture might not pick them up.

I collected some sticks and forced them into the ground around each site hoping that would keep people from walking or riding across my work. I'd check back later in the day once the material had time to bake in the sun. I hoped it worked. Even if it didn't bake hard, I believed it would make the record.

I needed to return to town and examine his buggy

wheels – right rear to be exact. Three days in a row; I wondered if that would be suspicious. I felt some urgency about it and would give it my best effort. I washed out the bucket in the stable and returned to the house, tracking down Fairmont halfway up a stepladder in the living room where he was helping Gertie rehang curtains she had just washed and ironed.

‘Trustworthy Boy’ was about to formulate another lie.

“My new friend Jasper in town at the livery, has the day off and invited me to go fishing with him. I imagine once school starts, I may not have many opportunities – between my studies and his job and attendance at school. Okay if I go in again so soon?”

“I don’t see why not. I had thought maybe we could move more of your things from the spare room into your room, this afternoon. No hurry about that, of course.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. I already have most of what I want in there. Maybe the storeroom needs to continue being my storeroom.”

“That’s fine. Or maybe we could arrange the extra things in there and give you a second room – like a den.”

“Hey. That could be great. Can we talk about it when I get back?”

“Fine. Gertie has me by my ears right here for the rest of the morning. When you get back, then. If you need a fishing pole, Sammy has several. I’m sure he’d be pleased to lend you one.”

“Jasper said he’d take care of that.”

My! Once I began constructing lies, they tripped off my tongue as if I were reciting a Shakespearian sonnet. The Reverend had warned about how that worked – the next one is always easier than one before it. I hated to think he was right about anything.

I was eager to get to town so abandoned my sortie into the recent sins of my life. My mission had a specific goal – examine that wheel. If his buggy was gone, and I couldn’t examine it, I wasn’t sure how I would spend my day. I was quite sure it was not Jasper’s day off; I doubted if he *got* a day off. Periodically, I pushed Wadsworth a bit faster than on previous rides. He seemed to enjoy it. We navigated the stretch in an hour. Wadsworth was ready for a long drink. I joined him – well,

not from the trough.

Humorously, I thought, I followed Wadsworth to his new favorite place in his world. Jasper seemed happy to see me, although he reached out for the horse, first. I had to wonder why a guy like him didn't seem to have friends his own age. I hadn't asked. He was nice, he was fun, he was smart, he wore the kind of tan a blondie like me could never wish for. I couldn't understand it.

"If you don't already, you will soon think I'm the oddest guy you know – asking you to help me and never able to give you reasons."

Jasper shrugged.

"No problem. We all got our stuff, you know."

I really didn't, but I smiled and nodded. He may have become the most comfortable of all my new people.

"Is Mr. Cutter's buggy here?"

"No, he must have left out of here early – hitched his rig himself, before I was awake – I sleep in a little room at the rear of the loft. Have no idea which direction. He left a note saying he'd be back by noon and wanted to go ahead and have me paint his rig. Thanks for that. I will get to it later in the week. That will make my boss happy – a few extra bucks in the coffers – all due to you, really. Some of it will probably come my way. Can I ask why you asked about the buggy?"

"I need to get a look at his wheels – right rear to be specific."

"Like I say, he'll be back around noon. I imagine the right rear is a lot like the other three."

"I believe it has a hump where the ends of the metal strip are fastened together."

"That's called a *flat steel tyre*. Sometimes the thickness of that strip varies, and one side may be higher than the other back where they meet. His rig probably left tracks in the damp dirt when he left earlier. We got a soaker last night. Let's look."

I followed and let his eyes do the work. He soon had the tracks sorted out.

"There. It's just like you said. Good eyes, Scotty! That leaves a pretty distinctive print, doesn't it?"

"Just like I figured. I'm sorry I have to be so secretive about things, but it's pretty serious. Once it's all resolved, I'll

share everything with you.”

“Like I said. It’s your stuff. I feel no problem about it. Hope you’re okay – safe and all.”

I didn’t want to lie to him so went with, “It’ll all work out.”

“What else you up to today, Scotty?”

“Don’t really have a plan. Didn’t know how long it would take about the buggy wheel. I hear there’s a little cave back west close to home. I may go explore it.”

“Probably *Great Spirit Cavern*; some folks call it *Crenshaw Cavern*. It’s on the Devonshire Estate. Nice people there. Better be careful. Don’t go in too deep. Lots of bats. Cover up, crouching on your knees if they come after you.”

“Thanks for the advice.”

“I haven’t ett yet. I can leave a note for my boss. I often do that. If any of our regulars need anything, they’ll know where I am. Want to come with me to my aunt’s restaurant, again? If you won’t eat, at least we can talk.”

“Sounds good to me. She makes really, really, good hot chocolate.”

He scribbled a note and stuck it over a nail on the door – apparently the, ‘note nail’.

I figured if we were closer in age, we’d have made a race out of it. He wouldn’t take advantage of me that way.

He stopped as we neared the restaurant. He seemed uncomfortable about several of the horses tied out front. I didn’t ask. It had become our way – don’t intrude on each other’s private lives.

“We’ll need to go in the side door – some of *my* stuff, okay?”

I shrugged and smiled to myself. Between us, shrugging was becoming a part of speech. I loved that.

Inside, we took the same table as before. He asked to sit where I had sat – with his back to the others in the front of the room. Apparently, that had not done what he hoped it would, and I soon understood several things.

Three teen boys stood up from their table and gave out with war-whoops – palms to their open mouths – supposedly like Indian Warriors did. It went on too long. I had noted that teen boys often didn’t know when to stop. Suddenly, several things clicked into place. Jasper’s beautiful tan – it came with

his heritage. His features were not necessarily Indian. It made me think he might be of mixed parentage. Clearly, the goings on made my new friend uncomfortable. I understood why. Indians were frequently the subject of ridicule. He cowered in his chair.

My father had often said the best way to fight dumb was with dumb. I whispered across the table.

“Suppose you could whomp up one regulation, type, war dance?”

“What?”

“Give them what they want, and they’ll no longer have any hold over you. I’m going to give it a go on top of this table. You can leave, of course.”

His look of puzzlement turned to a look of PUZZLEMENT.

I slipped out of my shoes and shed my stockings under the table. I opened my shirt revealing the most pathetic chest in the county. I jumped up on the table and began my best impression of an Indian dance. I’d seen it in a sideshow and had entertained my friends with it on more than one occasion. *They* bought it as genuine.

I put my feet in motion and whooped in my best Indian dialect. I certainly got the diners’ attention. They turned in their chairs to watch – at first stunned – later fascinated it seemed. There were lots of smiles. It shut down the teens.

I could feel the breath from Jasper’s long, deep sigh on my feet. He removed his pull over shirt with one smooth motion, slipped out of his boots and began his show – and my, was it a show. Bent at the waist, knees alternately brought high, turn to the left, turn to the right, stand erect with arms raised toward the sky. He chanted in a monotone – some Indian language, I assumed. It was the fanciest foot work I had ever seen, and back home, footwork got pretty darn fancy at the Grange dances Saturday nights.

Several little children left their seats and joined in. Turned out they were pretty good. Like them, I began patterning my moves after Jasper’s. At the conclusion, he prostrated himself before getting up. By ones and twos and fours, the patrons stood and applauded. The teens slumped into their seats. I figured dumb had just beaten dumb.

The ovation went on for several moments before Jasper turned and took his seat. He pulled on his shirt. I followed his lead. His aunt delivered the food and we tried to return to normal. We couldn't of course. Why our cheeks didn't split apart only the Great Spirit knew.

As patrons left, many of them stopped by our table and offered a hand for a shake with words of praise. My tears met his tears. The people had no way of understanding.

Presently, we stood to leave. His aunt came to me and offered a rib-busting hug.

"You are a God send, my boy. A God send."

I was sure the Reverend Bassett would contest that.

She moved on to Jasper. Their embrace was clearly more meaningful than the one I had received. I lay the dime for my hot chocolate and toast on the table. She picked it up and slipped it into my shirt pocket.

"Never again. Any meal, any time, on Aunt Sally. Always. You hear me?"

I nodded and shrugged, figuring it would be legitimate for a close relative to be privy to a couple of guys' private grammar.

I chuckled to myself about that. I wondered if ever before anybody had suggested that a shrug could be used as a part of speech.

As we crossed Main, heading for the Livery, we saw the teen boys standing back against the hardware store watching us.

"You think they'll give you trouble?" I asked.

"I doubt it. I think I'll start carrying my tomahawk and string something that looks like a scalp through my belt."

He was getting the idea.

We laughed ourselves on our way. Jasper became serious once we hit the privacy of the alley. He stopped and reached out putting his hands on my shoulders, turning me so we were facing.

"I don't have words in either language that are good enough to thank you. You *are* crazy, you know."

Before I could concur with that, he pulled me close into a long guy to guy hug. I just let it continue, understanding how important it must have been to him.



Back at the Livery, his boss met us with a big smile.  
“The talk of the town, returning home, I see.”

Neither of us understood. Our faces must have indicated as much.

“Word has it that you two shook up some long-standing biases held in this community. I have one word for you. Don’t expect all things to change at once, Jasper. At this point in your life, knowing you have helped ease things and point them in a new direction should give you great satisfaction – built a base for the town to grow from. I’m sure you will gradually find some degree of acceptance – inclusion even, perhaps that you have not been given in the past. From some quarters that will never come, son. The most insecure will always fear those they believe are different from them – in the minds of the less informed, different often means threatening.”

I thought that had been sage advice. It wasn’t my place to say anything and even though that had seldom muzzled me in the past, it did that time. Imagine that! I felt grown-up enough to turn ten.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### Oh, Oh!

Since I no longer needed to stick around to examine the buggy, I headed for home – thoughts of that cave still active in my head. Sammy had mentioned it. He might in fact be there. Jasper had given me some cautions about it. I loved caves. Father and I had visited several. As I remembered, the temperature deep inside caves stayed around 54 degrees year ‘round. That should be a nice relief from the early spring heat wave. Earlier, I had seen it on a map of the area – *Crenshaw Cavern*, like Jasper had said. It was just on the downside slope beyond the ridge at the rear of Uncle Chris’s property – beyond the water tower. Its mouth was on Uncle’s property. If Wadsworth and I left the road and headed south west, I could save fifteen minutes and come up behind the ridge at the rear of Devonshire.

I could get in an hour of exploring before heading back to Devonshire for lunch. As I neared the cave, the sky suddenly grew dark. I urged Wadsworth into a gallop and found shelter under the huge opening just as the rain set in. There was no sign of Sammy.

As I dismounted, I found myself at a point where the cool moving out of the cave met the hot humidity of the world. I twirled around to explore the feeling further. So much for that; I got dizzy and lit on my posterior – the opposite, I assumed from my preterior. My friends back home had no idea what they were missing – preterior! Hilarious!

There were lanterns rowed up against the wall some five

yards inside the opening. The mouth of the cave was large – probably twenty feet tall and twelve feet wide. During the first twenty yards, it worked itself down to a shaft that was ten high by eight wide. That continued to narrow.

I combined the kerosene from several lanterns to make one completely full. I checked for matches – I had a small box – hefted my backpack and slipped the straps in place over my shoulders. The canteen completed my gear.

I told the horse what I was up to and left him there in the shelter from the rain. Who knew what a good horse understood? Wadsworth liked being talked to, eye to eye while I scratched him behind his ears. What went through his head, I had no idea. He nodded a lot – of course, so did I when adults were discussing things in my presence that I didn't really understand.

Here I go again. If pennies had pictures of Wadsworth on them would we call them 'horse cents'? I should write this stuff down! Oh! I am!

The entry shaft remained generally consistent in height and width at about eight by eight, although it worked its way through several more expansive rooms, the first one with a pond, the second with a variety of little mesa like structures. I took time to explore both of them. The color was mostly drab, whitish/tannish stone color. The caves I had been in sported lots of colors. Maybe that would improve as I went deeper. It was sandstone rather than limestone which probably accounted for the paucity of stalactites and stalagmites – maybe the colors as well. That would be the topic for a science research paper once classes took up.

Early on, the floor was dry. As I continued, it became damp in some places. I came upon a large room with a flat floor. About a billion bats fluttered down from the ceiling and swooped over my head on their way to the entrance. I immediately assumed Jasper's suggested safe position. The flight seemed to go on forever. How they did that without hitting each other I couldn't figure – a mystery of nature. I was sorry I had disturbed them – probably the light. I assumed they would return once they encountered the rain. Like Sammy said, the floor was a foot deep in bat dung. The smell was terrible. I was amazed something that foul smelling could help produce the

beautiful aroma of roses. I moved on quickly.

I came to a split in the tunnel. I read once in a story that the smart cave explorer decided right from the beginning to always take the same leg when it split – right or left. Then, on his return trip, he'd be able to simply retrace his path and not get lost. I opted to always go to my right.

That shaft was some smaller in all dimensions. So far, there was nothing of real interest. I'd give it a few more minutes and if things didn't improve, I'd turn around and leave. The tunnel split several more times – each time I veered right. Each time I considered turning around. Each time I was pulled on ahead by the possibility something wonderful might be just around the bend. That was pretty much how I had lived my life, I suppose. Father had encouraged it. Mother provided caution.

Suddenly, there was the sound of falling rock some distance behind me. Not a good thing even though there had been nothing remarkable about it. Still, I figured I should go back and check it out.

As I rounded a bend – or was about to – I detected light some distance in front of me. One thing was certain – unless Wadsworth had learned how to light lanterns, it had to have been man made. Somebody was back there. I blew out my lantern and crept forward, hands on the wall for guidance and stability, to see what I could see. As 'sees' went, that one was not a good 'see' – it was Best, a lantern turned up high in one hand and a rifle in the other. Why did I keep believing him about where he said he was going? A portion of the ceiling had given way causing a pile of rock. From where I was crouching, I couldn't tell if it blocked the tunnel. From Best's unconcerned response, I figured it hadn't.

Even if it were still passable, it was a cinch I could not just tip my hat and pass him on my way to the entrance. It was another cinch that I dared not confront him. 'Hello Mr. Best or Cutter or whichever name you prefer. I am Scotty Atherton, the boy you have been trying to kill. Shall we *one-potato* or *eenie-meenie* to see who gets the upper hand here?'

No, that certainly wasn't going to work. What were my alternatives? A big black bear might work well – satisfy his appetite on the one of us closest to the opening. Best was hands down a plumper and more appetizing specimen than I.

How did he know the path I was taking? Maybe he had been close enough all along to watch. I hadn't thought to listen for anybody else in there. Maybe he caught on to the always right thing. Maybe I needed to change that up – take the next left instead – and risk getting lost?

My stomach grew tight and my heartbeat increased.

Perhaps, finding a hiding place and letting him pass was my best option. I had not come across hiding places since that second large room with the little mesas. Of course, I had not been looking for them.

It was clear, I needed to keep my lantern off. It was clear I had to have the light from my lantern to proceed – it was the darkest dark I had ever experienced. Part of the solution to my situation might be to hurry along at a much faster pace than he was – that and a few turns to the left. Dangerous idea.

I turned the wick down to a nib and lit it. I faced away from Best to contain the burst of light from the match. The lantern provided little more than a soft glow. I kept it low to the floor where it cast just enough light for me to find my next step. I picked up my pace and moved on waiting for the next split. I couldn't really trot, but I put on a fast walk.

Presently, I came to a spot where the main shaft ended. There was an offshoot to my left – it wasn't a true split, just another tunnel opening entering at a ninety-degree angle into the one where I found myself. Its floor was raised a good foot from that of the main shaft I'd been following. I rolled a large stone – about ten inches in diameter – so it sat at the base of the wall where the new tunnel began. My marker for the return trip even though it probably wouldn't be needed – the difference in height would be obvious. Of course, when I returned, that *entrance* would be my *exit*. Interesting; name depended on function – another essay once school took up.

I entered. It was considerably smaller. There was a rush of air at my back. From stories I'd read, that often signaled air moving toward an opening – an exit. The floor was strewn with little stones, which slowed me some. I was glad I wasn't barefooted.

With the breeze at my back, I grew chilly.

After another twenty yards I had to crouch to continue. It soon became decision time: I would have to continue on my

belly. I could always back out, so I figured it didn't increase the danger. The air continued to pass by with increased vigor as the tunnel decreased in dimensions.

A positive development might be that the opening had become so small that although I could continue, Best's man-sized body could not. The downside to that was that if the passage ended beyond the tiny opening, he could just sit there and let me starve to death or die from dehydration.

I took stock of my options. At that point, I didn't dare back out and return to the main tunnel because with me slowed by moving along on my belly, he would have had time to catch up. I pursued my only alternative – press on. The tunnel kept its size for five yards, then, gradually began enlarging a bit ceiling to floor. Presently, it became high enough that I could crawl again, and several minutes after that, it became even higher and wider. I turned around facing that tiny opening. An idea. I could fill that smallest section of the shaft with rocks. He might think it was the end of the tunnel.

I took several, precious minutes to do that – tossing them from a distance to form a pile that filled it. He was already stopped, but it might cause him to wonder if, maybe, I hadn't come that way – confuse him into thinking he had missed something. If he took time to remove the stones, it would keep him there and busy for some time. I wasn't sure how that might be of help.

I had been pushing my backpack ahead of me. At that point I could carry it on my back again. I took time for a long swig from my canteen and proceeded. Within another ten yards, it was high enough for me to stand up straight. Once again, I could move along with dispatch.

I shook the lantern to see how I was doing on kerosene. It was good for a while, yet. I turned up the flame just a bit. The tunnel took a slight uphill slant – not severe but noticeable. It was unnerving not knowing where he was. I stopped to listen. The constant, if gentle, sound from the air rushing by made it difficult to figure if there were other sounds. There was something rhythmical happening – the echo from the movement of his feet I wanted to think. It might have been nothing more than echoes in my mind.

I walked on. I felt safer, since he could no longer

approach me from behind or see my light – the way I had blocked the tunnel. I was able to make better time. I lost much of my lead by having to move along on my belly, but at that point, a lead no longer seemed important.

Suddenly, I heard splashing water above the rush of the air. Also, ahead of me, the dark of the cave was giving way to faint light. That all seemed like good news. Light had to indicate a connection with the outdoors – that exit the breeze was seeking. The air suddenly felt heavy and humid. My inclination was to run toward it. My head convinced me that was a terrible idea. Caution, Scotty. Caution. If I had a penny for every time I'd heard *that* voice, I would have . . . well, surely consumed a good deal more stick candy than I had.

Father had cautioned me to always listen to that voice – he called it my better judgement. He, also, suggested that come my teen years I would find it easy to disobey it. If that was part of God's plan for the preservation of the males of the species, I figured He needed to go back to the drawing board. Later, I would make a point to pass on that suggestion to Him.

At that moment, I needed to make some good decisions. It soon brightened considerably. I blew out the lantern and walked to the edge of a pond that consumed the floor of the tunnel from side to side. It was five yards long. There would be no getting past it with dry clothes. It was fed by splashes from a waterfall raining down just ahead, just outside. It caught the rays of the sun and sprinkled the tumbling water with random bursts of the colors of the rainbow.

I could not determine the depth of the pond, its surface rippled from the falling water at the front. The waterfall, itself, blocked the opening – side to side and top to bottom. I felt sure, I had come to the back side of the hill and that the waterfall might be a hundred or so feet above the valley floor. It must have presented one beautiful site – looking up from down below.

It seemed to be my only way out. It seemed to be the very thing that was going to block my escape. I figured I could swim across the pond to the falls. From there I had no way of predicting what I might find. Well, there probably was one thing. Since water remained in the pond, there must be some sort of natural barrier at the falls that kept it in place – a low, natural



rock, wall. I probably wouldn't be swept over the side of the hill into the falls. A pretty important 'probably' there.

I made a decision; I would shed my pack and canteen and leave them on the floor. I would fasten one end of my rope to my belt and secure the other around a boulder sitting beside the pond. I would enter the water and, letting the rope out slowly, I'd back myself to the front edge of the pond, where I could get a better perspective on my situation.

My, that water was cold. I m e a n C O L D!

Convinced it was my only alternative, I stuck it out and made my way across the pond to the rim of rock that contained the water – just the way I had figured – a sturdy, low, irregular, ridge of sandstone. Stretching myself into an upright position, my feet could not touch the bottom. I was not inclined to put my head below the surface of that cold water in a further attempt to discover the depth. As long as I remained on top, it made absolutely no difference how deep it was. I wondered if a person could get frost bite from being in cold water too long.

Supporting myself with my hands on that wall, I could make things out through the waterfall – not clearly, but enough to understand I was at the edge of a rock outcropping high up the side of a hill. The water splashed its way down the rocky slope to the valley floor. In a general way, I could see the blue of the sky and the green of the valley. A stream ran through it partly fed by the water from the falls. It was bright outside and had stopped raining.

I moved as far to what I figured was the west as I could – my right as I faced the falls. There was a mostly dry opening between the outside rock wall and the over-shoot of the waterfall. A veritable gale exited through it. It provided an opening that was eighteen inches wide at the base and sloped back meeting the wall three feet above that – my escape triangle. Beyond it was a ledge perhaps two feet wide running west. It curved in around the hillside, so I couldn't see about it further than five yards.

Again, I figured I could return if it stopped. I swam back to where my things were. Freeing the rope and recoiling it, I put it back inside my backpack. Placing the canteen strap around my neck and held my backpack balanced on my head, I carefully returned across the pond to the waterfall. I set the

backpack out onto the ledge and pushed it as far away as I could – making room for me to climb out of the pool. Carefully, I stood up on the ledge, my right hand against the rock wall and balancing with my left. What was it about me finding myself shivering in wet clothes?

Once I felt confident about my balance, I grasped the backpack and held it against my chest as I began to ease my way along. My feet squished inside my shoes and my clothes dripped. I felt five pounds heavier. I made the mistake of looking down. How many times had I read the admonition about not doing that?

I stopped and leaned right, against the rock wall, as if that would change the pull of gravity or stop the touch of vertigo that had overtaken me. After a moment, I proceeded carefully following the ledge around the curve. At that point, the terrain changed considerably. The sheer face of stone stopped abruptly and was replaced by a grassy hillside laid back at a fairly steep, 45-degree angle toward the ridge. Below me, the rock cliff worked itself down into that valley coming to rest alongside the creek. At last, safety looked to be within reach – just up and over the hill. Uncle's property should be close-by – a little to the east, most likely.

Moving from the ledge to the grassy slope above me was going to be tricky. I slipped into my backpack. I studied the situation below me. It presented a steep, rocky, slope that would allow me to hunt and peck my way among the boulders and outcroppings down to the valley if that seemed the best bet. I would be miles from Devonshire down there. At some point I'd still have to climb a hill to get home.

I refocused my attention up the hill. I figured if I lay over against the hillside, I could grasp the long grass and carefully pull myself up to where the angle flattened out. Success would depend upon the roots spreading wide and deep. I had no way of knowing how deep the soil was or how stable – tight – the grass would be. I only needed to move several yards to be able to hunch up and begin crawling. Finally, being a scrawny, seventy pound, nine-year-old might pay off.

I understood if those measures failed, I could slip back and tumble a hundred feet across the rocky face below me.

I moved ahead along the ledge another five yards to a

spot that offered less of an angle and, therefore, a better likelihood for success – there was a foothold to get me started.

Things were looking good.

As I prepared to lay myself stomach down on the grass, a man appeared at the top of the hill. He was too far away to identify but, foolishly, in my state of helplessness, I began calling out and waving my hands. My initial belief was that one of my new people had come looking for me. That was ill-taken, of course. They didn't know when to expect me and they had no way of knowing I would come to explore the cave.

My time to think that through evaporated in an instant as I watched the man raise his rifle and aim it in my direction. It was BEST! I sank to my belly and flattened myself against the ledge on which I'd been walking. I scooted backwards hoping to hide back around the bend before he could get a shot off. As I recalled, Best was a professional marksman.

I didn't make it. He missed me, although the bullet chipped the rock nearby, and it flew deep into my left arm. There was significant blood flow. I butt scooted back along the ledge out of the man's sight and pulled the chip from my flesh – not a pleasant experience. I had once asked Mother why clothes makers made the tails on boy's shirts so inconveniently long. She had no good answer for me. During those past several days, I thought I had discovered it.

Once again, I tore a wide strip of cloth from that tail and wrapped it tightly around my arm. It seemed to work. The blood flow stopped, but pain and weakness set in immediately.

Back on my stomach, I inched forward until I could see what he was doing. I had to raise up considerably to get him in sight. If I couldn't see him when I was prone on the ledge, it followed that he couldn't see me either. I crawled forward to where I had easy access to the rocky face of the cliff below me – that would need to be my escape route. He fired again, so much for not being able to see me. Maybe he was taking educated guesses. If so, they were pretty good. I managed myself, feet first, over the side of the ledge onto the rocky slope and slid many feet before stopping. I rolled myself toward the waterfall and hopefully out of his sight behind the hill. There were several more shots; I noted it took him fifteen seconds to reload.

He clearly had knowledge of the cave and where I would exit. He had been careful in his planning every step of the way – knowledge of the passageways in the mansion, the elevator, the gas lights, the well, and the water tower and now the cave. Since he could have had no foreknowledge that I would be at any of those places, he had to have accurate knowledge of all of them – be able to improvise on the spot. Also, he had clearly kept closer to me than I had realized – less fright, more danger.

I had wondered why I hadn't been able to hear him coming after me inside the cave. Any noise echoed on forever. He had left once he saw where I was headed and circled up over the hill to meet me.

I seemed to have but one useful alternative – continue down the cliff to the valley. So long as he was up there above me with his rifle, I couldn't get back up onto the ledge and return to the cave. There were few hiding places on that slope – move from boulder to boulder – often five or more yards apart. For him it was like shooting ducks in a pond, or more aptly, boy on a boulder laden hill.

Periodic shots continued. He knew where I was because his shots came closer and closer. If he backed up – moved west across the ridge another ten yards – the angle would change enough that I would be in his clear view with no place to hide.

Father had not provided me with a solution to a problem such as that.

He began backing up – west. From where I was, there was no place to shelter within twenty yards – a sitting duck if I tried to move to it. A sitting duck if I didn't.

I sank to my knees, and sat back, defeated, understanding my time might soon be coming to an end. There were tears. I supposed souls reached the same place whether killed by highwaymen on a country road or by a clearly deranged distant relative on the side of an unfriendly hill. I wondered if dying hurt.

I wasn't about to just give up. Still on my stomach, I prepared to make that dash to the bolder. Before moving out, I turned my head to get one last look at the evil being. *That* called for a second look. It called for me to raise to my knees. There he was – Wadsworth, galloping across the ridge toward Best, his mane and tail streaming in the wind. Someone was chasing

him. I couldn't identify who it was.

Without slowing as much as one iota, the big horse butted Best in the small of his back. His rifle went off and flew from his hands as he tumbled down the hillside, bouncing off the rock ledge like a rag doll and rolling to a stop on the rocks ten yards below me.

I hurried to him. Wadsworth's companion arrived moments later. It was Jasper. Presently, 'my' men arrived.

"He's still alive," I announced after looking here and feeling there. "His name is Wendell Best, alias Daniel Cutter. He has been trying to kill me ever since I arrived here – so he can inherit Uncle Chris's fortune, I assume. I will give you the details later. I guess you arrived too late to witness him shooting at me."

"I saw him get off several shots in your direction," Jasper said.

It could have been that he had. It could have been he was just supporting my contention. At the time I had no way of knowing where he had been through it all and that he had in fact been a witness.

Archie appeared from a lightly wooded area above the waterfall. He was upset.

"Man shoot at my Scotty. Man bad."

He was crying and ready to do battle with Best. Ebb and Fairmont held him back and did what they could to calm him.

"I'm fine, Archie. He didn't hurt me. It will be okay."

My words seemed to satisfy him. He relaxed against the restraint from the men.

It would come out that he had been picking berries up on the hill when the obvious part of the encounter came out into the open. He had witnessed everything that had taken place on the hillside. Whether his word would be found credible by a judge I didn't know.

The men fashioned a stretcher with saplings, Sammy's shirt, the rest of mine. The men knew a relatively easy route up the hill. We moved him to the mansion and Sammy rode for the doctor. Scout was the fastest of the horses and Sammy the lightest of the men. The women attended to my wound flabbergasted at what I had been going through since arriving. I stopped crying. They didn't. It was good for milk and cookies

and, seemingly, anything else I wanted that was within a hundred miles and cost no more than a billion dollars.

Best's back was broken in four places, and he would never walk again. Of all the things that had taken place between Best and me, all I could prove was that final confrontation supported by the testimony of Jasper and Archie. Wadsworth knew, but horses had little neigh in courts of law. Understanding his situation, and being a bit of a braggart, Best told his story, confirming mine. He would stand trial for that, he'd be convicted, but realistically, he'd never serve time, confined to a bed like he would be for the rest of his life able to do little more than converse and suck sustenance through a straw.

I felt sorry for him. I suppose, I hated him just a bit, if hate came in varying amounts. Father would have nodded that he understood. Mother would have gone to church and read the Bible. How had they ever managed such a successful marriage? Mother would have tried to explain that to me. Father would have said that was always a mystery between every couple.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### End Note

I should fill in several elements of the story.

As I mentioned, Best talked, making himself sound like a hero for doing so. He had come by his knowledge of the passageways, the underground room, the water tower and the cave those months he had stayed at Devonshire when he was a boy. That cleared up many loose ends. He spent much of his time since I arrived, skulking around the Mansion, waiting for his opportunity. It was he who had cut the elevator rope – in two phases like I had surmised. That last day while he was following me out of town, he had actually lost me once I started cross-country. When he saw the bats uncharacteristically flying in the rain, he understood where I was. The time I spent exploring the two rooms early in the cave had given him time to catch up. Archie would have spoken my sentiments; “Bad Bats.”

He had chosen Devonshire as his killing ground rather than my home town because he had the advantage here – he knew the territory, it was rural, and there would not be a village full of trusted people for me to turn to.

Of historical note, the hidden room under the well had been used to hide former slaves from the south who were living as free men in the north but were being sought to be taken back to the south because they were still considered property of their former owners – forced by the simply terrible *Dred Scott decision* back in the 1850s.

Dancing boy, was, as I suspected, the son of an Indian

father and a white mother. There had been a dispute and his mother had returned to her home and his father to points unknown – having taken a white wife, he had been banished from his tribe. Jasper was alone – no mother, no father, no tribe – Indian or White.

In the end, it was Jasper who saved my bacon. Soon after I left him to come home that day, he spotted Best/Cutter driving his buggy west along Main Street and out of town at something greater than his usual, easygoing gait. He was clearly following me.

Putting several things together – my obvious fear of the man, indicating I was in a life and death struggle, the telegrams, and my recent investigation of his buggy wheel – he sensed the man's change of plans was suspicious. Jasper followed at what he figured was a safe distance, watching him leave his buggy at the big hole in the rock, take his rifle from its sheath, and enter the cave – the very cave I had indicated I might be visiting later in the morning. The horse Jasper had come to know as mine was there waiting patiently. He believed the evidence was overwhelming – Cutter was out to harm me.

Jasper knew the cave well. It had spiritual significance for his father's tribe. He also knew there was only one exit and that Cutter was too large a man to use it. He had faith in me to handle things inside. Jasper knew about the waterfall exit. He moved to the west around the hill and found a hidden spot to wait for me to emerge so he could help protect me. Wadsworth, always in the market for a handful of oats, followed his new best friend up the hill. They waited together for the time it took me to navigate completely through the cave and make my exit along the narrow ledge by the waterfall. It really hadn't taken all that long.

Late in that timeline, he saw Cutter climb the hill from the cave, approach the ridge, and sit in the grass with his rifle to wait. Jasper and Wadsworth were far enough beyond Cutter to the west that they had a good visual angle on the ledge and the rocky terrain below it. Jasper understood he was no match for a rifle but had decided if things took a turn for the worse, he would rush the man. He prepared a club.

When I appeared from around the curve, they saw me. Once Cutter began firing, and before Jasper could mount an



attack, Wadsworth took things into his own hands – well, hooves, as it were – and made a beeline for Best, apparently meeting him just in time to save my life from that last, easy shot. Wadsworth must have had a flashback to the time his former owner was shot while riding him. There would be oats in his feedbox every morning from then on – make that oats swimming in molasses. I might just give that a try, myself – the oats and molasses, not the feed box.

Speaking of molasses, the casts I'd made of the buggy track turned out beautifully, though apparently held no legal status. Wadsworth was happy to have them for snacks.

Ebb, Sammy, and Fairmont had heard the shots and came on the run from the back lawn of the mansion. The events were playing out no more than 150 yards up and over the hill from the big house. They were well beyond their years as athletes, so it took some time for them to arrive. None carried a gun. Arms were not a necessity at Devonshire.

I have written about the rest.

With the addition of my speculation about Best's role in the deaths of my parents, the investigators back home were able to make that very connection once the highwaymen were captured and began singing like canaries (speaking of phrases having been written way too often). I was greatly relieved that justice had come to him and them. I spent some moments wondering if I hadn't been born if my parents would still be alive. The logic was defective, and I would soon set that kind of guilt aside.

A new teacher was procured. Uncle employed Jasper to assist Ebb who had spoken of wanting to cut back. He lived in the room next to mine using some of my extra stuff and spare items from the vacant rooms. We attended class together there in the library. I helped him improve his reading skill and study habits. He helped me learn that killer dance of his. On special occasions, he and I – decked out as Red Tomahawk and White Feather (upgraded from Anemic Stick) – performed our routine with great vigor to appreciative applause.

Our relationship easily slipped into the roles of younger brother and older brother. He taught me about guns. It wasn't my father as I had hoped, but I soon came to learn it was the very best next thing.

What a grand life we were going to have. My goal was to someday pin him to the ground the way he regularly did me when we tussled and beat him to the water tower and back when we raced. Like Father had said, early on it was not about winning – just leaning.

The troubling relocation of Scotty Atherton was at last behind me.

I believed Father and Mother would have approved of my new life among my new family. In their own very different ways, they had each prepared me well for the future that would be mine – one demonstrating the value of care and caution, the other the value of open-minded, persistent, independence. I would depend on my big brother to fill in the parts Father had left out of that talk – put better, I would grill him relentlessly until my every question had been fully and completely satisfied.

All in all, life soon became catiflobicly wonderful!

The End