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The **Chipper** of OAKTON VILLA

By Tom Gnagey

A heartwarming story of
life's contrasts: youth with age,
happiness with despair,
tragedy with triumph.

The Chipper of Oakton Villa

A story of rebirth and hope

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Published by The Family of Man Press

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CHAPTER ONE

The Storm

Chip peddled hard. He had never felt so alone or so frightened in all of his twelve turbulent years of life. The black of night and swirling, angry, clouds crossing the full moon above the dusty, old gravel road, added to his sense of desperation. A late summer storm would soon be upon him. The fifty two dollars and eleven cents with which he had begun his bike trek south was long gone. His stomach growled with a hunger that even his tightly cinched belt would no longer quiet.

He had spent six nights riding south on the moon-lit, back roads of central Indiana and had crossed seven counties. He slept during the day – usually in the steaming hot lofts of barns, needing to stay out of sight in case his disappearance had been reported to the authorities.

He searched the rural horizon for the silhouette of a barn. A sudden flurry of lightning illuminated a huge, isolated, building looming to the south. He made for it at top speed, hoping to beat the rain, which he could smell on the sudden, strong, wind that lashed at his back.

As he drew near, Chip discovered a century old mansion clearly in need of repairs and paint. Surrounding it – no, encapsulating it – was a tall, depressing, dark, wrought iron fence, its high, ornamental, gate long since rusted open. The scene, lit sporadically by increasingly frequent bursts of lightning, stirred uneasy memories from black and white horror movies he had watched on late night TV during times his parents had left him home unattended.

Chip dismounted and hurried with his bike up the wide,

curving, badly cracked, cement driveway toward the tall-columned front porch. Even at two a.m. several windows were dimly lit, suggesting it was not abandoned, as he had first thought. He couldn't be sure why, but that seemed to quell his fear – somewhat, at least. He moved around the far side to the back of the building. The wind howled across the roof and screamed through the dozens of huge, old, oak, trees. Their limbs thrashed wildly as the gusts built to a steady gale. Everything about the moment was frightening.

He located a cellar door, the long, flat, gently sloping kind he had waxed and slid down as a little boy. He tugged at the handle. With some effort, it opened into cavernous darkness. He felt his way down the stairs and opened the door at the bottom. Security was plainly not a priority there. He removed his back pack and felt his way to its side pocket. It was soon unzipped. Inside he found his one lone, surviving, candle and a book of matches.

The flickering light soon revealed a run of the mill basement – dirty, gloomy, and damp. To Chip it was suddenly his palace. He brought his bike down the stairs and silently closed both doors against the raging storm. With candle in hand, he walked the big room, searching for things he might use, hoping to find something edible. Half-heartedly, he flicked a light switch on the wall and to his surprise a single bulb, hanging on a time-worn cord from the center of the ceiling, sprang to life, lighting the area. He blew out his precious candle to save it for another day.

There on shelves at the bottom of the staircase he found his treasure – row after row of canned food. There were peaches and pears, green beans, apple sauce, and pickled beets. There was not, however a can opener. That would be a minor obstacle for ever resourceful Chip. As he began searching for a sharp object to assist him, he spied cans of Spam and corned beef hash on a lower shelf. They had pull-open lids. It was as if the gods were suddenly smiling down on him. It was about time, he figured.

He arranged several wooden crates and was soon sitting at his newly fashioned table, feasting for the first time in two days. The thick, stone, walls hushed the din of the storm and even the dim electric light tempered the vivid flashes from outside.

He was suddenly feeling better. After downing a can of cold hash, he searched the four large rooms, finding several

mattresses, rolled tightly and tied to the rafters. He cut one down with his pocket knife and soon had things arranged for sleeping. As he began relaxing, he sensed the chill in the air. He would need a cover of some kind. A bundle of newspapers would serve him well. He had once seen street people use them for that purpose in a movie. Exhausted, the boy was soon asleep.

His dreams were filled with disquieting images from his past – the badly bruised face of his distraught mother, the angry, raging voice of his father, the beatings, the humiliation, and all of those terrible family secrets he had to hide from his friends and the authorities at school.

Chip had lived his entire life in fear – fear of his parents, fear of ill-treatment, and fear of life itself. It had long been his plan that when he reached thirteen he would set out on his own. Things had grown so unbearable the week before, however, that he moved his timetable ahead by six months. Since he seemed to be the center of most disagreements between his mother and father, Chip reasoned that if he were not there, the two of them might find some way to work things out. He told himself that he loved them, but had he been pressed, he could not have sworn to it.

Despite it all, Chip did well in school and was liked by both his teachers and the other students. They called him “*The Chipper*” which reflected well the smiling face and up-beat approach with which he approached life outside of his home. His backpack was filled with books. He wouldn’t let a little matter like running away forever, interfere with his education.

And so it was that the lad, named Chipper had arrived at *Oakton Villa*. As he would soon learn it was a generally depressing, isolated, retirement warehouse for those who had no one interested enough in their welfare to take them in or make appropriate provisions for their latter days.

* * *

It might have been the sun streaming through the high, narrow, window on the east wall that awoke him as it bathed his face with warmth and light. It might have been the inquisitive little mouse that stopped momentarily to sniff Chip’s chin before scurrying on its way across the lad’s chest. Or, it might have been that after twelve hours of sleep his refreshed young body was finally ready to awaken and greet the new day. For whatever

reason, Chip's eyes popped open at 4:15 the next afternoon.

Again, he was filled with uneasiness about his situation. Again, he felt the pangs of hunger churning in his stomach. He pulled a crate close to a window, stood on it, and peered outside. Apparently, he had just slept through a beautiful summer day. He could see several large branches on the ground, which he assumed had been torn from the trees during the storm. The sight gave him an idea, but then it took very little to give The Chipper an idea.

"Maybe the owner of this place will pay me to cut up the limbs. I can afford to stick around here a few days to re-fill my wallet before moving on," he said aloud to himself as he jumped to the floor, shadow boxing a bit to stretch his muscles into a proper state of wakefulness.

"I'll need a good cover story. They can't know I'm a run away. I can say I'm from the town I came through last night – what was its name? Something Corners. What was it? Four! *Four Corners*. . . . Problem. They probably know everybody in that little place. I can say my family just moved there. That should cover everything."

If Chip had learned one thing well from his father, it was how to tell a convincing lie. Who knew it would one day actually prove to be useful! He would take his bike outside and park it by the front porch pretending he had ridden out from town

It seemed like a good plan but first a can of Spam. Chip had eaten lots of Spam in his short lifetime. He used to joke that the four food groups at his house were soup, bread, beer, and Spam. Regardless of that, he and his genes had managed to grow him a well built, generally healthy, body. The girls thought he was cute and the boys admired his strength, so body-wise, Chip was pretty pleased with himself.

As most pre-teens do, Chip had arrived at that confusing stage of development when it was still a toss-up to decide between hanging with the guys or taking a girl up on her offer for some kissing behind the gym. He hadn't kissed a lot, but really liked it. There would be no kissing that day. He had work to do. It did raise an interesting question about whether or not any kids lived in the big old house.

In a long-forgotten sink in one corner of the middle basement room, he washed out the hash can from the night

before. It would make a fine drinking cup. Drier than the first room, it looked to be a good place to set up housekeeping. He could arrange the mattress on top of several wooden crates for a bed. That should discourage the mouse from becoming overly friendly again. There was water for drinking and washing up. The room had two large, high windows facing the rear of the house and a ceiling light. The night before, he had run across some old furniture in the third room. With some of it he could furnish his new, if temporary, home base. All that could be done later on. First, breakfast and a long drink from the hash can to quench his sudden thirst.

That accomplished, he washed the smudges from his face and the grime from his hands and arms accumulated during his days of travel. He ran his fingers through his long blond hair hoping to untangle it enough to look presentable.

Before long he was out front, poised to mount the steps, which led up to the porch. He noticed the door was open.

“Odd,” he said to himself.

Chip was given to speaking his thoughts out loud.

He knocked on the door frame.

“Hello. Hello. Anybody home?”

There was no answer. He took several steps backwards to survey the scene. Over the door, a sign read, ‘*Oakton Villa*’. Well, it almost read *Oakton Villa*. The paint was badly cracked and some had fallen away. What was left read more like *Oak n illa*.

“Maybe it’s like a condo with apartments off some main hall,” he said to himself.

Cautiously, he went inside to investigate. He entered a huge, dark, entry hall open to the ceiling three stories above. It ran through to the rear of the house where there was a huge, old, spiral staircase – ornate in design, but like the rest of the place, it sported cracked, dirty paint.

The first door on the right had a sign. “Manager”. Chip knocked. The door swung open under the pressure of his touch.

“Hello. Hello. Anybody here?” he called again, brow furrowed with growing confusion.

“Dead,” came a woman’s husky voice from behind him.

Chip whirled around, his heart suddenly pumping wildly. In the doorway across the hall was an old woman in a loose,

flowing smock, cigarette in hand. Her face seemed held together by layer upon layer of garish makeup. Chip had no response.

“The manager died a month ago. You come to see him, did you?”

“Yes. Well no. Not exactly,” Chip began all quite inauspiciously. “I saw the limbs down and wondered if I could earn some money cutting them up and stacking it for firewood. I noticed lots of chimneys on the place. Figure that means fireplaces.”

“So, you a good worker, are you?” she asked, motioning him to follow her into her room.

“Oh, yes Ma’am. I can work all day and never tire. I’ll give you your money’s worth, okay.”

“Lemonade?” she asked, pointing him to a threadbare overstuffed chair.

Chip took a seat.

“Yes. That would be very nice. Thank you.”

“I’m Rose,” the woman said as she went into the kitchen, soon back with a large glass.”

“Thanks. I’m Chip. Just moved into *Four Corners*. Still Summer so no school. Just out for a ride you know. Saw the limbs down. Bad storm last night.”

To Chip it seemed like exactly the right things to say. To Rose it seemed like way too much. She was intrigued.

“What your daddy do, son?”

“He’s out of work. It’s why we came here. Going to try for some farmhand work.”

She nodded and lit another cigarette from the stub of the first.

“You do know smoking is bad for your health, don’t you Ma’am?” Chip said, clearly bothered by the habit.

“Dearie, I’ve been smoking for sixty years. Never had a sick day in my life. Was a . . . dancer, guess you could say, in my younger days. If anything kills me it’ll be Arthur.”

She coughed.

“Arthur?”

“Arthur-itis!” she explained.

She worked her fingers and bent her elbow, massaging her shoulder as she chuckled at her little joke. Chip smiled politely even though he had heard it from old folks all his life.

With another flick of her head she indicated a poster on the back of the door. Chip's eyes grew wide as he viewed the full length nude lady pictured there. She was throwing a kiss and posing with just a large feather held across her private area well below her navel. He read the banner silently to himself. "Rosie Malone, the queen of striptease." The lettering ran across her chest, not really covering her full, pink lady parts.

Chip swallowed. He swallowed again. It wasn't the first time he had seen such a picture, but never one so large and never in the presence of a female – let alone the female of which it had been taken.

"Very nice skin, I must say," he managed.

His reaction clearly amused Rose.

"Still have great skin," she said, pulling her smock up above her knee, both to make her point and to tease the boy just a bit more.

"About the work, Ma'am?" Chip asked, suddenly feeling the need for intense physical labor.

"Tell you what," Rose said, "George – the dead manager – kept a stash of petty cash in his desk. I suppose we can afford twenty bucks for a day's work."

"That sounds fair," Chip said, nodding.

Actually, it seemed like a lot of work for only twenty dollars, but beggars couldn't be choosers he thought.

Chip followed Rose across the hall and into the office. It had the feel of a creepy cave: ten by ten with a twelve-foot ceiling; dirty, dark green flocked paper rising above three feet of mahogany wainscoting set on a black, bare plank floor.

As Rose began rifling the drawers, a man's voice came from the hall.

"What you up to in there?"

Chip turned toward the voice, once again startled. Rose gave no indication of having heard it. The man entered the room and repeated his question.

"What you doing, Rose?"

Chip's presence seemed to have been ignored, not entirely a bad thing he thought and he backed out of the way.

"Looking for the petty cash bag. Some limbs fell during the night and I hired this young man to cut them up for us. . . . Here it is."

She unzipped the bag and removed a twenty-dollar bill, folding it twice and, with some flair, slipped it down into her bra.

“It’ll be here when you’re done.”

She patted her chest and Chip turned red.

“Chip, this is Grady,” Rose said, making a belated introduction. “He’s the grumpiest of the lot that lives here. But, his bark’s worse than his bite.”

Chip offered his hand but Grady ignored it in favor of more conversation with Rose.

“Who gave you permission to use that money?”

Rosie’s hands settled on her hips.

“I suppose as a one sixth partner in this dump, I gave myself permission. You got a problem with that?”

“Guess not, but don’t you be spending it all. We still haven’t agreed on what to do about replacing old George, you know.”

“And it’ll be a miracle if we ever do.”

She turned directly to Chip as if to deliver a private tidbit.

“This is the gosh awfulest bunch of self-centered, tight wads you’ll ever find under one roof. Doubt if we will ever agree on how to handle old George’s demise.”

Chip wasn’t sure what demise meant but figured it had something to do with his having been dispatched to the great beyond. He nodded and shrugged.

“I better get to work. You got saws and such?”

“In the basement,” Grady offered. “Follow me and I’ll show you to the stairs. You really know how to use that stuff?”

“Oh, yes, Sir. Helped my father saw and stack many a time. I’m stronger than I may look.”

“Hmm.”

They arrived at the door. It was behind the spiral staircase, and hidden from view up front.

“Not sure where they are, but rummage around and I’m sure you’ll find what you need. Maybe in the shop way to the west. Watch your step. We can’t afford any medical bills.”

“Thanks for your concern,” Chip said.

It wasn’t entirely appropriate but the thought had been formulating before Grady added the comment about the medical bills.

Grady replied with another non-committal, “Hmm.”

The equipment he needed was, as suggested, in the shop just beyond the third room. It had a raised wooden floor and lots of fascinating odds and ends he would need to investigate after work. He figured he had maybe three hours of sunlight left that day. His one regret was that he left most of that delicious lemonade untouched in Rosie's room. It had turned hot and the air hung heavy and motionless.

He arrived at the first fallen limb with a small timber cross-cut saw, a long-handled ax and a pair of heavy gloves. They were too large but past experience had taught him that you didn't saw or chop without gloves. He striped to the waist and set to work.

As he cut section after section and piled them under a nearby tree, his mind kept returning to that poster in Rose's room. It presented dual quandaries for him. First, would a *nice* lady really appear in public like that? Rose did seem very nice. Second, he was puzzled about why he had suddenly become so interested in looking at naked ladies. And he *was* clearly interested!

Twenty sections later, Rosie appeared with his lemonade glass, well iced and refilled to the brim.

"Thanks. Very thoughtful of you, Ma'am," he said, taking it from her.

"Let's cut the Ma'am crap. Call me Rose or Rosie. Ma'am gives me the willies – sounds like you think I'm old or something."

She laughed her deep, husky, natural laugh. It was infectious and Chip's grin soon became a chuckle. He liked her.

"How old are you, Mr. Chip? Twelve? Thirteen?"

"You're a good judge of kids, Rosie. I'm twelve and a half actually. I'm stronger than most guys my age – wider shoulders and bigger biceps you know."

Rose smiled and nodded, feeling the muscle Chip flexed for her to examine. She nodded again.

"Looks like you're doing a good job. Be sure to get back to town before it gets dark. Don't want you on the road after dark. Crazy drivers tear through here from *Buzzy's Bar* up the road, there."

She pointed in the opposite direction from *Four Corners*.

"Come through here drunk as the lord. They've taken out

our mailboxes a dozen times.”

“Thanks for the warning. I’ll be extra careful.”

“If you need to call your parents, you can use the phone in the lower hall. It’s the only one we got here.”

“Thank you. They know I can take care of myself. No need for that.”

Rose raised her eyebrows and started back across the lawn. Refreshed, Chip returned to work. By quitting time he had completed two of the six limbs. That left four for the following day. He’d have his twenty dollars by mid-afternoon. Then he’d have to decide about moving on. Of course, if there was other work, like painting or repairs, he might turn his stay there into a substantial bank account. He’d sleep on it and see what developed.

When he returned to his room, there were several surprises awaiting him. At the foot of his mattress he found a blanket neatly folded on top of a pillow.

“What in the ...?” He said out loud.

But there was more. On the crate he had used as a table, was a brown paper sack. In it were two ham and cheese sandwiches, an apple, and a Baby Ruth.

Chip put his hands on his hips and turned around looking for any other surprises. On the sink was an unopened bar of soap, a washcloth and towel, a plate, a spoon, knife and fork, and a tin cup.

It immediately became the source of great concern. Somebody knew his secret – well part of it at least. How much did they know? Who was it that knew? Were they going to report him to the authorities? Perhaps he needed to move on immediately, even without collecting the twenty dollars.

CHAPTER TWO

Surveying the Territory

His puzzlement was soon replaced by his hunger and he sat, devouring the food – real, wonderful, food! He would wait and see what transpired the following day. One of the residents would probably approach him and then he'd know where he stood. No reason to worry about it. Chip wasn't one to do that. He faced things as they came up and dealt with them one at a time. He had better things to do than wallow in worry.

His mother had spent her whole life fretting about this and that but never could move herself to the point of action – to finding solutions. It's why she remained with her abusive husband. It's why she allowed her son to remain with an abusive father. Early on, Chip had decided that worry is for the weak of heart. It consumes you and prevents you from formulating workable solutions.

He had solved his home problem years ago. He just wasn't old enough or capable enough to act on it. Now he was, and he had made his escape. He had just needed to wait for the appropriate time and knowing that time *would* eventually come, had made his home life bearable – well, not entirely.

He felt both sadness and relief. Sad that his mother and father were angry, helpless beings who, despite his hope they would now get their act together, probably wouldn't; relief in the knowledge that he was free from the terrible fear with which he had always lived. He figured that even if he were caught by the authorities, they would surely be smart enough not to send him back to the home that had treated him so badly. (Sometimes children assume wisdom from authorities that is not consistently

present.)

The sandwiches were the best he could remember having. He saved the apple for later. A candy bar was a rare treat and he lingered over it as he began a methodical search of the basement rooms.

He dragged a comfortable looking chair into his new home from a remote corner of the east room. At the bottom of a disintegrating cardboard box he found a radio – very old, with tubes – but it worked. There was an electric fan and a sheet of plywood that became a solid base for the mattress when positioned atop four small wooden crates. No TV but he could live without that. He wouldn't be there long. A shadeless floor lamp was soon fitted with a bulb from the workshop and placed behind the chair. In one of the sheet wrapped bundles hanging from the rafters he found a large braided rug with blue and brown hues – his favorite colors. It necessitated moving all the furnishings just put in place but was worth the work. He soon had a very homey island carved out of the surrounding darkness.

It was only eight o'clock. He found a station playing music which was to his liking, slipped out of his shoes and sox and settled into the big chair with a library book, borrowed from school. He figured someday he would mail it back. *Lucky in Life** was the title and Chipper was feeling pretty much that way. It seemed a good match to his mood and current situation. He began reading.

The alarm on his watch beeped at ten – the time he'd set to make sure he would get to bed at a reasonable hour. He figured a good night's sleep was important before his big day. He washed up at the sink and chuckled out loud.

“Can you believe this? Here I am taking a bath without being forced to and going to bed at a reasonable hour all by myself.”

Before long he had smiled himself to sleep.

The next morning it was his watch that awoke him at five a.m. He peeked outside through the high window. Darkness was just beginning to give way to dawn. It was a peaceful time of day he had always cherished. He slipped into his jeans and T-shirt. They both smelled bad – he would have to find a way to wash them out that evening.

Breakfast was a can of peaches, opened with a chisel and hammer from the shop. He put the apple in his pocket for a mid-morning snack and gathered his tools. Within a few minutes, he was back at work in the side yard.

In the still dim light of daybreak, he noticed a light come on in a front window on the third floor as he began chopping. A figure appeared in silhouette, and pulled back the curtains as if looking for the source of the clatter. Just as soon it disappeared and the light went off.

By nine, Chip had another limb cut and stacked. He seated himself, back against his next limb, looking east away from the house. There came a voice from behind – a woman's. Didn't these people ever approach from the front, he wondered.

"You must be the kid," she said more gruffly than pleasantly.

Chip got to his feet and turned to greet a stooped, ancient looking woman with leathery, wrinkled skin, a sharp protruding chin, and long, thin, white hair.

"Yes, Ma'am. I guess I'm the kid – Chip's the name. Some call me Chipper."

He extended his hand. She accepted it graciously, holding it without a shake and patting it gently. Her touch was surprisingly soft and gentle, though her appearance could have cast her as a witch in any Halloween play.

"I assume you're new to these parts," she said, making no move to release his hand.

"Yes. That's right. Brand new, you could say."

"I was watching you yesterday afternoon from my window – third floor, front. You're a good little worker. My children never helped out much. Guess I wasn't much of a mother. Yours has clearly taught you well."

Avoiding the huge misinterpretation, Chip asked, "And your name would be . . .?"

"Forgive me lad. How rude. I'm Gertrude. Be 79 next month. Not much to look at on the outside but still sharp as a tack in here."

She tapped the side of her head.

"I can see that," Chip said, not at all certain how to respond to the part about physical appearance. "So, you have kids, you say."

“Two drunks and a third in prison. Haven’t seen any of them in twenty years.”

“Not close knit, I guess,” Chip said, wishing he hadn’t the moment he closed his mouth.

Gertrude chuckled and nodded.

“You cut right to the chase. I like that in a person.”

She grew quiet and looked down the road as if searching for something that never came.

“So, what can you tell me about this place?” Chip asked, genuinely interested in learning more about *Oakton Villa* and its residents.

She dropped his hand and turned, scanning the old house.

“It was a magnificent place when I was a girl. Elegant parties in the wonderful entry hall. Immaculate grounds. There was never a stick needing painting or repair back then. The front gate swung open without a squeak.

“When the parents died, their son divided it into apartments and sold them, billing it all as a retirement paradise. I bought in. It was close to where I’d grown up and over a ten-year period I was able to pay it off. Most of the others here have similar stories. Well, except for Rose. She bought from a brochure and just showed up – sight unseen – a dozen or so years ago. She’s from Los Angeles. Not sure why she decided to come clear out here. We don’t talk much. None of us talk much, really. Like a chain of little islands, we are. Just six old has-beens waiting for death to claim us.”

“That’s very sad,” Chip said, the sincerity of his response showing clearly on his face.

“You’re a sweetie. I can tell,” she said. “You bring your lunch?” she added, looking around for the tell-tale brown paper sack.

“Dumb as it sounds, I didn’t. I have an apple though. I’ll be fine.”

“Twelve noon. My place. Like fried chicken?”

“Oh, yes, Ma’am. It’s my favorite.”

“Twelve noon then.”

She pointed to her widow. Chip nodded.

“Thank you. You are very kind. I’ll be there.”

Gertrude turned to leave then paused looking back.

“Call me Gert. That’s what my friends called me in the

old days.”

She made her way back to the house. Chip returned to his seat on the ground and finished his apple before resuming work. Gert seemed very nice. He figured she had lived a difficult life and clearly felt herself a failure where her kids were concerned. He wondered if his mother would feel that way when she was seventy-nine.

He rehashed what he knew about the place. Rosie seemed to be the outsider, though the way Gert told it that really didn't matter since nobody talked anyway. Grady held up a gruff exterior but he had been willingly helpful to Chip the day before. George was dead so that was pretty much that. He wondered about the remaining three. At lunch, he'd see if Gert would spill the beans on the rest of them.

Gert had given no indication that it was she who had been the Good Samaritan – providing the cover and sack-supper and such. It seemed that person didn't want him to know who he or she was. Why would that be, he wondered? The night before Chip assumed it had to be either Rose or Grady, since they were the only two he had met. Clearly Gert was aware of his presence the day before, which meant the other three might have also known about him.

Somebody had to have gone into the basement and stumbled onto his belongings. Who would go down there? Someone after canned goods perhaps. It could have been any one of them. Still, why did that person not confront him? If Chip had run across such a mystery, he would have certainly waded right in to see what was going on.

“Maybe it was the mouse,” he chuckled to himself.

He looked at his watch. Plenty of time to finish another limb. That would leave just two more for after lunch. With the sun overhead, the heat suddenly seemed sweltering so he shed his shirt and started back to work. Technically his 'day's work' would be over late afternoon but he had decided to finish the limbs regardless. Chip had always finished what he started, a trait so foreign to his parents they were truly puzzled by it.

Noon was soon upon him. He wiped the sweat from his face and chest with his big red handkerchief and slipped back into

his shirt. He did the finger comb thing to his hair and tried to see his image in the ax head. It was far too rusty to be of any help. He shrugged. He'd done what he could do.

Gert's door was open. He knocked anyway.

"A good worker and prompt and courteous as well. Come on in," she called.

She walked through the living room to meet him, wiping her hands on a full length, flowered apron.

"The place smells wonderful. Fired chicken has a fantastic smell," he said, attempting to make conversation. He stepped inside.

Gert stuck her head out into the hall looking both ways and then closed and locked the door. It seemed a strange thing for her to do. Chip had a momentary unpleasant vision of the *Hansel and Gretel* story.

"Come on back into the kitchen. Just a few things left to do," she said, leading the way. She seemed to have more energy than earlier.

Chip looked around the rooms as they passed through to the kitchen in the northeast corner of the building. There were knick-knacks everywhere – many probably colorful underneath layers of what looked to be years of dust. Some would have called her apartment cluttered. Chip saw it as homey. He was comfortable with clutter – it was what he had always known.

"Pull a chair up to the table," Gert said.

It was in the tone of a command but Chip chose to take it as a kind offer. He tended to see everybody in the best light possible. Expect folks to be nice and they usually are, seemed to be his motto. It had been his experience – well, except at home.

"May I ask how long you have been here?" he asked.

"You may and I'll even answer," she said, turning her head so Chip could see the twinkle in her eye.

"Fifteen years come December. First one to move in. That's how I came by the best apartment in the place. On a clear day, I can see fifty miles out my windows up here."

Chip craned his neck as if to check that out through the nearest window. He nodded even though he was sitting far too low to actually make a judgment.

"I've met Rosie and Grady. Who else is there?"

Gert placed a platter of chicken on the table. That was

followed by a bowl of mashed potatoes and then green beans. She took a seat across from Chip.

“Dig in, as they say. I stand on no formalities at my table.”

Chip was ready and soon had his plate filled. Gert had not been ignoring his question. She just functioned better doing one thing at a time.

“There’s Ernie – he has the apartment just below mine – above Rose. He’s a retired engineer.”

“Trains or bridges?” Chip asked in a matter of fact way as he made short work of a drumstick.

“Bridges, I guess – if that’s the choice.”

Again, her eyes twinkled. The mere fact of having something to smile about seemed to cheer her up. Strangely, that realization made Chip sad.

“He worked for a farm machinery company, designing new machines. The vice-president ran off with the retirement fund so he ended up here. He’s very quiet. I suppose you could say depressed, but then everybody here seems to share those two traits. Add destitute and it pretty well sums us up, I guess.”

Chip wasn’t sure he wanted to know that much about the residents. He just wanted a nodding acquaintance so when he left it wouldn’t be friends he was leaving behind.

“Then there’s William – never call him Bill – front apartment on the second floor across from Ernie – west, I guess. He’s my age. A retired teacher from a parochial school. Lives on his SS.”

“SS?” Chip asked, placing a large slab of butter on his mound of potatoes.

“Social Security. He reads a lot. Owns the car. Doesn’t have a license so Ernie does the driving. Mostly just to the grocery and to Doc Patterson’s office in town. Old folks need doctors.”

“What about Grady? What did he do before coming here?”

“He was an accountant for the same company Ernie worked for. I think Ernie half way blames him for the retirement fund problem. Not true, I’m sure, but there’s always friction between the two of them.”

“Have you met Maude, yet?”

“No. Not yet.”

“She’s second floor rear. Bad legs. Mother of five daughters and not a one of them ever shows up out here. Bad as my own.”

There was sadness in her tone for the first time. It soon lifted as she pointed to the chicken, indicating that Chip needed to have another piece. He cheerfully obliged. It was like a feast at court to Chip. He felt guilty eating what he was afraid might be her food allotment for the week. He wasn’t one to let good food go to waste, however.

“What did she do?”

“She was a seamstress – very good. Made all of her daughter’s clothes. Best dressed poor kids in town. I suppose she’s surviving on SS as well. She’s never mentioned it.”

“What you going to do about George – well not him, I suppose he’s buried. I mean who’s going to be the new super?”

“Have no idea. We never talk much together. Guess we haven’t missed his help enough yet to require us to look into it. Looking for a job are you?”

“Oh, no. Just wondering. I’m just a kid. School and stuff like that you know.”

Gert nodded and topped off Chip’s glass of milk.

“Can I ask one more question?” he said.

“Sure. At my age, I got no secrets.”

“Do I understand that you all bought your apartments here before you moved in, so you don’t have rent to pay?”

“That’s right. No rent. We’re supposed to each kick in two hundred a month to pay for the Super and things like upkeep, utilities, and taxes. I doubt if any of us have been able to meet that quota, though. George worked in town to support himself and helped out around here for free rent and an occasional plate of cookies. The past two years his arthritis got so bad he wasn’t much good as a handy man but what you going to do – give him a pink slip when he’s down and out?”

“Pink slip?”

“Means, ‘fire him’.”

Chip nodded. It was what he had surmised but he liked to know exactly what people meant. That had seldom been the case in his home, which probably made it all the more important.

Finally, he patted his stomach and pushed back from the

table.

“That was the most fantastic meal I’ve ever had, Gert. Thanks. I’ll get these dishes done up before I go back outside.”

“Nonsense. You’re my guest. My guests don’t do dishes. Besides, what else do I have to do? I feel like baking a cake. Haven’t felt that way for years. I was a baker back in the old days, you know.”

“No. I guess I didn’t know.”

“What’s your favorite kind?”

Chip didn’t have to think long.

“Anything with chocolate in it.”

“Double German Chocolate it will be. You skedaddle now. I’ll bring it down when it’s ready. Give me an hour and a half.”

“Sounds wonderful, but you’ve done so much for me already.”

“Pish-posh. This is the most fun I’ve had since I moved into this dreadful place.”

Again, her words made Chip sad. That was not how one’s waning years should be. He had no words but nodded. Gert planted an unexpected kiss on his cheek. Chip didn’t return it – he knew virtually nothing about kisses of that nature.

“Thanks for everything,” he managed.

“No, Chipper. Thank *you*. I’ll see you pretty soon.”

Chip opened the door and made his way down the stairs and back outside. It had been a wonderful time and it had been a sad time. Chip didn’t like sad. It gnawed at him over the next several hours. And why did *she* thank him?

As he worked he tried to remember times when his mother had kissed him. He assumed she had, but couldn’t recall an instance. He did have a fleeting memory of his grandmother kissing him as she tucked him into bed once when he was very young – or was that an image intruding itself from a TV program? He couldn’t be sure. At least he now had one peck on the cheek that he knew was for real, and *it* would not be soon forgotten.

He wondered why such a simple act should seem so important. Clearly, he had lived his entire life without such things so they were hardly necessary for survival. He wished he had returned the kiss. It was as if he only had half the picture. How must it feel to give such a kiss? He understood it implied caring

if not affection or perhaps even love – three more terms he didn't fully understand. He did care about Gert and was intrigued about how such a feeling could have developed toward a complete stranger in such a short amount of time.

His thoughts moved on to the kind of kissing he was more familiar with and to Betty Jean, with whom he had done most of his kissing during the past several months. Kissing her was substantially different from what he had just received. It was more like a sport, he determined, than an exercise in affection. His observation was that boys would eagerly kiss most any girl that would let them, so it was obviously not based in love or even affection. It was, for some still inexplicable reason, lots and lots of fun. It filled his entire being with a rush like he had never before experienced.

He wondered if Betty Jean knew he was missing. He wondered if it would matter to her. He wondered if his being missing would really matter to anyone. Would his parents even notify the authorities? Their lives would certainly be easier without him. Eventually the school would probably figure he was AWOL.

He continued thinking as he picked up the saw. He needed to begin making some plans for his own immediate future. Those plans – though part of a long-rehearsed fantasy – had always been nebulous and strictly escape orientated. Run away – south into warmer territory where survival would be easier. He had never given much consideration to where he would stop or how he would know when to stop. Kentucky and Tennessee looked like possible destinations on the map. He had great confidence in his ability to survive on his own – largely unrealistic, still, it was based on years of what had been an essentially self-sufficient lifestyle.

Chip had just toted the saw and axe over to the last big limb – the largest of them all, actually – when he saw Gert begin crossing the lawn in his direction. He hurried into his shirt, not entirely sure why he felt uncomfortable being bare-chested in her presence. She carried a small picnic basket and approached with a broad smile and cheery greeting. She seemed to pick every step with care but still managed a regular gait.

“Must be time for a break,” she said.

“Yes. I'd agree,” Chip replied, a natural smile breaking

easily across his face.

“Help me spread the blanket,” she said, lifting it from the basket. It seemed like a scene out of an old Bing Crosby movie he had seen on TV. He wasn’t about to light a pipe or break into song, however.

That accomplished, Gert settled herself into a sitting position and unpacked the basket. Chip got to his knees and sat back on his legs as he watched.

“Only brought a quarter of the cake. That’s my way of tempting you back up to my place later on. There’s also milk. Stuck a fork in there, too, but figured you’d be more comfortable using your hands. Napkins (she pointed). No way to enjoy a Double Chocolate German cake without getting messy. Dig in.”

Chip nodded and rearranged himself into a more comfortable cross legged position. The first bite was eye-closing, head swaying, lick-smacking, w o n d e r f u l !

“This is fan-*tas*-tic!”

Gert sat in silence, clearly pleased, drinking in the boy’s wonderfully unaffected reaction.

“You gotta teach me how to make this.”

“Anytime.”

“I’d think you’d be the most popular person here, making goodies like this.”

Gert became sober.

“I’m ashamed to say I’ve never baked for anybody here – well, cookies sometimes for poor old George.”

“You people! I don’t get it. You’re all lonely and you got built-in friends but nobody takes advantage of it. What gives? Seems like you *want* to be miserable.”

“Rose tried to get us together a few times but we just don’t have anything in common.”

“Except your gloom and misery,” Chip added shaking his head.

“What depressed old person wants to spend time listening to the depressing tales of other depressed old people? Dealing with our own sad memories is just about more than any of us can stand, I suppose. Certainly don’t want to take on anybody else’s load.”

“That’s a really dumb way to go about living, you know,” Chip said. “I mean, no disrespect but it is *just plain dumb*.”

Gert tried an explanation.

“Young people go about living. Old people go about dying.”

She scanned the horizon and searched for a way to change the topic.

“You certainly have a beautiful, golden tan.”

“Part Indian on my father’s side. It doesn’t take much to bronze-up my skin.”

“Indian with blond hair?”

“Mom’s Scandinavian.”

“I imagine the young ladies think you’re pretty nice looking.”

Chip didn’t know how to respond so he took a long drink of milk. Gert continued.

“Beautiful hair, muscles, square features.”

She reached out and touched his chin.

“What’s not to fall head over heels for?” she said as if needing to justify her contention.

“I never know what to say when somebody says stuff like that to me.”

“I guess you don’t need to say anything. I’ll bet there *are* girls, though, aren’t there?”

“Like I said, I’m pretty new around here. Not had time to really get to know any girls yet. . . . Is the rest of that slab for me?”

“Certainly. You *can* put it away, can’t you? It’s been so long since I had youngsters around I tend to forget.”

There was a moment of silence as Gert handed the final section of cake to Chip.

“Thanks, Gert. You’re about the kindest person I’ve met since I . . . since I got to these parts.”

More silence, then, he pressed his own agenda.

“I don’t suppose you get down into the basement very often, huh?”

“Basement? No. Haven’t been down there for years. The men take care of anything that relates to the basement. Why do you ask?”

She wasn’t supposed to have asked that question. Chip had no ready reason to offer but allow him ten seconds and he’d find one.

“I noticed lots of canned goods on shelves down at the bottom of the stairs. Thought if they were yours and you needed some, I’d be glad to bring them up to your apartment for you.”

“Not mine. I’m not sure whose it may be. Could be one of the men. Thank you for the offer, though.”

Either she was not his paper sack benefactor or she was playing it pretty cool. He had opened up the whole basement thing just to see where she’d go with it. Gert seemed like the sort that would press the issue if she thought he was staying there. If not her, who?

“I better let you get back to work. I suppose you want to get headed back home as soon as you get paid.”

“I suppose. Yes. But that promise of more cake will likely bring me back by tomorrow – if that’s alright?”

“You’re always welcome. There’s plenty of that fried chicken left. If you want to take some along, stop up before you leave.”

“Thank you. I may just take you up on that.”

It suddenly seemed like an inappropriate transaction. Gert was buying time with him by offering food. Chip was assuring his continued food supply by heaping attention on Gert. It was not how things between friends should be proceeding.

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CHAPTER THREE

The Secret Benefactor

With the final limb cut and stacked, Chip pulled his shirt through his belt and let it hang there at his side. He shouldered the axe and picked up the saw, looking around to survey his work. Something about the prospect of being bare-chested with Rosie felt exciting. He moved in the direction of her apartment. He had a brief fantasy wondering if she would remove the bill from her bra or allow him to go fishing for it.

There would be no fishing.

“Looks like a very good job, Chip. I know it’s worth more but twenty’s as much as we can spare.”

“A deal’s a deal, Rosie. You’ll hear no complaint from me.”

She reached into her bra and pulled out the neatly folded twenty-dollar bill handing it to Chip.

“I noticed you spent time with Gert.”

“Yes. A very nice lady. I like her. I like you. Can’t figure out why the two of you don’t spend time together.”

Rose reached out and ruffled Chip’s hair. It produced a rush within him similar to kissing Betty Jean. A strange connection he thought.

“Lemonade before you leave?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

He followed her into her living room, dawdling over the door closing so he could ogle the poster one more time.

“Here you go. One tall lemonade.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh, by the way, Ernie, wanted me to ask you if you’d be

willing to stop up at his place before you left today. He's rewiring something and wondered if you'd lend him a hand."

"Sure. Be glad to."

"You can drop the glass off on your way home."

"Okay. Sure. Thanks."

It had been a shorter and less eventful visit with Rosie than he had hoped it would be. But, there was always another day.

Ernie approached everything in a matter of fact way. There seemed to be no emotional spark left in him, but then perhaps there never had been – he was an engineer, after all!

The task was pretty straight forward. The ceiling fixture had shorted out. Ernie had a ten-foot stepladder positioned under it and a wiring diagram spread out on the table.

"I imagine one of these two wires has burned in two," he began, forgoing the usual, 'Hello, good to meet you, I'm Ernie, and thanks for stopping by.'

"You will climb the ladder and ascertain which has separated. Describe the situation to me and I will direct your next step."

"Sure. Glad to help," Chip said, intrigued by the old man's methodical, detached approach.

Soon at the top of the ladder – and without any of the usual admonitions to be careful – Chip went to work.

"Just like you figured, Sir. Black wire's broke. I assume you want me to strip both ends and twist them together."

"Yes. You've done this kind of thing before, then?"

"Lots of times. Carry a pocket knife just for such emergencies."

It was a stretch of the truth but seemed harmless. Within five minutes the wires were stripped, twisted and taped. The fuse was tightened into its socket in the electrical box in the closet and the wall switch was thrown to provide the essential test. The light blazed to life. After another few minutes the fixture had been reattached to the metal box and Chip made his way back down the ladder.

"That should be good for another twenty years, Sir," he said, smiling, not at all sure what to expect.

Ernie handed him a towel. That was the last thing he would have expected!

“An old place like this is filled with dirt and dust,” which seemed to be the signal for Chip to wipe his hands.

Ernie pointed to his own forehead as if to suggest a smudge on Chip’s. Chip smiled, nodded, and took the hint.

“That get it?” he asked, after taking a few, random swipes.

Hesitantly, Ernie took the towel and cleaned up the lad’s face. It seemed awkward though not necessarily unpleasant for either of them.

“Thanks. Need to be spic and span for the girls back in town, you know.”

It brought the first hint of a smile from the old man. At sixty-nine, Ernie still stood erect, shoulders back, his slender frame reaching something over six feet. A muff of sparse white hair encircled the bottom of his well-tanned bald head.

“So, what’s the damages?” he asked.

Chip did not understand.

“None, so far as I could tell. I didn’t see any scorch marks up there if that’s what you’re referring to. I assume that’s why they use metal boxes.”

“I meant how much do I owe you for your services?”

“Oh. Sorry. Guess I wasn’t familiar with your phrase. You don’t own me anything. Glad to help. I really like fixing things.”

Ernie made no effort to force payment on Chip. He extended his hand.

“Well then. Thank you for your help. Probably could have got up there myself, but it’s a pretty long fall for old bones.”

“And *not* for young bones?” Chip joked.

“You got me there. I’ve been watching you work. You’re well-coordinated and strong. I didn’t figure there was much chance of damaging your young bones.”

Chip grinned up at the man.

“I suppose I better be on my way, then.”

“Here, at least take a hand full of Oreos,” Ernie said, in a final gesture of generosity.

“I *love* those things. Thank you, Sir. Thank you.”

Ernie nodded as Chip filled his pockets.

“Rose, did you didn’t she?”

“Oh, yes, Sir. Twenty bucks straight from her bra as promised.”

He felt it had been an inappropriate thing to have said, but had no way of retracting it.

“Hard to beat a nice warm ‘Bra Buck’ I suppose,” the old man said with a wink.

A relieved Chip nodded, smiled and turned back upstairs for a final visit with Gert, eager to take her up on her fried chicken offer. It would soon be supper time and six Oreos wouldn’t hold him.

Twenty minutes later, after riding his bike back out the drive and heading up the gravel road toward town for the benefit of what seemed to have become a sea of curious old eyes, he circled back through a field and eventually descended the stairs into his new, if temporary, home.

His prospects for supper seemed great. Cookies, fried chicken, and a slab of cake. Again, there was a brown sack on his table. In it were two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a banana. It brought a nervous chuckle followed by some serious deductions.

“Since both Gert and Ernie gave me food, neither one of them is probably the BPBP (brown paper bag person). That leaves four possibilities. Rose is a game player. I know she knows she’s teasing me when she does stuff. It could be her. I wonder why whoever it is doesn’t just come to me. Why does he or she care enough about me to do it in the first place? I stink. First a bath then the PB&Js before they get soggy. Chicken holds.”

He turned on his radio – softly – and before long was reclining on his couch, smelling fresh as a daisy, sandwich in one hand and cake in the other. Life seemed good. He would finish the library book and then begin the next chapter in history.

He felt safe and well hidden. The room he had fixed up was set apart from the rest of the basement with a door he could lock from the inside. With no more prospects for earning money, however, it was probably time to think about moving on. He’d give it one more day and see what developed. Staying there wasn’t costing him anything; it seemed to provide an endless supply of food; and it was at least as safe from the authorities as a barn loft.

Some quick figuring suggested that it had to be Friday. The next day – Saturday – he would try to spend time with each

of the residents he had not yet met. The BPBP thing was driving him nuts. He'd put on his detective hat and ferret out the clandestine do-gooder.

Chip's eyes fluttered shut well before he had finished his book. Sometime between then and morning he crawled into bed and snuggled peacefully under his cover. Again, he was awake early.

Cold fried chicken made a surprisingly good breakfast. He had no good reason to show up at *Oakton Villa* that morning. What excuse could he concoct? He'd say he had lost his pocket knife. That would give him reason to be there. On the off chance they'd frisk him, he left the knife on the edge of the sink.

He rode up the driveway at exactly eight o'clock, whistling loudly for effect, and parked his bike against the porch. He began by going through the motions of searching the grounds as if looking for something in the spots where he had worked the day before. He knew he would be watched.

Grady was the first to make contact.

"Lose something young man?" he said walking across the lawn toward Chip.

"My pocket knife. Could be out here or could be inside, I suppose."

A third man – William, by the process of elimination – appeared on the porch. Grady addressed him as they walked back toward the house.

"The boy has lost his pocket knife. Haven't come across one inside, have you?"

"Pocket knife. No, can't say that I have. Has he asked Rose or Gert or Ernie? He spent time in their apartments yesterday, you know."

"Curious eyes," Chip said to himself, smiling. He approached the porch.

"No. I thought I'd look out here before bothering anybody inside."

They were joined by Ernie.

"The boy lost his pocket knife," Grady said to Ernie.

"He doesn't know if he misplaced it inside or out," William added.

Chip nodded seriously.

"Well, you had it late yesterday when you helped me fix

the light.”

“That’s right. I did. Then I went up to Gert’s place for just a minute.”

“Come on in and let’s give my place the once over first,” Ernie said, seeming a bit possessive of the youngster and moving him ahead of the two men, who followed them up the stairs. From their reactions, Chip assumed this must have been the most excitement the place had seen in years.

The ladder was still in place in the center of Ernie’s living room. That surprised Chip.

“I’ll be glad to help you put the ladder away. I should have offered yesterday. I wasn’t thinking, I guess.”

“Just haven’t got around to it. It goes in the laundry room on the first floor behind the office. Maybe you left the knife on the top of the ladder.”

Chip nodded, and scampered up.

“Apparently not,” he called down. “I think I remember closing it and putting it in my pocket while I was still up here.”

“That’s how I remember it, also,” Ernie said, rubbing his bald head.

“Would this be it?” asked a woman’s voice from the doorway. She too was old and gray but dressed considerably better than the others.

“Have you met Maude?” William asked.

“No. I haven’t had the pleasure.”

Chip moved toward the door. Maude held out her hand, palm up. In it was his pocket knife. That should not have been. What was going on? Chip had purposefully left his knife down in his room and yet, there it was in the old lady’s hand.

It grew on him gradually – from the tiniest glimmering of a hypothesis to the full blown logical answer.

“I assume you are Maude the Brown Paper Bag Person.”

The men looked at one another, baffled.

Maude’s old face broke into a wonderfully warm smile.

“That can be our private territory for a while longer. Why not come to my place and I’ll fix you some breakfast.”

Chip looked from man to man to man and then back at Maude.

“Yes. That would be very nice.”

He turned to Grady and William.

“Maybe you guys can help Ernie get the ladder back downstairs. It looks pretty awkward for a boy my size to be of much help.”

Their nods sealed the arrangement and Chip accompanied Maude to her apartment – following quietly, intrigued by his silent benefactor.

They entered a large living room – larger than the other apartments Chip had been in, though every bit as dreary. He could see the bedroom through an open door to his right. A wide-open arch led straight ahead into the dining room. The kitchen was through a door at the right rear. The lack of windows of an interior apartment set a somber tone. The drab, old fashioned furnishings, however, seemed to feel quite at home in the huge old mansion.

To the rear of the dining room, on the eastern outside wall was what Maude referred to as her sitting room – a narrow, well windowed room running the width of the apartment. There were green plants everywhere – hanging baskets, huge pots sitting on the floor, smaller pots on the window ledges. A patch of African Violets on a round table in the center of the room provided the only blooms to be seen – a small oasis of blues, purples and pinks. There were comfortable looking chairs, a bookcase and small tables arranged to give it a cozy, homey appearance. It was clearly where she spent most of her time.

“I’m afraid I’m not very well prepared to entertain a young gentleman,” Maude said, flashing her warm, broad, smile. “I do have a few oatmeal cookies and could whip up some hot chocolate if that would be to your liking.”

“Thank you. The cookies sound great. Don’t go to the trouble of hot chocolate. Water will be fine.”

Maude left the room for the kitchen. Chip assumed she had just forgotten the promise of breakfast. Old folks get forgetful. On the other hand, perhaps she thought cookies made a respectable first meal of the day. Chip would not argue that point. She was soon back with a wooden tray bearing a plate of cookies, blueberry muffins, and two glasses of milk.

“Cookies without milk is really no treat at all, don’t you agree?”

“Well, yes Ma’am, when you put it that way. Thank you.”

Chip had been walking the room, examining the plants

and the view. He took a seat near the low table on which Maude had placed the tray. She sat in a chair facing him and offered things from the plate.

“Thanks. They all look wonderful. So, about the basement?”

It had been a question. Maude finished her tiny bite of cookie.

“No mystery, really. Thursday afternoon I went down there to get some canned goods and you were sound asleep on the mattress. I saw your bicycle and book bag and the empty can – just put one and one together, I suppose.”

“But you didn’t tell anybody?”

“Nope. Figured it was your business – at least for the time being. Chances were that when you woke up you’d just feed your tummy and be on your way. I don’t know much about boys – had five girls, myself. If you needed help or wanted assistance I supposed you would ask. Anyway, by the time I got back down with the blanket and such, you were gone but your things were still there. Then I saw you out the window working up the wood *and*, I imagined, an appetite. I fixed the sandwiches. So, you see, there’s no big mystery about it.”

“Well, I want to thank you for your help and for not telling the others. I suppose I owe you an explanation.”

“Not as far as I’m concerned. Just tell me things are okay in your life and I’ll be satisfied.”

Chip was used to lying but something about Maude made it very difficult. Things were really not okay in his life – better, he thought then they had been – but surely not okay from the perspective of an old lady. She’d kept his secret so far so he guessed he would trust her. He sat back and sighed deeply.

“You heard my cover story?”

“Cover story? No. I can’t say I have. I don’t talk much with the others.”

Chip rolled his eyes and shook his head in continuing disbelief.

“The others have been led to believe that I just moved into *Four Corners* and that my dad is looking for farm work. I’m supposed to begin school in September.”

“Seems convincing,” Maude said, also sitting back. “But ...?”

“I ran away from home – up north – I won’t say exactly where so you won’t be so involved in case it all blows up.”

Maude nodded her understanding. She seemed to be a patient woman. Not one to pry. It wasn’t that she was not concerned, Chip thought, but more that she respected his right to privacy about things.

“I can give you the unpleasant details if you need them, but the short version is that my parents hate my guts and mistreated me so I ran away. Been in a few foster homes during my life, but always got sent back to my folks. It never changes. Decided I knew better than the judges what was good for me so I’m heading south for warmer weather. I can take care of myself. Always have, really. Just hanging around here to refill my wallet for the next leg of my journey. I’ll be out a here soon – tonight probably – tomorrow at the latest.”

Perhaps eighty percent of that had been truthful. Make that sixty.

“I see. Well, thank you for the information. I can’t say I think it’s a great plan but then I can’t know how bad it was at home, can I?”

“No, Ma’am, you can’t know that. Have you heard anything on TV about a missing kid?”

“Can’t say that I have, but I seldom watch the local news. It’s just too depressing. Catch Diane Sawyer most evenings but that’s almost as bad. Sounds like the whole world is going to the dogs, if you ask me.”

“Yes, Ma’am. I hear you.”

He reached for a muffin and sipped at his milk.

“So,” he began hesitantly. “You got a story, too?”

“I suppose that’s a fair question – Chip, is it?”

“Yes. Chip. At school, they call . . . called me *The Chipper*.”

“Well, Chipper, my short version goes like this I guess. Mother of five daughters. Their father abandoned us when the youngest was less than a year old. I took in sewing. The girls all had to work. Three quit school early. They were all married and moved away before they were seventeen. I was never any good with children. Scared to death of them, in fact. It was a terrible responsibility and I was never very good with responsibility. I ended up here nine years ago. It’s not all that bad. Just me to look

out for. My social security check sees me through every month with a little left over for my rainy-day jar. Nobody bothers me and I don't bother anybody else."

"Rainy day jar?"

"Savings for when some unexpected expense comes up."

Chip nodded that he understood. It was like his piggy back that had financed the first leg of his trip south.

"Sounds like you've never been a very happy person."

Maude seemed surprised with the lad's straight forward comment.

"Quite the perceptive young man, aren't you?" she said, agreeing to the essence of his observation without actually admitting anything.

"You ever see any of your kids?"

He knew the answer from Gert's earlier comments but felt he needed to hear it from the horse's mouth.

"Betty sends cards on holidays and my birthday. Nothing from the rest. Not even sure where they are or what kind of grandkids I may have."

She sniffled and turned her head. Making her sad had not been Chip's intent. He tried to switch topics.

"Betty. That was the name of my girlfriend back in . . . well back at my school. What a coincidence, huh?"

Maude understood the diversion and nodded.

"More milk? I have a fresh gallon in the fridge."

"No. Thank you, though. You're very kind. You seem to do very well with kids, I'd say."

"Thank you, Chipper. You make it easy, you know."

Chip shrugged deciding not to pursue that idea to its logical conclusion. If he made it so easy, how could his parent's consistent abuse be explained? He continued to be convinced there was something evil in his nature that must have only been obvious at home.

He plastered on his *Chipper* smile and tried to move on.

"I'm not sure where all of this leaves us, you know?"

"I suppose it leaves as being new friends who have just had the chance to get to know each other."

Again, Chip nodded. This was a wise lady. That just didn't match up with the story she told. He looked around the room.

“Would you like the grand tour of my place?” she asked taking note of his interest.

“I don’t want to intrude, you know.”

“Nothing of the kind.”

She stood and held out her arm for him to follow. With her arm on his shoulder she escorted him from room to room, pointing out this and that – things that were clearly important to her. Chip liked to have her arm around him and he nestled himself closer to her side. The gentle touch of an adult was foreign but wonderful.

In her bedroom were dozens of dolls – big dolls, small dolls, girl dolls, and boy dolls.

“You made these?” he asked, examining several.

“Like a hobby, I suppose. It keeps my fingers nimble. I’ve sewed all my life. I’d miss it if I couldn’t sew. An old lady can only use so many dresses herself, you know.”

“I suppose. These are really great – not that I’m into dolls understand.”

He looked up at her to make certain he had made that point clear.

She indicated that he had and Chip relaxed again.

“Well, I guess that’s the tour. There is a shower in the bathroom if you’re ever so inclined.”

“Thank you for the offer but I’d feel strange showering off in a Lady’s bathroom.”

“Well, it’s here if you change your mind. My sofa is probably a better bed than what you have in the basement, but again, only if you decide to use it, of course.”

“I figure I need to stay out of sight around here, at night. It would be hard to explain if one of the others came visiting in the evening and found me in your apartment.”

“Yes. I suppose. Of course, none of them has ever come visiting since I’ve been here, but it’s your call.”

Maude exerted no pressure. She was very comfortable. She was also generous and genuine. Again, Chip had to wonder how he could have become so close with another person in such a short amount of time. He cared about her and he wanted her to have a good and happy life. It made no sense to him. He liked everybody in that old place. And they seemed to like him. It was like an episode from the Twilight Zone on late night TV where

everybody could see him but they couldn't see each other.

"I'd better be going, I guess. Thank you for everything and for keeping our secret. I'll say goodbye before I leave for good."

Maude leaned down and planted a gentle kiss on Chip's cheek. He'd been waiting for the moment just in case it occurred. He returned the kiss with a quick peck to her cheek. He had been right. Giving that kind of a kiss was as great as receiving one.

Kissing girls provided a hot rush. Kissing loved ones produced a warm wave of contentment. Each had its place. Each had its rewards.

Chip stopped in the hall as the door closed behind him. Now what? Clearly there was not going to be another paying job. They were all broke – sad and broke and determined to remain miserable.

He heard the men's voices and looked over the railing. They were still taking the ladder back to the laundry room. He wondered if that might have been the first thing they'd ever tried to do together. Three guys and one ladder somehow didn't seem to be working. They each had suggestions. They each had objections. Eventually they reached the destination and they disappeared inside the room amid a three-way running commentary.

That reminded Chip that he needed to wash his clothes. One problem. He had but one set and wasn't about to strip to his birthday suit in front of the others while he waited for clean duds. It would be a job for later that night.

As he descended the stairs, random thoughts began to connect in his mind. Maude sewed and made dolls. Gert baked. Ernie fixed things. William was a teacher. Grady was good with money, and Rosie got naked in front of paying audiences of men. Except for Rosie's, the other's talents all had possibilities. Well, Rosie's certainly had possibilities in the Chipper's young imagination, but not along the path his mind was following at the moment.

CHAPTER FOUR

Relatives

As he passed the laundry room door, at the bottom of the stairs, he heard the men talking inside. He would not have paid attention except that he heard his name. He stopped and stood back to one side and listened.

“Something about that lad just doesn't seem right,” came Ernie's voice.

“In what way?” William asked.

“I can't put my finger on it. Seems to me there would be a lot more opportunities for him earn a few bucks in town than out here. Why does he keep coming back out here?”

“I see what you mean,” William agreed.

“I can't see it's any reason to be suspicious of him,” Grady said, as if defending Chip. “You two just aren't trusting enough. What you think? He came out here to rob us?”

“Well, no. I guess I may be going overboard.”

Rosie's door opened at the end of the hall and Chip figured he needed to move on so as to not be caught eavesdropping on the men. He walked toward her, turning on his smile.

“So, how's things with Rosie, this morning?” he asked as she stepped into the hall.

“So far so good. You?”

“Found my pocket knife, so things are fine, I guess. I don't suppose there's any more work around here, is there?”

It was more just making conversation than the reflection of a genuine expectation.

“Lots that needs doing but the petty cash bag looks pretty

flat. Sorry.”

“That’s okay. I understand about a flat cash supply. I met Maude today. She seems very nice. Makes dolls, did you know that?”

“No. I guess I didn’t. You do get around, don’t you?”

“Always have, I guess. Mom says I’m better than the newspaper.”

It was a phrase borrowed from *Leave It to Beaver* or some such black and white kid-com, but seemed to do the job. Rosie smiled and nodded.

“You have any skills, I mean other than dancing like you used to.”

The image it conjured up in his mind turned his ears red.

“Always been a darn good salesperson, I guess you could say. For thirty years, I left the men convinced they’d seen a whole lot more than I ever actually showed them.”

“Wasn’t that like cheating?”

“May have been but they always seemed to leave happy. I figured satisfied customers meant they felt they got their money’s worth.”

“I suppose you’re right. A salesperson, huh. Good to know. Guess I need to be on my way back to town. Lots of new girls to thrill, you know.”

“Oh, I’m sure of that,” she said. “Will we see you again?”

“Oh, sure. Still have half a chocolate cake to put away up at Gert’s and these hot days will give me reason to stop by your place for lemonade – if that’s okay.”

“Any time. We like you, Chip. Come back often.”

“I like you, too. I will.”

“Hope you’ll bring your parents out so we can meet them, sometime.”

“Parents? Oh. Sure. They don’t get out much, actually. Maybe later on, though.”

It seemed best to beat a hasty retreat before she asked for their social security numbers. He didn’t like the inquisitive turn things were taking at the *Villa*. He mounted his bike and headed toward town. Being early in the day as it was, he decided to continue down the road and visit *Four Corners* in the daylight. It turned out to be a leisurely fifteen-minute ride.

Its name seemed appropriate. Two rural roads, one

blacktop and one gravel, crossed paths there. The settlement spread back from the intersection for several blocks in all directions. A gas station sat catty corner from the grocery store. There was a small café on the third corner and a John Deere dealership on the fourth. The rest of the business section took up the block going due west from there – a drug store, a pizza place, and Doc Peterson’s office, housed in a building with a dentist and hairdresser. A long-deserted gas station sat at the far end of the street. During his ride around town he found no kids out playing. In fact, there was no school building. A rural, volunteer fire station sat at the south edge of town across the street from an overgrown baseball field.

Clearly families with kids had long since left for other areas. He rode back by the drug store, his eye taken by a huge picture of a raspberry sundae in the window. He had twenty dollars but knew none of it could be spent in that way. As he made ready to push off and return to the *Villa*, the door opened and a girl and her mother came out. They chatted together for a moment and then the mother walked off, apparently toward home. The girl looked around and spotted Chip. She walked toward him.

“New around here, aren’t you?” she said. It hadn’t been overly friendly but neither had she told him to buzz off.

“Yeah. Uh. New. Sort of.”

Chip’s mind was whirling. He hadn’t anticipated the need for a second cover story. She would know he had not just moved into town with his parents.

“I’m staying with my grandma – great grandma, actually – out at the retirement home – *Oakton Villa*. You know where it is?”

“Oh, yeah. Looks like an eerie old place. One of the men comes into my Grampa’s grocery every week. I guess he shops for everybody out there.”

“That’s right. Ernie. So, you live here, do you?”

“I live in Bloomington, actually, with my dad and his wife. I come here to be with Mom on the weekends. Pretty boring here. No other kids in town anymore.”

“Yeah. That would be boring, for sure. Not much hopping out at the *Villa*, either. Me and one friendly mouse are the youngest by more than half a century.”

“You’re funny. I’m Connie. A freshman. Only child.

And you?"

"I'm Chip. I'll be in eighth grade this year. Only child, also. Live with my family up north. I like girls."

If there could have been a dumber way to end his resume, he couldn't imagine what it might have been.

"I'm glad you do. I like boys, especially cute ones like you."

"Thanks. You're beautiful, too."

Drat it! Things were going so well right up to that last word!

"Thank you, Chip. We could walk over to the park and talk and stuff."

Talking would be nice and who knew what all 'stuff' might include.

"Sure. The park. Sounds nice. I guess I can leave my bike here."

"It'll be fine. None of the old folks in this place are going to steal it."

Unexpectedly, she took his hand and they walked back down the street. For a girl, she seemed a bit forward, but suddenly, *hand-holding-doing-stuff-forward* seemed like it might be a good thing. She talked a lot. That also seemed good since he wasn't called upon to keep the conversation going. Talking with girls was a lot different from talking with boys and he hadn't had a lot of practice.

"I had a boyfriend but he moved," Connie said. "We'd gone steady since seventh grade. You have a girl."

"Not a steady. Just different girls from time to time."

They got to the park and each sat in a swing. They continued talking. Connie had not had an easy life either. Her parents had been divorced for three years. Before that life had been pretty unhappy for her. Things seemed to be looking up recently. Chip was happy to hear that. Suddenly it was one o'clock.

"My mom will be wondering where I am," she said at last. "I didn't realize it was so late."

"Me either. Thanks for talking with me. You're a very nice girl."

"You're a very nice boy. You can kiss me if you want to."

"I can? I mean thank you. That would be very nice."

Connie wrinkled her brow, never having heard a boy stumble through that particular set of remarks before. They stood and he drew her close. They kissed, gently.”

“That was nice,” she said, then pressed her lips to his again for a much longer, much less gentle kiss.

“You’re a good kisser, Chip. When will you be back to town?”

“I don’t know for sure. Maybe tomorrow about two?”

“I’ll be here in the park then. About two tomorrow.”

She turned and walked off in the opposite direction from where Chip had stashed his bike. Chip stood there, enjoying the rush in all of its various ramifications. Suddenly he had reason to stick around for at least one more day.

As he rode back toward the Villa he had lots to think about. He liked Connie but it was as a girl – not as a person. He wondered if he should feel guilty about taking advantage of her. It wasn’t affection. It certainly wasn’t love. It was as a kissing and talking partner. Unlike the people at the *Villa* – who he would miss – it would not really bother him if he never saw Connie again.

He cut through the field and carefully made his way into the cellar. It was barely two o’clock. He took the plate of fried chicken to the couch and picked up his still unfinished library book. He read and munched. By four both had been finished. He decided to search for some more treasures there in the basement. In the East room – the one he entered first – there was a cupboard door on the inside wall. He opened it. It wasn’t a cupboard. What was it? There was a rope loop hanging down. He gave it a gentle pull. It moved easily. He continued to pull. One side of the loop came down and the other went up. Presently a little compartment about two feet square and three feet tall dropped into view.

Chip had seen such things on TV – usually late at night and usually in mansions. Dumb waiters he thought they were called. They were used to carry food from one floor to another – perhaps other things such as laundry as well. He remembered the *Three Stooges* moving from floor to floor in one. It sounded like fun. He crawled inside. The open sides allowed access to the ropes. He began pulling the one on the left and soon found himself rising up the shaft into darkness. He saw slits of light

above him; he stopped at the first one. It was another cupboard-like door, only from the inside. He put his ear close and listened for voices. It was quiet. He pushed ever so gently against the door and it eased open. He looked through the crack. It was Rosie's dining room. He closed the door and continued his upward journey.

The next floor had the door on both sides. He opened the one to his left. It was Ernie's dining room. No one seemed to be there. He opened the door to his right. It was Maude's place. Again, it was empty. He closed the door and pulled some more. The door was to his left. That time there were voices. Men's and women's. It was like a convention of the old people. He thought they never talked. What was up? He carefully opened the door a crack. It was Gert's place. They were standing around the dining room table. Their voices seemed upset. It was Maude's voice he first heard clearly.

"I suppose I should have told you about him, but what harm is to let him stay a night or two down there."

Chip swallowed. Was he being sold out?

"No harm, I guess," said William, "But his parents must be worried sick."

"I agree," said Gert. "We just need more information. Shall we confront him or shall we call in the authorities?"

"He hasn't told us the truth so far," Rose added. "What makes you think he'd tell it to us now?"

"I think he told me the truth," Maude said, defending the lad. "I can't say I think it's right for a twelve-year-old to be out in the World by himself, though, so maybe the authorities are the best ones to handle this."

That was all Chip needed to hear. He let himself down into the basement and hurried out of the waiter. He gathered up his possessions, along with a half dozen cans of Spam, and packed them in his backpack. He'd have to leave the novel and large history book behind. Not three minutes had elapsed before he was pushing his bike up the outside steps. Within five, he was back on the gravel road heading south. There were tears in his eyes. They soon made their way down his cheeks. He felt alone again. He didn't need those people anyway. He didn't need anybody. Kentucky is where he'd go. He peddled fast, soon tiring his young legs. He settled into an easier pace, sniffing to

himself, and tossing his head in disdain. The breeze tugged at his tangled hair blowing it this way and that.

He was mad. He was sad. He was lonely. It had all proved one thing for sure. He didn't dare put his trust in anybody ever again. From then on, he'd spend his time with girls. He'd talk with them and kiss with them and leave them behind. No attachments. No commitments. No guilt.

There was one huge problem. He didn't believe a word of it – well, he didn't want to believe a word of it. How could he have misjudged those people so? He had let himself become fond of them and they'd turned on him.

It seemed like he had been riding for hours. His watch, however, read only five p.m. It felt strange to be riding that road in the daylight. Perhaps he should find some refuge until sundown. He surveyed the countryside. He was coming down off a high plain and saw hill after hill stretched out before him. It would not be easy riding. He'd continue on until his legs were just too tired. Then he'd find a place off the road to rest until dark. It was his plan and he was prepared to stick with it.

There had been surprisingly little traffic. That was good. When a car did happen by, Chip slowed to a leisurely pace and made sure he was looking in the other direction as they passed. Nonchalance. That would be the secret to daylight riding.

He heard another car coming up from behind. He wouldn't turn to look. That would make it appear like he cared. Nonchalance! Just keep to a steady pace and look relaxed and carefree. He sat up straight and slowed a bit. He began whistling – a nice touch he thought to himself. The car honked. Why? He was as far to the left as he could get. The car had plenty of room to pass him in the right lane.

The honking continued and the car slowed as if it had no intention of passing. He peeked over his shoulder. It couldn't have been worse news. There, packed into William's old Fairlane Wagon were all six antiques from the *Villa*. It mimicked a chase scene from a silent movie with the old people's heads stuck out the windows and the car swerving back and forth across the center of the dusty, gravel, road.

He stood and began churning those peddles with renewed effort. He could peddle for as long as they wanted to keep up the pursuit.

No. He couldn't. His legs ached. His lungs called out for oxygen that never seemed to arrive. The race had been lost. He considered heading out across the meadow. Surely, they wouldn't try to follow in the car. But there were fences. Suddenly they had pulled alongside him. It was Rosie's voice he heard above the others.

"Stop the damn bike and let us talk with you."

The inappropriateness of the swear word coming from a lady seemed momentarily humorous. As he coasted to a stop he was chuckling through tears neither of which accurately defined his feelings. He'd been ratted out, sold down the river, snitched on, had the plug pulled, and a variety of other similar terms he'd heard on the late, late show.

He averted his face from them and wiped his cheeks with his shirt tail. They were immediately out of the car and surrounded him. Rosie had her arm around him. William and Grady had their hands on their hips. Maude and Gert held on to each other. Ernie spoke first.

"You had us worried sick, young man. We thought we'd lost you forever."

Maude stepped forward and continued, feeling it was her place to offer some explanation.

"Grady stumbled onto your new home in the basement about noon. He came up and reported his find to the rest of us. I felt I had to share what I knew. We figure you overhear some of that discussion through the dumb waiter – the door was open in the basement when we all went down to talk with you. You and your things were gone. We were so frightened. We would feel terrible if anything bad ever happened to you."

Chip was bewildered. He tried to put his quandary into words.

"But you talked about going to the authorities."

"For about ten seconds. Later agreed we needed to begin by hearing you out."

"And what if after that you still don't believe me?"

"We settled on that as well. We'll turn our backs and let you continue on your way. Give you a twelve-hour head start before we called the Sheriff."

"So what now?"

Ernie made the suggestion.

“You and the bike up on the luggage rack and we’ll go back home and try to sort this thing out.”

Chip sniffed and nodded his agreement. With the men’s help the bike and boy were soon secured in place, and the old car was on its more unhurried way back to *Oakton Villa*.

They gathered in Maude’s living room. Gert brought cookies. Rose provided lemonade. Maude had coffee and tea for those so inclined. No one seemed to want to open up the clear and obvious topic so Chip began. He was sitting on the couch between William and Gert. He began his story with a long, labored, sigh.

“Starting back when I was five, the child welfare department has removed me from my home, I suppose five or six times. Each time they put me with foster parents. It wasn’t that the foster homes treated me badly or that the new schools hadn’t been pleasant enough, but I wasn’t used to being bossed around. I’d always made my own rules and come and gone as I pleased. I didn’t rock my parent’s boat and they didn’t rock mine – usually. It was like an unspoken agreement. I hated the rules and the lack of freedom so I never spoke against my parents when I was in placement. I’d make the beatings seem like a whole lot less than they were. After a couple of months, they’d let me go back home. That’s always what I thought I wanted but it never worked. Every time I thought it would be different – I really did. The problems were still all there, though. Oh, they’d be better to me for a while but before long the yelling and the thrashings were back.

“The last time I was sent on that kind of a *vacation* things ended up in court. I remember my parents’ lawyer said something like: ‘We have heard from the psychiatrist that Chip is a normal, well-adjusted boy. If things were as bad in his home as the Case Worker suggests, could he possibly have grown into such a healthy young man, liked and respected at school by both his peers and the professional staff?’

“I remember that psychiatrist telling me I had a natural resiliency and ability to survive and he turned it against me when he took the stand. In my eyes, the people who had been charged with looking after my welfare had proved they were incompetent years ago, but he ignored all that and made me out to be like

some superman who could take anything they threw at me. Somehow that seemed to make it okay – all the stuff they did to me.

“Well, I hated the way they tried to control me in the foster homes so I decided if a beating at night was the cost of my independence then I had to be willing to pay the fee. There had to be something wrong with me that the psychiatrist missed, you see. Outside our family, Mom and Dad got along well with everybody.

“Ever since I was just a little kid my plan was when I reached thirteen I’d run away and be on my own. A few weeks ago things just got too bad so I decided to move up my timetable. My dad’s drunken, violent, episodes became so bad and came so often that I knew I had to leave before he killed somebody – Mom or me.”

The story had been delivered devoid of emotion and some of the specifics had not been entirely true. Chip’s eyes remained on the floor throughout his account. From time to time the women sobbed and the men winced. It had not been a pleasant chronicle.

When he finished, Chip looked around at the others expecting to be hit with dozens of questions. There were none.

“So?”

The adults looked at each other, nodding, knowing the others’ minds. Maude spoke.

“How would you like to have six new grandparents?”

She didn’t wait for a response.

“William can tutor you. We can all *chip* in – so to speak – for your support. That way it truly won’t be any burden on any of us. You’ll need a new – what did you call it – a cover story, I suppose.”

Chip allowed himself the tiniest slip of a smile.

“I already took care of that, I guess.”

They looked surprised.

“I met a girl in town today and I told her I was staying out here with my great-grandmother.”

“Well that leaves me out, honey,” Rosie said. “I’m far too young to be your *great*-grandmother.”

The others chuckled nervously.

“I guess it leaves us guys out as well,” Grady said

sounding disappointed.

Chip looked back and forth from Maude to Gert.

“I’d be proud to be the great grandson of either one of you. You know, there is a way so we don’t have to make a choice.”

They looked puzzled as the boy, flashing his most impish grin, continued.

“The way I seem to recall it, my grandmother on my father’s side was your daughter, Gert. And my grandmother on my mother’s side was *your* daughter, Maude. Isn’t that the way you all remember it?”

Gert began chuckling. Maude followed her lead. The others joined in and for the first time in thirty years the happy sounds of laughter were echoing through those halls and out the open windows.

“It’s blatantly illegal, you know,” Grady said, “Making such false claims.”

“Ya think we’ll do time in da big house, Buggy?” Maude said in the worst hoodlum-eze ever uttered.

Again, they laughed. Again, Chip drank it all in. Had any boy – any person at all – ever felt so much love? He couldn’t contain himself.

“I don’t know what to say, guys. It’s overwhelming. I love you all so much.”

The women dabbed at tears. The men cleared their throats.

“He’ll need a decent room,” William said.

“The office?” Ernie asked.

“It has possibilities,” Rose said, nodding her approval. “I can keep an eye on things so he doesn’t try to sneak girls in at night.”

The other women seemed embarrassed. The men winked at Chip. Some things transcended the generations.

Gert stood and became sober.

“There is one thing I think we need to seriously consider. Regardless of the kind of home your parents provided for you, Chip, I think you at least owe them the courtesy to let them know you are safe.”

Chip frowned. That was not a part of his plan. He didn’t think he owed them anything. The idea was not to his liking. He

wanted them to suffer! Before he could speak against it, William spoke in his ever-calm voice.

“I agree with Gert, Chip. I was never lucky enough to have a child of my own, but if I had, I’m sure there would always be a part of me that would be concerned about his well-being. They did give you life and that’s the most wonderful gift of all.”

It suddenly put a whole different perspective on things for Chip. He did love life. That was the whole point of running away – to make a better life for himself.

“So, how?” he asked at last, willing to at least entertain suggestions.

Ernie had a plan.

“You can write a sentence or two in your own handwriting. Say anything you want to say. None of us even needs to see it. Just so it conveys that you are safe and being well taken care of. We can send it to a mail forwarding agent. The classified section in the back of Popular Mechanics always has a whole section of them. You should get it into the mail on Monday. I’ll take it up to Linton to mail it to the forwarder. No chance it could ever be connected to us here.”

“Okay. I’m not sure what to say. I may need some help.”

“If you want help you’ll get it. Give it a try by yourself first though, okay?” William suggested.

“Okay. I’m really starved. Anybody have a few crumbs for their new . . . What am I to you, now, anyway?”

“It seems to me we just became a family here this evening,” Gert said. “How about ‘relative’?”

“If relatives get fed, I’m in favor.”

It was good for another laugh. No one wanted to leave and they chatted well into the night – well, the old folks chatted. Chip ate! It was as if they were meeting for the first time. Eventually, Chip fell asleep on the sofa. He was happy. He was safe. He was family.

CHAPTER FIVE

Adjustments

Chipper awoke right where he had fallen asleep. The events of the day before, rushed in to greet him. The lows had been terrible. The highs had been fantastic beyond his wildest dreams. He sat up. Something smelled rotten. It was Chip.

He stood and folded the cover that had been provided for him. Someone had removed his shoes and sox. He was grateful they had gone no further. Maude entered the room, her cup of coffee in hand.

“Good morning, *Relative*,” she said smiling.

“Good morning to you, *Relative*,” Chip answered rubbing his eyes and stretching. It produced an ear to ear grin. “The coffee smells great.”

“I didn’t realize you were a drinker. There’s always a pot on in the kitchen.”

“Oh, no, I’m not into drinking it. Just always loved the smell. Mom always made instant but some of the homes I lived in brewed up the real stuff. How it can smell so wonderful and taste so awful is a mystery.”

“Have cereal, eggs – could make pancakes. Orange juice. The regular breakfast stuff. What will it be?”

“I’m more used to pop tarts or cold pizza,” Chip said fully seriously. “You make real pancakes from the bottom up?”

“And pretty good ones, I’ve been told. That sound good?”

“It sounds great but I’m afraid I’m going to be lots of trouble. If you show me how to make them I can do it for myself from now on.”

“Believe me it will be no trouble. I love to cook. Probably not as good as Gert, but I get by.”

“I need to do my laundry and probably the sooner the better,” Chip said pulling at his T-shirt. “Problem is, these are all the clothes I brought.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. I’m not that much taller than you. How about I get you a pair of my PJs for you to wear ‘til your things get washed?”

“Are they girly?”

“I think I have some plain blue ones. Suppose they might do?”

Without waiting for an answer, she went into her bedroom and was soon back with a choice.

“Plain blue or red with geometric figures on them.”

“The blue will be fine. I suppose I should take you up on the offer of a shower as well.”

“Why don’t you shower and get changed while I make breakfast.”

Facing him, she put her hands on his shoulders and looked long into his face.

“This is going to be just wonderful, Chip. It’s like you’re a miracle in our lives. We all agreed to that last night.”

She pulled him close. He felt her kiss the top of his head. No words would come. He was certain he was no miracle and only hoped he would not let them down.

He took the pajamas and left for the bathroom.

“Shampoo in the cupboard,” she called after him.

He smiled. Had that merely been a helpful piece of information or a straight forward suggestion? Either way, he was soon lathered up. It felt good to get really clean. He found a comb and after some struggling had his hair untangled. It was almost shoulder length, and blond. Chip called it medium blond though it may have actually been a bit darker than that. The hair and the blue eyes came from his mother’s side. His dark skin and well-built body from his father. He liked what he saw in the mirror. Sometimes he wished he could see inside. If he could find where the evil in him resided, he might be able to squeeze it out like pus from a pimple. He didn’t dwell on that but it was always with him.

The sleeves and pant legs were too long but he rolled

them up and soon felt presentable. He gathered up his clothes and wrapped them in the bath towel.

“If you have laundry soap I can take care of my stuff,” he announced as he entered the kitchen.

“After breakfast, okay?”

“Sure. You have a very nice bathroom. I guess that sounded dumb.”

“Not at all. Thank you. You mustn’t worry so much about what you say. I’m not easily offended and I’d rather hear things straight than have you pussy foot around.”

The pancakes arrived. Chip took a seat. They smelled wonderful and tasted delicious. There were four on the platter. He devoured each in turn. Maude sat across the table, nursing her coffee.

“So, if I’m going to be living here, how can I help? I’m used to having chores to do. I’m a good worker. I want to pull my weight.”

“You any good at dishes?”

Chip grinned.

“Dishes are my specialty – that and taking out the trash. I’m pretty good with the vacuum too. Have trouble with windows but I’m willing to work at that. I can mow the lawn and shovel snow.”

“Sounds like you will be able to pull your weight with no trouble at all.”

She looked at the clock.

“I have a church service I like to watch on TV on Sunday mornings. You’re welcome to join me or you might rather use the time to wash your clothes.”

“I’ll do the clothes thing. Church gives me the willies. Soap?”

“Under the sink. It’s concentrated so one cap full should be more than enough. Would you mind throwing in a few kitchen towels?”

“Sure. These?”

“The ones in the hamper under the window.”

“I’ll go down to the basement and check on my stuff while the washer’s going. Don’t want to disturb you and God up here.”

Chip was soon in the laundry room. Actually, it would have more properly been called a storage room – large and

cluttered with all sorts of boxes, pieces of furniture and rolls of old carpeting. The washer and dryer sat near the hall door. Chip was an old hand at washing and soon had the machine purring. He checked his watch figuring it would take at least twenty minutes for the load. The laundry room floor was cold to his bare feet as were the wooden steps leading down stairs. The braided rug provided welcome warmth.

Nothing seemed to have been disturbed in the basement. If they moved him upstairs into the old office, he'd miss his place down there. Maybe he could keep it for a club house though he realized his club house days were clearly numbered. "Maybe a make out spot," he giggled to himself.

By nine o'clock he was back at Maude's door, finished laundry in hand. He supposed he would not be required to knock and yet it hadn't been established one way or the other. He rapped and called out as he opened the door.

Her program was over and she was humming a hymn and tidying things up in the kitchen. Chip was soon back into his familiar feeling jeans and T-shirt.

"You can keep the PJs for sleepwear if you like. I can even take up the sleeves and legs. Got a blue robe, too. It'll give me something important to do."

"Sure. If you want to. That would be great."

Actually, Chip preferred sleeping in his birthday suit but with all the women suddenly in his life, he figured that might have to cease.

"I need to write that note to my parents. Can I borrow some paper and an envelope?"

"In the desk drawer in the dining room. Let me know if I can be of any help."

Chip sat down at the desk. It reminded him of school and he experienced a brief wave of sadness. He located the paper and a pencil and began. No drafts. One shot and out was his plan.

Dear parents,

This is Chip, your son. I ran away so you two could get your act together without me in the way. I am safe and being very well taken care of by some wonderful people. I hope you won't come looking for me. Things will be better for all of us this way. By the way, thanks

for giving me life.

Chip.

He stamped and addressed the envelope, knowing he needed to conceal that from the others. The less they knew the less they could be held responsible in case things didn't work out. He sealed the note in the envelope and then sealed that envelope inside another – one Ernie could address to the mail forwarder. He left it on the desk and joined Maude in the kitchen.

“I told Connie – the girl from town – that I'd meet her at two this afternoon. Will that still be okay?”

“I imagine so. You like this Connie?”

“She's okay, I guess. A little forward you might say and that probably means that after a while she'd become pretty bossy. I've seen it before with girls.”

Maude just listened, privately amused.

“There's one more thing we need to get worked out between us – I guess it's really *among* us,” Chip said, continuing his monologue.

“What's that?”

“I need to know who my boss is. It won't work to have six bosses, you know.”

“You're a wise young man. The seven of us will have to give that some serious thought. You are right about it, of course.”

“I'd like to get it settled as soon as possible. I'm the kind who needs to know where I stand. I also need to know about school. Somebody said something about William tutoring me. If that's how it's to be we need to set up a schedule. I guess I can talk to him about it.”

“As I understand it, school begins the first week in September around here. What grade are you in?”

“I finished seventh last year, so I'll be in eighth. I brought books along. I think education is important.”

“I'd suggest you and William get together and work things out. He seems eager to get started, too. We also need to get you some more clothes – you need at least one change a day.”

“If there's a thrift store at the Salvation Army or some church I'm sure I can find good stuff there. That's where I always shopped before.”

“You let me look into that. I'm sure we can work it out.”

“No nerdy stuff, please. I wear T's in the warm weather

and sweat shirts in the cold. Just jeans – prefer faded – and white socks. Underwear is briefs – not boxers – briefer the better. Suppose I’ll need a coat of some kind, too. Gee, I’m getting expensive. I’ll chip in the twenty I earned cutting the wood.”

“You hold on to that for now. Probably need some mad money to treat Connie you know. Speaking of treats, Gert invited us all up to her place for brunch today.”

“That sounds great. Maybe I should go up and see if there are things I can do to help.”

“What a nice idea. I’m sure she’d appreciate the thoughtfulness.”

“I’ll go do that now, then, okay?”

“Fine. Maybe while we eat you can work out a tutoring plan with William.”

“You’re sounding like a parent.”

“Well, until we get this boss thing settled I figured I should take a shot at it.”

Chip grinned.

“I figured as much. See you at lunch.”

It was all too good to be true. Chip had seen good things fall apart before. He would enjoy it all while it lasted but he’d hold Kentucky in reserve.

Gert’s door was open.

“Knock, knock,” he said as he stood there peering inside.

“Chipper?” she called from the kitchen. “Back here, dear. Come on in.”

“Thought maybe I could help. I understand you’re cooking for the whole crew today. That’s pretty nice. Smells like ham.”

“Good nose. Ham, green beans, yams, mashed potatoes and candle salad.”

“Candle salad?”

“Not real candles. If you really want to help, you can make them for me.”

“Sure. I’m a fast learner.”

“The fixin’s are on the cabinet by the sink. Put a piece of lettuce on the salad plate. On top of that goes a ring of pineapple. Then cut a banana in half and stand it up like a candle on the center of the pineapple. A cherry on top for the flame and then dribble on some of this mayo and cherry juice concoction like

wax dripping down the side.”

“Pretty neat. I never knew anybody who went to that much trouble to make something you were just going to eat. I can do that.”

And he did. Ten minutes later each of the seven places had its very own candle salad. Gert stood back and looked them over.

“You have a real artistic touch, son. They are beautiful.”

Chip understood that Gert meant what she said. His teachers always said he was artistic. Some of his best drawings remained behind on the walls of the boy’s bathroom at school. The memory brought a smile to his face.

“What?” Gert asked.

“Oh. Nothing to share with a lady like yourself, Ma’am, er, Gert.”

Gert raised her eyebrows but wouldn’t pry.

“Things will be ready in ten minutes. How about you go round up everybody. I seem to be ahead of schedule. Nothing worse than sitting down to a cold meal.”

There *were* worse things of course, but Chip opted not to press the issue.

It was a happy time. Chip listened more than spoke. He was amazed at the questions being asked back and forth between the adults. These people really didn’t know each other. Happily, they’d know each other much better after the meal was completed.

“Why’s our little miracle so quiet today,” Rosie asked at one point.

“Just want to make sure I get my share of the food,” he said going for the laugh.

He got it.

There was a word from science class that he thought fit him better than miracle. What was it? Cataclysm? No. Cataleptic? No. *Catalyst*. That was it. Something that promotes a change without undergoing any major change itself. He figured if he had been the reason for these people coming together then it was more like he was playing the role of a catalyst. As a catalyst he’d feel no actual responsibility. Not so as a miracle worker. He wanted none of that.

“Chip does have several things on his mind that I think we

need to attend to,” Maude said.

The others looked his way and waited.

“Well, and I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but we gotta work out some way so I just have one boss. Six of you is going to be way to confusing. I don’t have a good suggestion about it but I figure that should be an adult decision so I’ll just depend on you to handle it. Then about my school work . . .”

He turned his attention to William who sat across from him.

“I understand you have offered to help me out.”

“Yes. I have. Regular school won’t work. They need a birth certificate and a personal history and parental permission forms and it would just become too complicated. I’ll be pleased to work with you.”

“Well, I’ll miss being with kids – no offense to anybody here you understand – but I can see what you’re saying. I have some books with me. I suppose we can begin with them.”

“Sounds like a plan to me. You have a favorite subject?”

“History, I suppose. Seems to me that it’s mostly about all the mistakes people have made down through the years. I figure there’s lots of useful stuff to learn from that. One thing I don’t get though. It seems like in every chapter there’s a whole new generation of people making all those same mistakes all over again. Doesn’t anybody read history books?”

His pronouncement was met with silence. Then Grady spoke.

“Maybe you’ll be the one to lead us down the right path.”

That was way too much of a load for Chip. He changed the subject.

“Why don’t I help clear away the dishes? I happen to know there are peach pies in the oven.”

It had been a successful diversion but the lad’s wisdom had made the others feel rather foolish. They each had their own, private, cross-generational, failures to prove just how astute Chip’s observation had been.

The pie was delicious. The conversation eventually returned to congenial topics. The men offered to do the dishes. The women gladly accepted and moved with coffee into the living room. Chip excused himself for his appointment in town.

As he rode toward *Four Corners* he suddenly realized that

there was not one shred of his wonderful news that he could share with Connie, or anybody, for that matter. It didn't seem fair. It had been the best week in his entire life and he couldn't talk about it. Still, he did seem eager to see Connie again. That surprised him. She was just a girl, after all.

He pulled into the park a few minutes before two and was giving the swing a vigorous workout when he spied Connie walking across the grass in his direction. He bailed out into a perfect two-point landing. He was impressed and hoped she was, too. He waved and she returned it.

He ran the twenty yards to meet her.

"Good to see you, Connie. I hoped you'd come."

"Same here. I hoped, too. Let's teeter."

"Sure. Teeter is good."

They talked as they teetered. Connie seemed less forward – more attentive to what was on Chip's mind. It was nice. They walked to a grove of trees hand in hand. They sat on the grass in a small clearing and continued to talk.

Connie was a reporter for the school paper and was on the Pom Squad – some kind of junior cheerleader group best as Chip could figure it. Her mother ran the drug store there in *Four Corners*. Her dad taught at the university up in Bloomington – psychology – and consulted for some big conglomerate. Connie didn't know which one. Her step mom taught drama at her high school. She seemed happier, less wound up than the previous day.

"I really liked kissing you yesterday," she said at last.

"Me too, *you* I mean. I liked kissing *you*."

There was more kissing and more talking and more walking hand in hand.

"Like sundae's," Connie asked at last.

"The day or the dessert?" Chip asked, seriously.

"The dessert, silly."

She slapped at his arm, playfully.

"Sure. I'd like to buy you one if you like them, too."

"Mom said we could make our own at the drug store. It isn't open on Sundays but she gave me the key."

"Sounds great – a Sundae on Sunday."

Before long they were sitting at the old fashioned counter enjoying their treats. Connie fed Chip her cherry. It was fun

being with her. She didn't pry. On several occasion, he had to manufacture answers to her questions but it seemed to have worked out well. He just hoped he could remember what he had said if any of those things came up later.

He helped her do up the dishes. It seemed like he had known her forever.

"Daddy's picking me up in twenty minutes. I have to go. Still have some things to pack. This has been a great afternoon. Will you meet me next Saturday?"

"Wouldn't miss it. I suppose we could try for one last kiss to last the whole week," Chip suggested.

"It was long and it was better than any before."

* * *

As he pulled into the drive at the *Villa*, Chip hoped that Connie hadn't bruised his lips or left any other marks on his face or neck that would disclose the afternoon's activities. He figured his boy-girl stuff was just private and no one else's business.

He parked his bike beside the front steps and entered through the front door. The entry hall was a mess. The men had moved the furniture out of Dead George's office and were struggling to erect a wood frame bed in the room. Chip offered his help and before long it was ready for occupancy. A dresser was moved in along with several chairs, a study desk, book case, and small table. It looked cluttered – just the way Chip liked things.

"A new coat of paint to bring everything together and I'd say you got yourself a new room, Chip," came Ernie's, hand on his hips, opinion.

"Looks that way. Thanks guys. I could have stayed and helped if you'd have just mentioned it."

"Something we wanted to do for you," Grady said, looking pleased with the results. "Still need some curtains, I suppose. Have to get Maude to work on those."

"Curtains? Boys don't have *curtains*," Chip said without thinking. "Boys have drapes, if anything."

"Well, yes. *Drapes*. Of course, that's what I meant. Drapes."

The three men chuckled. Chip joined them knowing he had made his point and feeling a bit foolish for having launched such a fuss. He surveyed the room and bounced his bottom on

the bed.

“Blue, wouldn’t you say?” he said.

“Blue?”

“Blue paint to bring this collection of pieces together.”

The men looked around and nodded.

“With – maybe – *red* drapes?” Ernie suggested somewhat tentatively, waiting for Chip’s reaction.

“And a red bed spread and throw rug,” William added.

Chip nodded, thoughtfully. It was a good plan. He helped the men move the unneeded furniture down to the laundry room.

“Where’s a vacuum?” Chip asked. “The carpet in this entry hall needs a good going over.”

“Rosie has one,” Grady said.

“I’ll take care of it, then, Chip said.

The men moved out to the porch and Chip made short work of the mess on the carpet. He returned to his new room and lay back on the bed – yet to be made up or fitted with a pillow. The ceiling seemed a long way away. There were two tall narrow windows on the outside wall, opposite the door. A crystal light fixture hung on a brass chain in the center of the room. He figured he could eventually exchange it for something more manly. He’d need to scrounge up a desk light. A computer would be nice, but he’d not even bring that up. They had done so much for him already.

He made his way to the basement to retrieve the blanket, pillow, radio and fan. It took several trips. He was starved so ran the three flights of stairs to Gert’s place. He figured there would surely be leftovers. There were.

Gert loved to watch him eat and they made easy conversation about the day’s activities. She seemed tired to Chip, and he commented.

“You look tired.”

“I am, a bit. Haven’t cooked like that for years. It was great fun but my old bones aren’t used to it.”

It was at that moment the larger problem hit him. His new family members were *all* old. He’d be lucky if any of them survived to see him graduate from college. It was a sad thought. It was very scary. Suddenly his happy future was riddled with six funerals. He wasn’t sure he would be up to that. It wasn’t fair.

Then he was hit by a second wave of concerns. He had accepted them as his family. That meant that when he was capable of caring for them, it would be his responsibility to do so. He'd have to make about a zillion dollars a year to handle all that. He needed to sort it all out, but he had no one to talk to. Life was teasing him with short shots of happiness followed by long term doses of uncertainty.

CHAPTER SIX

Routines Can Be Good

The next several weeks passed more or less uneventfully. Life settled into a dependable routine. Chip and Ernie painted his furniture sky blue. Maude made him red drapes and bedspread. Rose and Ernie took him shopping for clothes and he soon had an outfit for every day of the week. Each outfit looked just like every other one – a fact that pleased Chip but bewildered the old folks.

Since William would be spending the most time with Chip, it was agreed he would be the boy's "boss". Not many occasions came up where 'bossing' was necessary but Chip checked in and out with him and got his permission to go here and there. The school work was going well. William turned out to be a great teacher with a huge library that made Chip drool.

Most weekends, Chip spent time with Connie. He really liked her and didn't even mind her tendency to be a bit controlling. He figured a girl who regularly took the initiative where kissing was concerned was probably a pretty good catch. She was a lot like a best guy friend except instead of playing ball together they kissed together. As sports went, kissing had to rank right up there with the best of them. Her mother was lots of fun and the three of them had many good times together.

With September drawing to a close the nights became chilly. That meant most days Chip spent some time splitting wood and delivering it to the apartments for use in the fireplaces. Each apartment had its own gas heat but most preferred the fireplaces during the Fall.

Life was good at *Oakton Villa*. Three evenings each week they all ate together usually in one of the women's apartments.

For other meals, they had worked out a schedule that shared Chip more or less equally among his new relatives. The men set up horse shoes in the side lawn and spent many happy hours there together. Grady turned out to be the one to beat. Chip was improving and enjoyed his time with the guys.

If there was a problem, it was Chip's lack of boy companions his own age. There had been no gossip about a missing boy and the education commission had accepted William's home tutoring plan without question. Chip had relaxed about the funerals in his future, having decided to just enjoy life with his new older friends for as long as it lasted. Their inevitable passing would be terribly sad but that just made it all the more important to build some wonderful memories with them every single day.

Privately, Chip was concerned that there had been no apparent search initiated for him. He had to wonder why? In his fantasies, he saw his father going from house to house all over the state hunting for him – looking in attics and basements, thumping walls for secret rooms or passageways. But he concluded that was all it was, a fantasy. Either his parents were relieved to have him out from under foot or they had put their own welfare ahead of his – not reporting him missing so they would not be looked upon as the kind of parents from whom a son would need to run away. He sobbed himself to sleep over it on more than one occasion.

On the morning of September 30th everything changed abruptly at the *Villa*. A Sheriff's car pulled up and stopped out front. Chip saw it approaching from his window. Thinking it had to do with him, he grabbed his jacket and headed for the basement door behind the staircase, ready to make his escape. He was clearly unaware of the contradiction within him – on the one hand wanting his father to come for him and on the other doing everything in his power to stay free of the man.

Rose met the deputy at the front door.

"I have official documents for the owners of *Oakton Villa*," he announced.

"Official? Sounds ominous!" Rose said.

"And you are?" he asked.

"Rose Malone, one of the owners."

He checked a list of names and nodded.

“You can sign for the envelope.”

“What’s in it? I don’t sign unless I know what it is.”

“All I know, Ma’am, is that it’s legal documents from the Sheriff’s office. Sign for them here or come with me back to the station, I guess.”

“Not much of a choice, then.”

“Not much. Sorry Ma’am but that’s how this law works.”

Rose signed the paper and took the envelope.

The deputy tipped his broad brimmed gray hat and left. He had been kind. Rose took the envelope into her room and opened it. A few minutes later she had everyone gathered in the entry hall to hear the devastating news.

“It seems that George failed to pay the taxes on this place the past three years and if we don’t come up with six thousand dollars by December 31st the place will be auctioned off to pay the debt. I don’t know about the rest of you but there’s no way I can come up with my share of that – what would that be? A thousand dollars apiece?”

Chip moved forward from the rear of the hall where he had been listening.

“Actually, that’s only about seventy dollars a day between now and then. I have an idea – it’s not new, actually – I was thinking about it that first week I was here in the basement.”

“Come on up to my living room,” Maude suggested. “We can hear Chipper’s idea and think about what to do.”

Once everyone had taken a seat, Chip began.

“Back at the beginning I was really worried about you guys and your finances. I guess lately I haven’t thought much about it. But, I got this idea. Gert makes the best baked goods any of us have ever had, right?”

Everyone nodded and Gert blushed.

“Maudie makes beautiful doll cloths – 100 times better than you could ever buy in a store.”

Again, everyone nodded, though brows began to furrow as they seemed to be missing the point.

“Ernie can fix anything he gets his hands on and William’s the best teacher I’ve ever known. Grady knows all about running a business and Rosie was a *fan*-tastic salesperson back in her earlier days.”

Rosie winked at him. The humor had escaped the others.

Their faces remained blank. Chip tried again.

“The Oakton Bizarre. Gifts and services for all occasions and all ages.”

Wrinkled brows smoothed. Sad faces began to smile, then beam. They looked at one another and nodded. Rose spoke first.

“You got connections with the grocery and drug store in town, right, Chip?”

“Very solid connections, I’d say.”

It was his turn to wrinkle his forehead suggesting careful thought rather than confusion.

“I can contact them to be outlets for the dolls and the baked goods. That will begin getting the word out. Then we can decorate this place for Christmas and have the county’s biggest Holiday Bizarre ever. We can make decorations to sell in addition to the food and dolls.”

It was William’s turn.

“Ernie and I can run ads in the county paper to sell our services. Chip can deliver fliers door to door in all the little towns around here. We can easily make ten dollars an hour and if we each only work an hour or two every day that will be nearly half of what we need.”

“I think we can make this work,” Grady said. “I’ll get right on the paper work with the state – sales tax and such. My job really won’t take much time. If you others can show me what to do, I can help you.”

Rosie added her enthusiastic endorsement.

“You can help me make decorations – wreaths and candle displays – things like that. Give me a couple of feathers and I can decorate anything.”

At that the others laughed. It was the first time her unglamorous past had been brought out into the open. It was a good thing she had done.

“Don’t forget Halloween and Thanksgiving,” Chip said. “We can do decorations for them, too. I can ask some farmers if we can have cornstalks. We can probably work out a deal to sell pumpkins for those who are growing them and split the profit someway. Grady and I can take care of that.”

“I’ve always thought this big entry hall would be a wonderful place for a huge Christmas tree,” Gert said.

“I’m pretty sure I know where we can get one,” Chip said.

“The county road crew is clearing trees and brush for the new bridge east of here. The actual construction won’t begin until January, as I understand it. There are two great pine trees that’ll have to come down. We can talk to the foreman and see if they’ll spare them until when we need one.”

Additional ideas began to fly back and forth.

“I’m going to need lots of freezer space,” Gert said, thinking out loud.

“I’m sure we can all spare room in ours, Grady suggested.”

“Maybe I can pick up an old box-type freezer at an appliance store,” Ernie said. “If it just needs a little work I’m sure I can fix it. Maybe I can trade them some work hours to cover the cost.”

“I’ll need material and thread and doll bodies,” Maude said, continuing that train of thought.

“I’ll ask Connie if she knows where we might get some used dolls. Of course, most of the girls have Barbies and dolls like that. I imagine they’re all pretty standard in size. Maybe just make clothes to fit the ones they already have.”

“And as for the cloth, we can get dresses and shirts at the second-hand clothing stores. Wouldn’t that work?” Rose asked.

“Sure would. I probably have enough old clothes myself to get a good start on things,” Maude said.

Rosie had one more shot to take.

“I’d offer you some of my own old costumes but I’m afraid they wouldn’t go very far.”

Even the men blushed. Chip’s heart began pounding. It was probably time to go chop some more wood.

The plan was set. They all went back to their own apartments and began making lists of things to do. The old mansion was filled with excitement and purpose. Chip’s private fear was that it would be too much work for the old people. He didn’t want them getting sick because of his plan. He knew he’d have to work overtime to help. Chip liked to work. That would be no problem.

Chip returned to his room to make a list. As he took a seat at his desk he looked out the window toward town. A man’s face appeared just outside, then, just as quickly, vanished. It startled him and he jumped to his feet. More than that it made him

uneasy. It was a face he had seen somewhere before – perhaps. Where? Why would a man be peeking into his room – especially somebody he might know?

He rushed out the front door and around the side of the house to investigate. There was no one there. He ran on to the back of the house but still, no one was in sight. It was puzzling to Chip. Usually, *puzzling* was fun for the boy – some new challenge to figure out. That time it was for some reason distressing.

He returned to his room deciding not to bother the others with the encounter. It was probably just some vagrant passing by who resembled somebody from Chip's past. He began work on his list. There was a knock on the frame of his open door.

"Ernie and I are going to the thrift shop to see if we can find a Barbie doll for Maude to use as a model," Rosie said. "Want to ride along?"

"Sure. Let me tell William."

For some reason checking in and out with William provided Chip a sense of security and belonging. He never failed to keep William informed and William never failed to say thank you.

They were soon in the car headed for town.

"You say you shop the thrift stores, do you?" Ernie asked, addressing Chip, apparently making more than just idle conversation.

"Oh yes. An old hand at finding bargains."

"I'd say so," the old man came back.

Chip looked puzzled so Ernie explained.

"That back pack you have. Top of the line quality, it seems to me. Same for your bike."

"Oh. I see. Yes. Like I said, I can sniff out the bargains."

"Can I be honest, with you, Chip?" he continued.

"Honest? Sure. Of course."

"I'm having a hard time buying your story."

"I don't understand, Ernie."

"Well, here's my problem. You tell it as though you come from a poor home, abusive in nature, with relatively uneducated parents who don't give a whit about you."

"Yes. So?"

"But, I see this very bright, loving, happy, caring young

man, who speaks impeccable English, is clearly well read and even cultured – you do recognize most of the classical music I play in my room. Those things, along with the two hundred dollars' worth of clothes you were wearing when you arrived here, just don't mesh with the background you tell us about."

"I'll take all that as a complement. I've worked really hard to overcome the obstacles my home has presented for me. I'll even admit I owe some of that to one of the first foster homes I was in. They showed me how important all that was if I wanted to get ahead – to be more than my parents were, you see. I never intended to imply I came from unintelligent stock – so to speak – just from two alcoholics who are terribly selfish, unhappy and mixed up and don't know squat about raising a kid."

"Well, I for one," Rosie began, "think you've done a heck of a job raising yourself, Chipper."

She looked at Ernie and spoke directly to him.

"I think you're being cruel to the boy. What's wrong with you?"

"Maybe he *is* telling the truth, then. I'm an engineer and I need all my ducks neatly in a row. Chip's ducks just didn't line up that way. I'm sorry if I offended you, Son, but sometimes I'm honest to a fault, I guess."

"Not a problem. I'm much more comfortable with folks who are honest and open. I like to know where I stand. I guess you have the right *not* to believe me just like Rosie had the right *to* believe me."

Chip paused and then looked up into Ernie's face.

"I didn't steal the stuff I came here with, if that's your concern. I don't steal. Your things are safe around me."

"Okay, then. I'll not speak of it again. I hope this hasn't damaged our friendship."

"Friendship? We're relatives, remember."

The remark broke the tension and received a round of nervous chuckles – more than it deserved.

"As long as we're being honest," Chip went on, "Have either of you seen anybody hanging around the *Villa* lately?"

"Hanging around? A stranger, you mean?" Rosie asked.

"Yeah. I saw somebody. He was looking in my window."

Rosie turned to Ernie.

"I haven't, have you?"

"No. Just the mailman sometimes brings packages up to the door if they're too big to fit in the box. But you know Chester, don't you?"

"Yeah. I know him. This was a younger guy – late thirties, I'd say. I figured he was just a drifter, maybe, looking to see if anybody lived in the house."

"Was he dressed like a drifter?" Ernie asked.

"Not really, I guess, now that you mention it. I only saw him from the chest up, but his hair was combed and he wore dark rimmed glasses. He had on a blue shirt with a collar and a little pad of some kind in his pocket – and two pens in there, too."

"Doesn't sound like a drifter. Did you notice if there was a car parked anywhere?"

"I didn't think to look. I did go outside right away and tried to find him."

"That may not have been a real good idea. What if he'd been dangerous?" Rosie said, clearly concerned.

"I guess I didn't think of that."

"If you see him again, come and get one of us men, okay?" Ernie said forcefully.

"Okay. Sure."

"And, keep your drapes closed at night," Rosie added.

The topic was dropped – well, it was dropped as far as further conversation about it was concerned. It lingered on in each of their thoughts.

An hour later, the three returned home with several sacks filled with purchases. Maude met them at the door.

"My goodness. Three sacks to bring home one Barbie doll?"

The three of them giggled.

"Got some bargains," Chip said.

"Let me tell you, Maude," Rose said, "If you want the best deals in the State, take this young champion haggler with you. He sweet talked the sales lady down from almost twenty dollars to five."

She tussled Chip's hair. He stood motionless, enjoying the touch and hoping it would continue. Rosie gave the best hugs of any of the three women because they lasted longer. It was as if they were more genuine in some way.

"We got you gobs of good stuff," Chip said at last.

"Bring it on up then, and let me see."

Chip took the bags and accompanied Maude to her room, leaving the others behind. He dumped the contents onto the dining room table.

"Here are three Barbies and two Ken's – you know about Ken don't you?"

Maude nodded as Chip continued.

"We got five, big, baby dolls. They all have great heads and hands but the bodies need some work. Figured you could dress each of them special some way. Then, Rosie picked out these dresses and shirts for you to use for cloth. Here's a doll sized baby carriage that Ernie says he can make look good as new."

"And a black felt hat, I see," Maude said picking it up. "I can make dozens of doll hats and shoes out of this."

"Oh, no, Maude. I got that for *you*. Rosie says you look great in hats and I haven't seen any around your place here so I got it for you. Used my own money."

He beamed.

Maude also beamed and nodded as she walked with it to the mirror on the hutch. She tried it on and turned toward Chip, striking a glamor pose.

Chip clapped.

"You do look great in a hat."

"Well, thank you, young man."

She curtsied humorously,

"I just don't have many occasions that call for hats anymore, you see."

"Well, we'll have to work on that," he came back. "I gotta get down to William's place, now. Told him I'd come for lessons as soon as I got back. This week is Incas. I love the Incas."

Chip studied right through lunch. Lunch with William was usually peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with milk and chips. It was one of his favorite meals. No dishes to wash – just his mug to rinse out and hang back on a hook under the shelf above the sink. Men seemed more sensible about such things. Women would have found a way to dirty a half dozen dishes and would have required hand washing before and after eating. They also seemed determined to make him wear a shirt while eating. How that had anything to do with digestion escaped him. He was

glad he was a guy.

When he got his assigned work completed, William usually let him look through his huge collection of National Geographic Magazines. Most of them were good for at least one picture of a woman naked from the waist up. William seemed to understand it was a normal interest and looked the other way. Chip was intrigued by how merely looking at the cover of a new edition caused his heart to begin racing.

Becoming a man was a fascinating process. He didn't yet feel comfortable asking certain questions about it, however – and he did have questions. He wasn't sure why that particular topic seemed difficult to discuss with adults. It certainly hadn't been with his friends back home. Of course, they didn't really know any more about such things than Chip did, so he realized much of the information he had garnered from those discussions was probably suspect.

"I have a special English project for us to work on today," William said once they got back to the library table where they held class.

"What's up?"

"We need to compose two classified ads – one for Ernie and one for me."

"Where do we start?" Chip asked reaching for a pad and pencil.

"Where would you start?" William asked.

He often asked questions in response to Chip's questions. Chip liked that. It pointed him in the right direction so he could think things out on his own.

"Well, we could look in the classified section of the paper and get an idea about how other people write them – find some that really grab our attention and then use those as models."

"Sounds like a solid plan," William said, continuing to be amazed at how bright this little ragamuffin really was. It raised questions about the boy's story in his mind, as well, but he didn't voice them. William was the most patient of Chip's new relatives.

"Something else, I hadn't thought of," Chip added. "We'll need to decide which headings to put them under."

They each took a section and began reading, from time to time circling those that had possibilities. Then they exchanged sheets and examined the ads the other one had marked.

Chip began writing.

Tutor. Experienced. All subjects. \$10.00 an hour. My place or yours. William Flagg.

He handed it to William who nodded his slow, deliberate nod. Chip knew from experience that particular version of the nod meant it was generally okay but still needed a little work.

"What grade levels would the readers think I tutored," he asked.

"I see. What's your preference?"

"Let's say fifth through eighth. Also, transportation getting me to and from homes in the area could become a problem."

Chip went back to work and soon pushed his new version across the table toward William.

Tutor. Experienced. Grades five through eight. All subjects. \$10.00 an hour. My place, smack in the middle of the County. William Flagg.

It was received with generally the same nod as before – a bit faster, however, which indicated that it was considerably improved but not yet quite good enough. Chip waited for the comments.

"How will the reader find me?"

"Ojai Board?" Chip joked, smiling sheepishly as he realized the omission.

"And how could we quickly indicate my actual qualifications?"

Chip thought.

"Those letters after a college graduate's name. What are yours?"

"M.A."

"And that means what?" Chip asked as he went to work making the additions.

"Master of Arts."

Chip nodded *his* own special nod – one indicating that the information he had received, though not complete, was sufficient for the time being. He *would* be back for clarification, however. William smiled. They had developed a good relationship and read each other well. He had nearly forgotten how invigorating it was to have a youngster around.

The final edition included the degree and the phone

number. A similar ad was constructed for Ernie, less the engineering degree, which they decided would make him look over qualified as a handyman. Chip would show it to him later for his modifications and approval. Then it would need to be delivered to the newspaper.

By shortly after one, the lessons were finished for the day. Ernie's ad was finalized with him. Rosie presented the men with a list of raw material needed to make the decorations. She thought they could begin trying to locate and collect things such as pine cones, grape vines, cornstalks and feathers. She added a reminder to Chip about the big Christmas tree he needed to make sure was saved for them.

The three men and Chip set out for town in the old Fairlane with ads and list in hand. Ernie was the only one with a driver's license so he always drove. The car belonged to William so he got to ride shotgun. That left Grady and Chip in the back seat.

Conversation flowed easily. Chip had discovered several stands of pine tree – places where he thought cones could be gathered. William pointed out it was late in the year and many may have begun to rot. They would do the best they could.

It cost \$44.04 to run the two ads for two weeks. It was much more than Chip had expected. He was learning there was a significant cost associated with running a business. Each of the three men decided they would chip in equally – \$14.68.

"Now just you wait a cotton pickin' minute," Chip began. "I got money. I should get to help pay. With four of us it'll only be eleven bucks and a penny apiece. That's how it should be if I'm *really* a part of this group, that is."

He pouted his lips ever so slightly and looked up at them with just his eyes without raising his head. Chip was pleased with his performance. He had received virtually all of his privileges at home through the judicious application of guilt. The others agreed to let him 'chip in' (it had become a running joke among them).

They stopped at the bridge construction site on the way back from town. Chip was the first one out of the car.

"Hey, Chipper!" one of the men said, waving, and then addressed the other workers. "Hey, guys! Chipper's here!"

The older men in the car were amused – impressed even.

Clearly on his earlier visits to the site, the Chipper had worked his magic on them as well.

After a round of hair ruffling and marginally severe pats to the back, Chip posed his problem.

"Come about November seventh or so, we're going to need a huge pine tree to use for a Christmas tree down at *Oakton Villa*. We have this fantastic Holiday Bizarre coming up. You must all stop by. Dolls, food, decorations. Great stuff. But that's not the real point. About the tree. You said those two were going to be cut down, right?"

He pointed. They nodded.

"Any chance one of them could be saved for us?"

Johnny, the foreman, responded.

"Which'n?"

Chip looked back at his three old friends who had gotten out of the car but not really joined the group. William and Grady looked at Ernie. It was a matter of size and that seemed to be the agreed upon realm of the engineer.

"The smaller of the two will fit our needs best, though we could probably use branches from the other one to make wreaths and garlands and such."

"Then *both* it tis," Johnny said with a twist of his head.

Chip recognized that a twist of a head was every bit as good as shaking hands among these men.

"As you need limbs let us know and we'll cut 'em off for ya. When the time comes, we'll cart the tree over for ya, too."

"That's very kind and generous of you," Chip said smiling first at them and then back at his family with a private wink, as if to admit the con artist that lived within him.

Johnny moved past Chip and offered his hand to William.

"You have to be William," he said. Then he moved to Grady. "And you Grady, and you, Ernie, the engineer."

"You've called us correctly," William said. "I'm not sure how."

"You guys is all the Chipper, here, ever talks about. Skinny with black rimmed glasses, bald head and no smile, gray hair with gold wire rims. Couldn't miss you. The family resemblance is obvious. You got quite a Grandson here. It's the darndest thing we ever heard, three grandmothers and three grandpas all living under one roof. Wonderful, understand – just

the darndest thing, though."

Chip shrugged and looked up sheepishly at his 'grandfathers'. There would be an explanation due in just a few minutes. Oh, he *had* one. He just hadn't expected that he'd ever need to use it *on them*.

William closed the conversation with what seemed to be the obligatory remark.

"Well, we wouldn't trade our Chipper here for anything in the World."

Chip knew he meant it. He leaned close and attached a loving hug around the man's waist.

"We gotta be going," Chip said to the workmen. "Probably see you again tomorrow."

"You *better* show up. Thursday's *Oriole* day, remember," Johnny added.

Back in the car Chip gave Ernie directions to one of the groves of Pine trees, then sighed.

"I suppose an explanation is in order," he began, hoping they'd say it wasn't necessary but not counting on it. The men sat silently indicating they were waiting.

"Well, you see, it's hard to explain you all to other people. So, I made up this little – *harmless*, little – story that seems to hit a tender cord in everybody's heart."

Still silence.

"Okay. Here's how it goes. Gert and William are my great grandparents. Maude and Grady are my grandparents on my mother's side and Rosie and Ernie my grandparents on my father's side."

"May I ask how you hooked us up into pairs like that?" Grady asked.

"By personality and needs."

Chip's conversation took on a serious tone.

"I grouped you according to how compatible I thought you'd be."

"And you gave *me* the stripper!" Ernie said.

His tone suggested a question mixed with both pride and amusement.

"No. I gave you *Rose* – a spontaneous, affectionate lady who would be a great balance to your need for precision and your aloofness."

"Oh. I see. Aloof. Yes, I suppose."

"Well, I guess I have to ask about my match up with Maude, then," Grady said.

"Partly your ages and partly the way you look at each other when you think no one else is watching."

The remark produced chuckles from the other two men. Grady made no move to deny it.

"Okay. What about me?" William asked.

"You need a woman for whom you can eat all the wonderful things she loves to cook and bake. I've watched you eat. You keep up with me and still don't gain an ounce. I figure you're up to taking all she can offer – in terms of food, I mean."

Chip blushed. So did William. The other two laughed out loud. Eventually Chip and William joined them. It was the first such mildly sexual joke he had ever shared with grown men. It felt good. It felt grown-up.

At the pine grove, they filled a trash bag with beautiful cones of all shapes and sizes and were laughing like little boys by the time they approached Rosie's room to drop them off.

She put her hands on her hips.

"Something I should know about here, gentlemen?"

She was reacting to their giddy behavior.

"You stop off at *Buzzy's Bar* up the road?" she continued.

"No . . . *dearie*," Ernie said in private reference to Chip's fantasized pairings.

The four of them laughed themselves on down the hall. Rose shook her head. It was wonderful to hear laughter again. It hadn't been half bad to be called 'dearie' either.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Innovation on a Theme

It was a conversation Chip was not intended to overhear. He had turned in early, planning to arise at six, chop the wood, and then head into *Four Corners* to visit the stores. But he had too much on his mind and couldn't get to sleep. Girt was a night owl so he donned his robe, shuffled into the slippers, and headed up to her apartment thinking a mug of cocoa might help him sleep. It was as he passed Maud's closed door that he heard concerned voices coming from within her apartment. He stopped and moved close to listen. Chip considered himself inquisitive – not nosy.

"The actual amount of taxes is \$6,768.36," Grady said. "That comes to \$1,128.06 each if we divvy it up equally."

"That just seems like a lot more than we can count on making from a few sets of doll cloths and Holiday Breads," Maude said.

Grady had done some calculations.

"If we think in terms of items that bring in five dollars each in profit, then we need to make and sell over 1300 items. At ten dollars, each, that's cut to about 700. I assume the wreaths will sell for more than that. But, you're right. It will be a huge job. There are some alternatives for raising the money, however."

"Such as?" William asked.

"We own fifteen acres here. We could sell off one acre lots. One or two would pay the back taxes."

"I thought about selling the Fairlane but it won't bring more than five hundred dollars and we'd be stuck here without transportation," William offered.

"I have a small life insurance policy," Ernie said. "I'll gladly cash it in but I don't have anything saved for my – what are they calling it now – final expenses, so I feel like that wouldn't be

fair to whoever outlives me, you know."

It was Grady again.

"I hate to be the voice of doom in all of this but even once we pay off what we now owe it looks like there will be some twenty-two hundred dollars a year in taxes that we will need to find a way to pay. That's three times what we were paying just five years ago. It will likely just keep going up."

William spoke of another problem.

"And then we have to consider Chip. His needs will just keep growing, too. Good text books run fifty to a hundred dollars each. There will be college that we should be saving for right now. In a few years, he'll need a car. He shouldn't have to live his life wearing thrift shop clothes. He'll need an allowance. He'll soon be dating and that's not inexpensive."

The room grew silent. The tears of the ladies inside were matched by those rolling down Chip's face in the hall. He returned to his room. Not even cocoa would help him sleep that night.

What he had just heard turned his life upside down. William was right. It was expensive to raise a kid.

They had no real responsibility to care for him. He was the one who had forced himself on them. If he stayed there – even if they found a way to support him – it seemed like stealing from them. Chip was many things, but he had never stolen. It made him realize that if these good people couldn't afford to raise him then he certainly was not going to be able to take care of himself out on his own. The grand promise of his Kentucky and Tennessee fantasy suddenly faded. He couldn't – shouldn't – remain at the *Villa*. He couldn't realistically travel on south and survive on his own. He most certainly couldn't return home – or could he, should he, must he?

Life had gone from unbelievably wonderful a few hours before to terrifying and all quite hopeless at that moment. It had never been his intention to interfere in the lives of the people at *Oakton Villa*, nor to pose such a problem for them. He overcame his initial impulse to pack up and leave immediately. A few more days or even weeks would not bankrupt these people and Chip needed time to carefully create a thoughtful plan. No more of this riding off half-cocked like a little kid. He had to grow up fast. For some reason that realization allowed him to sleep.

The next morning, as his eyes opened, it all rushed back upon him. His stomach hurt like it used to when he'd have to listen to his mother and father arguing into the night. He'd not let on he knew anything about the concerns of the others. He'd plaster on his Chipper Smile and go about his day. It wouldn't be easy but he had to be up to it.

William was a late riser so, after cutting the wood, Chip left a note on his door explaining that he was off to town on his bike to enlist the help of the local store owners. He figured whatever money they could raise through the bizarre was bound to help some. At that point it was all he had to contribute.

His first stop was the grocery. Connie's always smiling, rotund, talkative, grandfather owned it as had his father before him. It not only served the folks who lived in *Four Corners* but also a large rural population.

"Buck. How's it going?" Chip said in predictable Chipper fashion as he swung open the front door ahead of him.

It was not a large building. There were shelves from floor to ceiling around the four outer walls and two rows of shorter shelves in the center area. A counter with the cash register ran the width of the store, and sat just out a few feet from the back wall. Buck returned Chip's greeting from behind the counter.

"Mornin' Chipper. What brings you out so early?"

"Just needed a big dose of your smiling face, Buck."

Like every master of flattery, Chip had learned to make what he was doing appear obvious and yet leave a lingering impression of sincerity that still managed to boost people's moods.

"Smiles are always free here. Take all you want."

It was Buck's standard line, but it, too, projected a warm, sincerity.

Chip hopped himself up into a leg dangling sitting position on the counter as Buck counted the change into the register. The boy proceeded to outline the plight of his old friends and his proposed solution. Before he left, a deal was struck. There would be a holiday gift section at the front of the store – one everybody would see as they entered. His wife would make a special sign promoting both the goods on hand the upcoming bizarre. The store would get 10% plus the cost of the sales tax.

Chip was the kind of youngster that other people just

wanted to help. It may have been his good looks or his ever-present smile. It may have been his long-haired, ragamuffin appearance or his sense of humor or quick intellect. Probably different things for different folks. How any parent could have lifted a hand against the boy would have been fully unimaginable to outsiders.

He made similar stops at the hardware, the farm machinery store, and the drug store. Connie's mother, like the others, was pleased to help and suggested that Connie's school paper could run an article about the Bizarre hoping that might bring out some buyers once the *Villa* was open for business.

Chip accepted the idea but in his mind immediately amplified it to include all the area papers. He'd get Rosie after that. He finished his strawberry sundae – on the house of course – and started back to the *Villa*.

As he rode through the little town he noticed several houses with signs in their windows offering craft items for sale. One lady made stuffed bears and another Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls. A third wove baskets. Suddenly he felt he had solved the problem that Maude had raised at the private meeting the night before. Maybe they didn't have to make *all* the items. Maybe they could take items on consignment from the local crafters. It was an exciting idea – enough so that an extra surge of adrenalin propelled him back to the *Villa* in record time.

Maude and Ernie were standing outside Rosie's open door talking quietly with her as Chip burst upon the scene. None wore a smile and although Chip took note he didn't comment. People usually smiled when he approached them. He had no idea why but it had always been that way.

This time would be no exception. Their faces lit up as he approached.

"I got it *all* solved."

"You have all of *what* solved?" Rosie asked.

Chip realized his phrase might have revealed his eavesdropping from the night before.

'Damage control,' he thought to himself.

"Well, I got to thinking how much work it's going to be for us to make the amount of stuff we'll need to sell in order to make the tax money and then I got this really fantastic idea."

Even though Ernie raised his eyebrows and glanced at the

women, Chip felt he had covered himself well enough. He plunged ahead.

"Around here, like in every little town, there are lots of folks who make craft items for sale. I got this idea that if we contacted them they'd put their stuff here with ours and we could take a share of the profit for the service. One big Bizarre should make it easier for them to make sales; otherwise all the buyers have to go knocking on doors all over the county."

Maude nodded and looked at the others who joined her.

"That just might work. I know there's a woman in *Four Corners* who makes baskets," Rosie offered.

"Right and one that makes Raggedy Ann dolls and one that makes fuzzy bears," Chip explained. "And there must be lots of others in every little town around here."

"How should we go about contacting them?" Maude asked.

"Well," Chip began, his mental wheels working overtime, "Maybe Rose and Ernie could make the rounds of the towns and stop at the crafters' places they run across and work things out."

"*Rose and Ernie?*" Ernie said to Chip with a private wink.

"Well, that's just what came to mind – you being the driver and Rosie being the super sales person."

The women agreed, not understanding the Chipper's underlying romantic agenda.

At that moment, another possible financial bonanza hit the boy. He would keep it private but it had real possibilities. If he could convert the six-single people in that house into three married couples, then there could be three vacant apartments to rent out. That should easily take care of the annual tax payments and who knew, maybe even something for his own expenses. He liked the idea of having money for dating. Money for college would be good, too, but for some reason dating seemed to have more urgency about it. He figured college might come from another source.

That reminded him that Connie would be at her mother's on Sunday, which was just two days away. She hadn't been able to come the previous weekend and Chip's lips longed for some female attention. He'd have lots to tell her – between the kissing sessions. He was sure she would have good ideas about it all. Unexplainably, his heart began thumping. He would just have to

get up the courage to ask William why that – and other things – kept arising.

It was eleven o'clock. Saturday. No lessons. He went out on the front porch and straddled the railing, putting together a plan for the day. A car that had been parked along the road fifty yards to the east of the house pulled onto the road and drove past the *Villa* toward town. It was a light blue Chrysler. Chip was sure he had seen that car in town not a half hour before. He wondered if it belonged to the man whose face he had seen in the window.

It was a scary feeling that crept up his back and prickled at the nape of his neck. Again, his heart pounded. Chip's mind made an odd connection.

"My heart pounds when I think about kissing Connie and my heart pounds when I'm scared. Are girls and romance really just scary?"

He didn't carry it any further though it left him perplexed.

He went back inside and flopped onto his bed, rolling over so he was staring up at the ceiling. He wondered if every, almost thirteen-year-old boy's life was as complicated and scary as his. He chose not to think about it and was soon asleep, making up for the night before.

He awoke to the aroma of tomato soup. It was a staple at Rosie's place, and it was there he was scheduled for lunch. There would also be toasted cheese sandwiches and dill pickles. Rosie liked to drown Fritos in her tomato soup, a new delicacy that Chip was learning to enjoy.

He sat up on the side of his bed and stretched. He walked over to the window and looked up and down the road toward town searching for the light blue car. It wasn't there. Of course, the first time it had been parked on the other side of the house. He walked to the front door and looked east. There was no car. He felt relieved. He didn't want that car or the man in it to be looking for him. That would mean he had been located. But why just located and not approached or picked up and dragged somewhere? It suggested to Chip that the man was not searching for him but had some other agenda.

He followed his nose through the open door at Rosie's.

"Hey, sleepy head," she said in a cheery greeting. "I peeked into your room a while ago and saw you were zonked out.

Not sleeping good at night?"

"Just last night, I guess. Lots to think about – with the bizarre and all, you know," he added quickly.

"You're worried about that man you saw through the window, aren't you? Can you tell me why? I mean if you can't, I guess I understand, but you need to know we're all here for you."

"I know you are. Don't know why that guy gave me the Willies but he did."

"You said you thought you recognized him. Any more ideas about that?"

"No. Not really. Can't place him if that's what you're getting at. Probably just a generic face – you know, looks like lots of folks in a general sort of way."

"I have a hypothesis," she said.

"What's that?"

"I think it's a real estate guy either wanting to list the place for sale or somehow knows it'll be up on the auction block and was just looking things over."

"And he sits out front *guarding* the place?" Chip asked, poking a gentle hole in her theory. He then hastened to mend it himself. "Of course, we don't know that the man I saw *is* the one in the car."

He changed the subject.

"Smells like lunch at Rosie's in here. Love that smell. Need any help?"

"Just to eat it, Sweetie."

It was the first time he remembered her calling him that. He apparently reacted with some startle.

"If you don't like 'sweetie,' just say so. Didn't mean to offend you or anything."

"Oh, no. *Sweetie* is great! Guess I just wasn't expecting it. I didn't mean to react badly. Sorry."

They were both preoccupied as they sat there across the small table from each other. Chip noticed there was a new African violet sitting on the kitchen window sill. He indicated it with his spoon.

"From Maude?"

"Yes. Pretty nice, huh?"

"Yeah. Nice."

"Can I ask you something – something very personal?" he

managed at last.

“Sure. You can ask me anything so long as you give me the right not to answer if I think it’s inappropriate.”

“That seems fair and this may be really inappropriate so I’ll understand.”

Here it comes, she thought. He’s going to ask me about my days as a stripper. She had been correct in her assumption of the topic, just not in the direction of his interest.

Chip’s delivery was matter of fact.

“I understand that you used get naked in front of groups of men and I’m okay with that. I’m not fully a man myself yet but the idea of seeing naked ladies is on my mind a lot. But that’s off the topic; my question is: Didn’t you get really cold dancing around like that?”

Her long, deep, laugh surfaced partly from nervous relief and partly as a reaction to the tenderness in his question.

“What?” he asked, not having expected her reaction.

“You are a *sweetie*, Chip. Thank you for your concern about my welfare. In answer to the question, yes, sometimes in drafty dance halls I did get chilly. But I’d just dance a little faster when that happened.”

“Makes sense.”

Chip nodded his head. It was his only comment and her answer satisfied him fully.

That pretty well accounted for the noon time conversation. Chip helped do up the dishes. As he prepared to leave, Rosie pulled him close and planted a kiss on his forehead. He reciprocated with one to her cheek. It was becoming a habit between Chip and the women – a habit he had grown to like. He lingered over those times for as long as he felt was appropriate. He was glad the men hadn’t tried it though because he thought that would be very uncomfortable.

Suddenly just chopping wood and doing up dishes didn’t seem like an adequate contribution. Regardless of their original contention, he could see he was costing them a good deal of money. He gave up his vision of a new computer for Christmas.

And that reminded him that he now had no way to earn money so he could buy presents for them – *them* meaning the six adults at the *Villa*, Connie, and her mother. He would need to make the rounds of the businesses in town and see if they could

use his help cleaning up and such. He still had to visit the local farmers to see about getting cornstalks and selling their pumpkins for them. Suddenly it sounded like he had decided to stick around. He crossed the hall to his room and checked his list.

It gave him great pleasure to mark off the first item: CONTACT STORES IN TOWN ABOUT HANDLING THE CRAFTS AND GIFTS. Then there was also the second item: SEE ABOUT THE BIG CHRISTMAS TREE. And still a third: FIND AND BEGIN COLLECTING PINE CONES AND SUCH. He seemed to be on a roll. He used a pencil to add, CONTACT LOCAL CRAFTERS and put Rosie and Ernie's names beside it. Finally, he scribbled near the bottom, GET A JOB.

"Three done," he said aloud in a self-satisfied tone as he put the pencil back on his desk.

Grady's voice came through the open door.

"Three what?"

Chip turned, smiling.

"My list. I got three things done and just added two more. I suppose that's progress of a sort, isn't it?"

"I'd say so. Always figured having something important to put on a list was a good sign. No *'to do list,'* no life, if you ask me."

Chip thought he understood but would save further discussion until later. He changed the topic.

"Rosie thinks the man and the car belong to somebody who's interested in buying or selling this place. What do you think?"

"Afraid I don't have an opinion. No basis for one. I did figure the next time I spotted the car parked out there I'd approach it and ask what he was up to. I guess I prefer the direct approach – getting the facts – over speculation."

"Be careful. We really don't know his intentions," Chip snapped through a strangely serious expression.

"Almost sounds like maybe you have some idea about those intentions?"

"Didn't mean it that way. I'm sorry if I keep saying things that make you suspicious of me."

"I'm just concerned about you, Chip. I want things to go the best that's possible for you. Like I told you before, when things don't appear to fit just right, I get uncomfortable. Please

don't take my wariness to mean I don't love you, because like the rest of the folks here, I do."

It was the first time a man had ever told Chip that he loved him. It felt strange. It felt wonderful. Chip turned his head away and wiped at a fully unexpected tear.

Nothing more was said on the topic. Grady left for the horseshoe game and Chip returned to Rosie's.

"Do you have designs in mind for the wreaths, and such yet?"

His tone made it sound like a task master questioning his serf. It tickled Rosie.

"I thought I'd go for circular with greenery, pinecones, ornaments and a bow."

Chip suddenly saw how ridiculous his question must have sounded, but didn't admit to it.

"I still don't have any leads for the grape vines you wanted to use as the framework for the wreaths," he said, his tone retreating to normal. "How about using saplings that we could bend into circles, maybe. Lots of them down by the creek. Also some cattails down there. Do you want to try using them?"

"Sure. I guess we could also substitute wire for the grapevines," she said, thinking out loud.

Chip nodded.

"Don't know where we'd come by that either, but I'll keep it in mind. I'm a pretty good scavenger. That reminds me. Decorations for the tree. Anybody got any? It's going to take like a gazillion."

"I hadn't thought about that. I suppose we each have a few we could donate. How about spray painting some of the bigger pine cones? Maybe add some glitter while they're still wet? Tie them to the branches with thread?"

Chip nodded his approval of the idea.

"How about if I take responsibility for decorating the tree," Chip offered. "The rest of you have so much to do."

"I can't see why there would be any objections to that. Sure. It will be a great help. Since it was Maude's suggestion you might want to check with her, first, though. We're also going to need some kind of tables or shelves to display the products on. That has me stumped. Maybe you and Grady can put your heads together on that project."

“Sure. I just went in the hole by one.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“My list. Completed *three* items and now I’ve added *four* new ones. That puts me down by one.”

Rose nodded as if she understood.

“So, how many ornaments do *you* have?” Chip asked wasting no time in getting to work on his newest responsibility.

“Two boxes on the top shelf in the dining room closet.”

Chip opened the door and pulled on the light. Rose pointed out the containers. Chip pushed a chair into position so he could lift them down. Rose helped once they were within reach.

“Where’s a good place to store them as I get them all collected?”

“How about in the entry hall just outside your door?”

“Okay. Be sure your name is on the boxes.”

Then the larger question hit him.

“How will you know which ones are yours once they’re out of the boxes?”

“You just know your own Christmas ornaments, Chip. They each have some special meaning – the year, the place, who gave them to you. You know!”

Chip hadn’t the slightest idea what she was referring to but let it be. At home, he’d never been allowed to help decorate the tree. His mother had been required by his father to make it perfect and he clearly wasn’t up to that kind of perfect. He wondered if the others would know their ornaments the way Rosie said she did.

With Rosie’s help the two boxes were moved across the hall. Within an hour, he had collected boxes from the others. Maude had the most and Grady the fewest. Maude’s and Gert’s were obviously precious to them. Grady seemed to have no attachment to his at all. In fact, he said he hadn’t used them since moving into the *Villa*. William and Ernie had no comments about theirs. In all, there were eleven boxes of ornaments and twenty-one strings of lights. Later, Chip would begin the task of untangling the lights and testing them for burned out bulbs. That had been a task assigned as punishment back home. For some reason, it suddenly seemed like a privilege.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Hearts Aren't Always Valentines

His room seemed stuffy so Chip cracked the window before he went to bed. As he drifted off to sleep he was contemplating how much better it was to be there, cozy and warm under his covers and between the fresh, clean sheets than to be in the loft of some strange barn attempting to keep the cold at bay by digging himself into a pile of straw.

The night time sounds of summer were mostly gone. An occasional, seasonally challenged, cricket or cicada chirped its annoying, atonal song, and the owl that lived in the oak tree outside Chip's room hooted from time to time at passing mice, but mostly it was quiet.

At about three a.m. all that changed. A siren approached from *Four Corners*. It wailed loudly and awoke Chip. He threw back his covers and went to the window to investigate. It was a blue, flashing, light coming down the road from town. That would be an ambulance, he thought to himself. Perhaps a patron of *Buzzy's* had been in an accident. If Chip could have had his way, all the liquor in the World would have been drained into the ocean. "That would probably make lots of really happy fish," he joked out loud to himself. It was the first-time liquor had brought him a smile rather than tears.

He would wait and watch the vehicle rush by the house and then crawl back under the covers to chase after some wonderful dream; perhaps it would feature Connie. The vehicle slowed. The siren stopped screaming. It turned into the drive there at the *Villa*. Chip covered himself with his robe and slipped into his shoes. He opened his door and went into the hall. Oddly,

it was lit. The front door was open. William was out on the porch waving the paramedics inside. Chip ran to stand beside William.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“It’s Grady. A heart attack I’m afraid. About ten minutes ago, he knocked on Rosie’s door and collapsed. He’s in on her couch now.

Chip left the porch and entered Rosie’s place. The others were all there. Maude put her arms around Chip and pulled him close.

“So, how bad is it?” Chip asked, biting at his lower lip.

“We have no way of knowing,” Rosie offered. “He knocked on my door clutching his chest and said, ‘My heart’. Then he collapsed. I ran and told Maude and she got the others. Together we lifted him onto the couch. He hasn’t spoke since but he is breathing.”

Privately Chip was hurt that he had not been included in the activity she had just described. He knew it was probably because he was a kid and the others were trying to protect him, but he tended to wonder if it also indicated that, despite Grady’s comment about love, he hadn’t been accepted as a true part of the ‘family’.

William led the paramedics into the room. Everyone was asked to leave so they huddled together in the hall outside the door. Another ten minutes passed; then the door opened and Grady was wheeled out on the gurney. The paramedic was cryptic in his comments.

“Heart attack. Stable. Taking him to the cardiac unit in Bloomington.”

He handed William a card.

“This is where he’ll be. They will need a next of kin to sign papers.”

“There is no next of kin. We’re all he has.”

“Well, one of you will need to show up and explain the situation. You can follow us if you want. You have a car?”

“More or less,” William said in reference to the ancient Fairlane.

It would have been humorous under other circumstances.

William looked at Ernie who nodded. The two men scrambled into their clothes and were soon out the door and into the car headed for Bloomington.

* * *

The first report came by phone at a little after five a.m. They had lingered together in Rosie's living room. She made coffee for the adults and cocoa for Chip. Chip, of course, was the first to the phone.

"The *Villa*. Chip. What?"

It was William on the other end.

"The doctor says it's still too soon to know how much damage was done. He's in the cardiac unit hooked up to dozens of wires and tubes. They are waiting on the results of blood tests. They let Ernie go in to see him for just a few minutes after he regained consciousness. He seemed weak but alert. He told Ernie to tell everybody out there that he'd be back to check the books before the first of the month so nobody better try to run off with the profits. I think that was a very good sign – his sense of humor. I'll give you another call as soon as we get an update."

"How are you and Ernie doing?" Chip asked. "One heart attack is about all we need tonight."

"Actually, we are doing quite well. Ernie commented on it a few minutes ago. We're going to be fine and all of you must be too. It's a lot to put on your shoulders, son, but you have to be the man out there for a while. I know you're up to it."

"Yes, Sir. I am up to it. Call us as soon as you know anything more and if you get a chance, Rosie needs bread, coffee and milk."

The women chuckled at Chip's capacity to be so practical in the midst of the crisis. He turned to them and repeated William's message as closely to word for word as he could. He then took William at his word and assumed his role as man of the house.

"I think it's best if we all try to get some sleep now. We will be able to plan better about how we're going to take care of Grady when he gets back here. For one thing, he can use my room so he won't have steps to climb. But, like I said, we'll plan better after some sleep."

The women were wise enough to understand that Chip needed to feel in charge. They each gave the lad their own version of the hug and kiss and returned to their apartments. If none of them slept better than Chip that night, then there was no sleeping at all.

By six thirty he was dressed and outside splitting wood. He had to decide if it was going to be appropriate to go into town to see Connie. She needed to know about Grady. He could call her mother's house but that seemed impersonal. Chip depended on William to be his sounding board when he had decisions like that to make and William was not there.

That led him to consider another problem. The two men couldn't just stay at the hospital indefinitely while Grady recovered. They needed a change of clothing, a shower and rest. Maybe they needed money for food. He had no way of contacting them so would have to wait until they called.

That happened at five minutes after seven. Rose appeared on the front porch and motioned Chip to come to her. He figured it was the call and was pleased to be included. He ran across the lawn and up the steps. Inside he found Maude on the phone. He wouldn't take it from her though that was his initial inclination. Clearly Maude could not qualify as the man of the house.

The news was generally good. The heart damage seemed minimal. Grady would probably be released by the middle of the week.

"Steps?" Chip prompted and Maude understood.

"Will he be able to do the steps up to his apartment? If not Chip says he can use his room."

Apparently, that had not yet been discussed but William would ask. The men would come home at noon, clean up and get some rest. Then Ernie – the only driver – and one of the women would return to stay the night with Grady. The doctors said that wasn't necessary but they just didn't understand that it WAS necessary.

Chip understood they wouldn't let kids near a cardiac unit so he didn't protest specifically, though did make known his thoughts about the general unfairness of such a rule. He would make Grady a card and say on it what he felt needed saying.

With the conversation over, Chip asked the women if they thought he should stick around or go into town. Their answer was unanimous.

"Go see Connie!"

It could have been interpreted as, "Anything to get you out our hair for a while." He chose to think they felt he'd be better off if his mind was occupied with other things. Since that

had been his own leaning, he accepted it without comment or further deliberation.

He finished the card, delivered the wood, picked up his room (the women were amazed!) and was ready for lunch with Gert by noon. It had been decided that Rosie would take the first night shift along with Ernie. If it seemed necessary to do the same on Monday night, Maude would go along. Gert was the oldest of the women and the others had grown to be protective of her.

By 12:30 Chip was on his way into town. He had lots of time and could have ridden at a leisurely pace but for some reason a *hell bent for leather* ride right down the center of the road seemed necessary. He arrived at the Park well ahead of Connie and was running laps around it when she came into view.

He waved high and long as he ran toward her, smiling. He arrived puffing and was somewhat surprised at how really glad he was to see her. It was almost as if she were something more than just a girl.

“Old man’s out of shape, I guess,” he joked and he stood for a moment bent over, with his hands on his knees trying to catch his breath.

When he straightened up Connie reached her hands toward him and he took them in his own. Her hands were soft. His had become rough and calloused from the use of the axe. He felt the need to apologize.

“Sorry my hands are so rough. I have lots of wood to split every day.”

“I think they feel very manly,” Connie said, taking one of them in her left hand and running the fingers of her other over his palm.

“I’ve missed you so much,” she said, administering a gentle kiss to Chip’s cheek.

“Me to.”

He kissed her cheek in return.

“Walk in the woods?” she suggested more than asked.

“Sure. What you been up to?”

“School mostly. Lots of work on the paper. I had two articles in this week’s edition. I brought a copy for you if you want it. It’s over at the store.”

“Sure, I want to see it. That’s great. I’ve seen your mom

a couple of times.”

“She told me. I like the idea of the bizarre and I’m sure my paper will do an article about it. I got dozens of old dolls you can have. Probably need some pictures for the paper.”

“We can do that. Thanks.”

“So, how have things been going for you?” she asked as, hand in hand, they entered the path that wound through the grove of pine trees.

“Grady had a heart attack. Pretty sad out there right now.”

“Oh, no! How terrible. Did he . . . ?

“He’s going to be okay. Should be home by mid-week if everything goes alright. It’s really gotten to me for some reason. Everybody else seems to be handling it better than I am.”

“I suppose they’ve had a lot more practice handling such things, don’t you?”

Chip looked at her and smiled, nodding.

“You’re right, of course. It’s my first heart attack . . . well, you know what I mean.”

Connie stopped and faced Chip. They put their hands on each other’s waists and kissed. It was nice. It was gentle. It was a wonderful kind of closeness Chip had longed for all his life.

During most of the afternoon they sat in a clearing and talked about the big issues people had to face – life, death, sickness, right, wrong, fair and unfair. It was comfortable talking with Connie. She seemed less forward, less bossy, when they were talking. They took time out to kiss occasionally, but mostly it was just important conversation between two young people who were searching together.

As was their custom they ended the afternoon over a sundae at the drug store; then he walked her home. The kiss at her door was always just a short, mutual, peck to the lips – nothing lingering or groan producing. It was more like slapping a guy friend on the back as they’d turn to go their separate ways after a ball game.

He ran the three blocks back to the park, mounted his bike and headed for the *Villa*. That time it was an easy-going ride. He took time to notice the trees and the animals in the fields. He noted the greens of the grass and the blues of the sky. He felt better and was whistling by the time he climbed the steps up to the long, narrow porch.

Inside he checked in, first, at Rosie's place. The door was open.

"What's the word on Grady?" he called out, even before he located her in the kitchen.

"Grady's stable and apparently doing very well. William and Ernie are back here resting. William said to wake him up at five thirty. I'll let you take care of that if you will."

"Sure. Did you get some rest, Rosie? If you're going in there tonight, you'll need your rest."

Rose put her arm around Chip's shoulder as they walked back to her door.

"You sound like an old man, Chipper. It's not your job to take care of us, you know. We're the grown-ups. You're the kid. It's okay for it to be that way."

Chip nodded though it was not his intention to stop looking out for their welfare. They traded pecks to the cheek and Chip was off to William's room. It was five thirty on the nose. The apartment door was open just a crack. That meant, 'Come on in Chip but I may not be completely decent.'

It was the case. William had just stepped out of the shower. Chip called into the bathroom.

"I'm in the apartment, William. Came to make sure you'd got up. Anything I can do for you?"

"I figured we'd eat together this evening, Chipper," he called back. "Go see what looks good in the fridge."

Boys his age are always up for eating and by the time William had dressed and arrived in the kitchen Chip had macaroni and cheese well on its way to becoming edible. William fashioned two small lettuce and tomato salads and poured a large glass of milk for each of them. Amazingly, it all came together at the same moment. They sat to eat.

"So," Chip began. "What's the *real* poop on Grady?"

"Real poop?" William asked smiling.

"Yeah. I figured you might have been sheltering the women from some of the gruesome details."

"Afraid not. He's doing well. It was a very mild attack, thank God. When we left, he was sitting up eating. The nurse said that by this evening they'd probably have him up walking for a few minutes."

"Pneumonia," Chip said nodding, knowingly, as he blew

on a fork overflowing with too hot macaroni.

“What?”

“Pneumonia. They get patients up and moving around as soon as possible to help prevent pneumonia and other respiratory problems.”

The explanation had been matter of fact. William nodded.

“I see. Well, then, the highly trained medical staff must be doing okay after all.”

He was kidding Chip and Chip accepted it without comment.

“So, honest Injun, he’s doing okay?”

“Yes. Seems to be doing fine.”

“I’m worried that Rosie didn’t get enough rest to stay in there tonight.”

“Rosie will be fine. She’s been taking good care of herself for quite a few years, you know. She’s probably in better shape than any of us.”

They traded smiling glances and raised eyebrows about the *shape* she was in. Chip had caught it first, though William wasn’t far behind.

Chip had things on his mind – things left over from his discussion with Connie.

“Do you think it’s ever alright to tell a lie?”

It was a direct question, which he figured William couldn’t turn back on him.

“Lies. Lots of kinds of lies, I suppose.”

“Like?” Chip asked getting up to bring the loaf of bread to the table.

“Like those intended to hurt compared with those intended to ease another’s pain.”

Chip nodded. That made sense but had not done much for providing an answer, so he offered a pointed comment of his own.

“Then there’s the kind that’s told to protect the one telling the lie.”

“Yes, there are those kinds.”

William didn’t elaborate.

Chip took a drink, sneaking a look at William over the glass to see his expression. It seemed normal. He’d plod on.

“So, which are okay and which aren’t? I mean, I know the ones meant to hurt aren’t okay, but what about the other two.

You have an opinion?"

Chip was pleased with his last-second addition there. That certainly couldn't be turned back on him.

"Seems like this topic is a pretty big concern for you, today."

Okay, so it *could* be turned back on him!

"Connie and I were talking about it. That's all."

"I see. Well, I suppose lies have a pragmatic side to them."

"Pragmatic?"

"May not be the best term. What I mean is that if they achieve some socially positive goal, they may be acceptable, I guess."

"Socially positive?" Chip asked.

William didn't hesitate before responding.

"Like if a runaway told a lie that was intended to protect himself but one he thought also worked to make things better for all concerned, *then* it might be considered acceptable from a pragmatic standpoint."

Chip stared across the table directly into William's eyes and held the contact for a long moment. He did not respond. Neither did William. The topic was left unresolved both allowing it to end there.

Chip began clearing the plates to the sink. He filled it with hot water and added way too much soap – Chip always added way to much soap. William took a dish towel and dried as Chip delivered each plate, glass and utensil. It was their ritual. That time it had been a silent, five minute, ritual. William was being patient. Chip was beating a strategic retreat. A change of subject seemed crucial.

As he pulled the plug to the drain and began drying his hands he asked:

"How old were you when you kissed a girl for the first time?"

It took William by surprise, but as usual, he recovered quickly.

"Well, I kissed Susie Kline on a bet when I was in the second grade, but that's probably not the kind of kiss you had in mind."

"You remember her name? That must have been seventy

years ago?”

William smiled without comment and continued.

“The first really meaningful kiss is what you’re going for, I assume.”

“Yes, Sir. That’s a good way to describe it.”

They each leaned back against the cabinets and folded their arms. William looked off into space.

“I was fourteen. The girl was Betty Sue Atherton. It was on my very first hay ride at my very first boy-girl party. As I recall neither of us was much good at kissing but the experience convinced me that I wanted to repeat it often in the future.”

“Did you? I mean if that’s too personal, just forget it.”

“It’s not too personal between you and me, Chip. Yes. I’d say that I went on to do my share of kissing.”

“Connie and I kiss.”

“I imagined as much,” William said, prying no further.

“I like it – a lot.”

“As it should be,” the old man said, pouring himself the last of the coffee from the mid-morning pot.

“Isn’t that terrible?” Chip asked.

“You kissing Connie?”

“No! That thick, oily looking gunk you still refer to as coffee.”

“I suppose I drink it more out of habit than for taste at this time of day.”

They smiled over the confusion. Chip felt comfortable with the opening that had been created between them about boy-girl things.

“I get all hot and sweaty and my heart pounds so loud I can hear it.”

“Of course. That’s how we guys are put together. Other parts of you probably react as well.”

“Gosh, yes! That’s normal too, then, I guess.”

“Not only normal but if you’ll think about it, all quite essential for the survival of our species.”

Chip grinned, a bit embarrassed, but grateful to his old friend. It was William who spoke next.

“Tell you what. I’m sure I have a facts of life type book somewhere in my library. We’ll find that for you and if it doesn’t answer the questions you have I’ll be glad to. Think that will

work?”

“Thank you. I don’t know why it’s embarrassing, but it sort of is. Not as bad as I thought it would be though. You did very well with it, I’d say.”

Again, William smiled, privately amused that he had passed the Chipper’s test.

“There are no questions and no topics that you and I can’t discuss when you’re ready to, okay?”

“Yes. Okay. Thanks. This is so great! Can we look for that book now?”

The book was soon located.

* * *

Chip stood in the lawn and watched Ernie and Rose drive off down the road into the already darkening sky toward Bloomington. He returned to his room and spent the next five hours reading. Finished at last, he closed the book and said out loud:

“If I’d of just known all that stuff two years ago my life would have been a heck of a lot easier. I should probably send it back home to Billy. Based on the information I got from him, he’ll *never* figure out to be a father.”

It was serious and sincere. He suddenly felt a special bond with William – more than before – different than before. Like the bond he’d always wished he had with his father.

Gert knocked at his closed door. He slid off his bed and opened it.

“Hey. Gert. What’s up? It’s late.”

“I saw the light under your door and figured you might be hungry. I got ham salad made up for sandwiches and a bowl of potato salad in the fridge.”

“I’m always hungry. Sounds great.”

He shut the door and the two climbed the stairs to her apartment. Chip intentionally set a slow pace.

“I’m okay about Grady, if that’s your concern,” Chip offered as he opened the door to her apartment for her, thinking there might have been some ulterior motive for the visit.

“Wish I could say the same. Oh, I shouldn’t have said that. Didn’t mean to upset you.”

She shook her head, plainly disgusted with herself.

“Hey, it’s okay to be upset,” Chip said, suddenly realizing

he sounded a lot like William.

“I know, Honey.”

She took his hand and patted it.

“It’s just that I always figured that at my age I’d be the first one, you know? I hadn’t prepared myself for having to deal with anybody else’s . . . problems.”

Chip wasn’t sure how to respond so he didn’t – another trait he’d figured he owed to his teacher. Gert motioned him to follow her back to the kitchen.

“Get out two plates and mugs. I’m suddenly hungry myself. Been off my feed all day. It’s so good to have you here, Honey.”

“It’s good to be here, Gert. I figure I’m just about the luckiest kid in the state to have all you people in my life.”

It was the first time he had put that feeling into words and it came out just right. A tear rolled down Gert’s cheek. She didn’t speak. Chip set the table and poured himself a glass of milk.

“Drink?” he asked.

“That milk looks good. About half a glass.”

Chip could tell she was tired. She brought the bowls and bread to the table and sat down.

“Guess it’ll be a build your own, late night, snack tonight, if that’s okay.”

“Better still, let me do the honors. *Chef Chipper* at your service. White or wheat, Ma’am?”

“White, thank you,” she said, playing along.

“One slice or two?”

“Let’s go whole hog – two, please.”

“Potato salad – one scoop or two?”

“One, unless seconds are out of the question later on.”

She smiled, enjoying Chip’s little game.

Soon the plates were ready and the meal was underway.

“Apricot pie in the fridge,” she added. “I know you like yours cold.”

“Can I put a slice in the microwave to heat up for you?” Chip asked.

“No pie for me this evening, I guess.”

She reached across the table and put her hand on Chip’s.

“You’ve been a blessing for us all, you know. It’s like

I've spent all my years just waiting for this chance to have you in my life."

Again, Chip had no idea how to respond. Everything that came to mind seemed childish, but then, like Rosie said, he *was* a child so he'd go ahead and give it a shot.

"That makes me feel very special. I'm sure you must be overlooking lots of great things that have happened to you, though."

He hesitated but then finished his idea, partly for her benefit and partly for his.

"Like, I'll bet you remember your first kiss – the first really meaningful kiss, I mean."

"Lawrence McAferty. I was sixteen. In the alley behind the hardware store after school."

She lowered her head as if embarrassed – not enough, however, to keep her from continuing.

"He was seventeen and a basketball player. He had wavy black hair and the bluest eyes I'd ever seen – 'til you came along. Clearly, he had done lots of kissing because he knew just what to do and how to do it. I remember I wasn't sure if he should be holding me so close and so tight, but soon forgot about that. His strong arms around me felt so wonderful."

She looked up at Chip a bit sheepishly.

"A whole lot more than you wanted to hear, I'm sure. I haven't thought about that in fifty years. That was a nice memory. Whatever made you ask such a question?"

"Connie and I kiss sometimes. Well, we kiss every time we get together, really. For some reason I want you to know that."

"How nice that is to want to share part of your special times with us old folks. I will give you this advice about it, however."

Her tone became serious; she put down her sandwich and dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. She bent forward and shook her finger, not entirely playfully.

"Enjoy your kissing, Chip, but always be a gentleman about it."

Chip figured she was saying he should stop at kissing. He had no intention of going any further. He was only twelve for goodness sake. He nodded as if he fully understood what she was

trying to tell him.

“It’s really late, Gert. Let me do up the dishes and then we both need to get ourselves to bed. No telling what tomorrow will bring.”

“There never is, Honey.”

She sighed. The tone of her words was suddenly cheerless. It disturbed Chip but he didn’t let on. He understood that her life had been filled with pain and disappointment. How unfair that such a fine person should have lived anything other than a wonderful, love-filled life. It made him wonder about his own. It made him wonder about his parents. He thought about his room at home – his ball glove left behind for lack of room – his friends and teachers. He worried about his immediate future. Tears bathed his pillow that night.

CHAPTER NINE

The Blue Limousine

The grownups had not been open with Chip about several things though he had his ways of keeping up to date. He and the dumb waiter became good friends. His plan to leave had been put on the back burner since his new, late afternoon job at the grocery store was allowing him to handle most of his own expenses.

By mid-October, however, the over-all financial side of life at *Oakton Villa* was not looking good. The lots could not be sold since the property was tied up in the back taxes problem. Chip could not be sure if that was because some law wouldn't allow it or because no one wanted to get involved until the problem was resolved. Either way, there would be no Villa-saving revenue from that front.

Also, after Medicare had paid all it would pay on Grady's hospital bills there was still a whopping ten thousand dollars outstanding. Chip noticed there was suddenly a lot more mail – both incoming and outgoing. It seemed his people were attempting to contact relatives and loan agencies.

Another problem surfaced. It was related to the way Dead George had handled the *Villa's* affairs. He had mortgaged the place to the hilt. It was an odd payment arrangement, Chip thought, but then he didn't know much about such things. There were no payments due until the upcoming February 15th at which time something called a balloon payment of twenty thousand dollars came due. Clearly Dead George had not been an honest man. Because of that mortgage they were unable to get a loan on the property.

Chip added up the debts as he understood them: \$6,000 in

back taxes. \$10,000 for Grady's hospital bill. \$20,000 for the balloon payment on the mortgage. It came to \$36,000. He knew there was no way they could raise that much money with the holiday bizarre. The plans for William to tutor and Ernie to handyman had pretty well fallen through. There were no takers for the tutoring and only a few for Ernie's services.

Chip considered several plans. One would be to revert to the one where he'd leave in order to save them the money it cost to support him. That amount seemed like a drop in a bucket, considering the total financial picture. Another was to stick around and help out however he could. Still another involved him getting a second job. It seemed unlikely that the amount he could bring in would be of any real help, however. He had a short-lived vision of becoming an overnight success as a rock star but considering he couldn't carry a tune or play the guitar, that probably wouldn't pan out.

So, although the others thought they were sparing Chip from worry, they were not. The plans for the Bizarre moved ahead. It kept them busy and would bring in some money, perhaps enough to help them each relocate.

It was on the evening of October 21st that Chip had finally had enough of the cat and mouse game. He was munching on a ham sandwich inside the dumb waiter, at the door which opened into the dining room of Maude's apartment. He was listening to the group discuss their plight. The plan they were agreeing to was a terrible plan and Chip couldn't allow it. He had no alternative in mind but he knew what he was hearing was unacceptable.

It seemed they had arranged for each of them to take a room in an old residential hotel up in Indianapolis. William would take a two-bedroom place so Chip could remain with him. The others would each contribute something from their social security to help pay his extra expenses. Chip had seen William's social security check and figured it barely paid his bills as it was, and that was without a rent payment every month.

Grady kept insisting that his hospital bill was *his alone* to pay. The others turned a deaf ear to him. He was part of the family and they'd work it through together. Their plan was for the women to continue doing the crafts and baking and for the men to try again with the tutoring and handyman services. In a large city,

it might work for a few years but they were old and wouldn't be able to continue doing that forever. No! It was a *terrible* plan.

Chip burst through the door of the dumb waiter and jumped into the room.

"It is the worst plan I've ever heard of! There has to be something better."

"Chip!" William said. "This is a private discussion. If we had wanted you in on it we would have invited you."

"Sorry about that but it seems I haven't been included in *any* of your discussions lately and much of it revolves around me. I'm really *steamed* about it, I'll tell you that."

Suddenly he sounded like a teenager!

He plopped down into a big chair, crossed his arms and mounted a major pout. The others looked at each other not knowing how to react. Chip was right about his central role in it all but still, he was the kid; they were the adults. It was their responsibility to make the decisions and to protect Chip from the worries of the situation.

"Well, as you can see, I haven't been spared the worry; I just haven't had anybody to talk with about it like you guys have."

There was a chorus of sighs from the old folks. Maude spoke.

"Our intention was good. We wanted to spare you. You do understand that, don't you?"

Chip loosened his pout and nodded, hesitantly. He didn't speak. Tears began streaming down his cheeks. Rose moved close opening her arms to hold him. He shivered his body away from her attempt. He was mad. He was sad. He was more frightened than he had ever been before.

Grady spoke.

"We have the finances figured. We can make it okay up in Indianapolis. In all honesty, we won't be able to provide college for you like we all want to, but we'll go after scholarships for you, and we *can* take good care of you and meet your other needs. We all want to do that more than anything else. It's because of you that we've become this family. It's like you are really some kind of angel sent to make our last years wonderful."

For Grady, that speech had been downright elegant. The women joined Chip in his tears. Even stoic Ernie wiped away a stray from the corner of his eye. Minutes passed in silence.

Eventually it was Chip who spoke.

"I love you all and I know you love me. It's been the best time of my whole life here with you and I'm glad it's been the same for you. But, the bottom line is, I have a home up north. Many things it *wasn't* but at least it always provided for me. Except for the fact that my parents hated me and hurt me, everything else was really pretty good."

That hadn't come out the way he had intended and the women sobbed out loud. The men winced and shook their heads. Instead of pleading his case to return home, he had just sealed his relationship with his new 'relatives'.

William conveyed the feelings of the others.

"If you decide to, we realize we cannot prevent you from leaving us. You're smarter than any of us. You're more cunning than any of us. You're stronger and have more endurance than any of us. All we can do is to tell you how much we love you and how empty our lives would become without you."

William was almost as good at laying on the guilt as the Chipper. Chip looked from one to another around the circle of white haired, wrinkled, paunch bellied, old people. It had just become clear to him that once he entered someone else's life, he became a part of them. Allowing friendship to happen was like promising that the relationship would last – that in making a friend you immediately took on an irrevocable responsibility for that person's wellbeing. It was overwhelming and remarkable – frightening and comforting. He sighed the sigh of all sighs as his tears continued.

"I don't know why my parents hated me. I always figured it was something about me – something bad about me deep inside. I guess you folks have shown me – proved to me – that it must have really been about *them*. It's like – what's that saying – the weight of the World is off my shoulders – something like that. It's . . . dumfounding – that's a word William taught me – dumfounding to suddenly realize I'm actually a loveable person. It's like suddenly becoming something new and extraordinary – another one of William's words. I don't know what else to say. Well, yes I do."

The adults chuckled through their tears. It was classic Chip!

"I'd just like you to understand that I want to be a part of

things with you – good or bad, happy or scary, for richer or for poorer. Can we agree to that?"

"I think we just got married," Maude said, smiling around the circle. They all laughed out loud, wiping at their tears.

That time he accepted Rosie's hug and within a few minutes had received one from everybody in the room. It even seemed alright when he felt William's gentle kiss to his temple.

Chip would let the adults in his life make the big decisions, although he would not stop making his own suggestions and would probably harangue at them a bit if he didn't think his ideas were being given adequate consideration. After all, he was *The Chipper* and that's what *The Chipper* did. It didn't matter where he lived or what he had so long as he was with his loved ones.

Since returning to the *Villa*, Grady had recovered to his old, energetic self – clearly more appreciative of life than before his illness. Chip was intrigued by how adversity often tended to strengthen people and to bring them closer together. He wondered why that had never happened back in his original family.

* * *

By mid-morning the next day, Chip had located an overgrown, no longer cultivated, grape arbor on the back side of the woods behind their property and had dragged a sample vine onto the front porch for Rosie to inspect.

"Looks great!" she said looking it over carefully and bending it in several places along its length to check its flexibility."

Is this it or is there more?"

"Only about an *acre* more of the stuff," Chip smiled.

Before noon he had well over three hundred feet of vine spread out on the back porch. Ernie began cutting it into the eight and twelve foot lengths Rose required and Grady was weaving them into eighteen and twenty-four inch circles. Chip soon realized it was going to take many, many, hundreds of feet before the wreath making was finished. It became his habit to spend several hours each morning bringing in the vines – after wood splitting and before his school lessons.

One morning William received an envelope in the mail from the State Board of Education. It said that since Chip was

being home schooled he would need to take a day long progress examination sometime during the next several weeks. William assured him it was no big deal. Still, Chip was a bit concerned. In some way 'examination' seemed a whole lot scarier than 'test'.

They decided to do it on the following Wednesday. It would entail a trip to the Jr. High in a near-by town. William arranged for the counselor there to administer it. Being back in a real school building with real kids sounded like fun to Chip and that helped him set aside some of his anxiety.

Grady had determined that buying paint in spray cans for the pine cone tree decorations was too expensive so Ernie and chip rigged up a way to dip them into cans of low priced latex paint and let them drip and air dry in the basement. As Rosie found large cones that were not perfect enough to use in the decorations she put them aside for Chip to use on the tree.

The next weekend had been designated *Pumpkin Hollar Days* at the *Villa*. Many of the area farmers brought in their pumpkins, gourds, squash, cornstalks and bales of straw to sell out in the front yard. Ads had been placed in papers and fliers delivered to stores and homes. Eleven farm families had agreed to participate and most left it up to the wives and teenagers run things. Connie and her mother came out to help. Chip was in heaven with all the kids around. It had been his activity to organize and he did a good job.

The price of each item was marked on a peel off sticker and each farm was assigned a different color. Connie and her mother collected the money and removed the stickers, placing them on the sheet for that farm. At the end of the day the amount collected for each seller could be easily totaled. The *Villa* received a 25% commission on every sale with the rest going to the farmers. The system worked flawlessly.

When all was said and done, over twelve hundred items had been sold and the total take had been nearly four thousand dollars. The *Villa's* share was \$988.00. Gert, Maude and Rosie had sold cider and cinnamon buns bringing in another hundred and twenty dollars. It had been a profitable day's work.

By the time the farmers had gathered their things and left, and after Connie and her mother had headed back to town, it was nearly seven o'clock. The *Villa* residents gathered in Maude's living room for the grand totals. Chip proudly made the

announcement.

"My goal was for us to raise a thousand dollars. We raised one thousand, one hundred and eight."

Every one clapped and nodded. It was a happy moment. Chip was not finished.

"I see one problem though."

The others looked at him, not understanding.

"You, see, I have this pesky one hundred and eight dollars *too much*, here. So, I was wondering what you'd think about all of us cramming ourselves in to the Fairlane and going up to *Brenda's Cafe* next to *Buzzy's* for supper."

"We've never done anything like that," Ernie pointed out not supporting or condemning it.

"And it's about time we did," Rosie said, moving to Chip's side and putting her arm around his shoulder.

"All in favor say Aye!" Chip said enthusiastically as if conducting a classroom election.

Everyone, including Ernie, joined in the chorus of Aye's. By eight they had cleaned up. Maude wore her new hat. Decked out in their church going best, they invaded the Fairlane, and were soon laughing themselves up the road toward *Brenda's*. Chip noted to himself that it was a feeling he had never before experienced. It was remarkable and he didn't want it to ever stop.

* * *

The next morning – Sunday – the Villa awoke to another chorus. There were groans from one end to the other. Their old bones and muscles had been overtaxed. Even that, however, was cause for smiles and laughter. Chip played along inventing humorous complaints that matched the others one for one – his big toenail ached, his eyebrow hurt, his earlobe kept cramping, the single hair in the center of his chest was simply exhausted!

Some weeks earlier Ernie had found a box-type freezer and it had been set up in Chip's old room in the basement. Gert had it almost half full of goodies. Some of the money from the Halloween pumpkin sales would be used to buy cooking supplies and to purchase more used dolls for Maude.

Maude had completed dozens of sets of clothing for the Barbies and had begun dressing the baby dolls. Several had been on display during the big Saturday event and they had drawn a good deal of attention from the women and girls. The bizarre was

set to open November fifteenth.

A local lumber yard had agreed to loan them sawhorses and sheets of plywood to use as display tables. From a local newspaper, William picked up several roll ends of news print which they would roll out to cover the plywood. The tree would be delivered by the bridge guys on the tenth so there would be time to decorate it. Twenty-five-foot-long Garlands made from branches taken from the second pine tree were strung across the hall and on the porch railing outside. Those, which would be for sale, were kept in the east room of the basement with the window open to keep them fresh in the cooler air. Chip sprayed them with a fine mist every evening. They were keeping fine.

Wednesday arrived and Ernie and William were off to school with Chip for his examination. The men seemed more nervous than the boy. As advertised, it took the entire school day. The counselor took him to lunch in the cafeteria and introduced him to several of the boys. William and Grady found a horseshoe game in a park and occupied themselves with new friends as well.

The test results would be mailed to William in a few days. Being in a school caused some short-lived pangs of home sickness for Chip, but they passed during the ride home as he listened in wonder as the men relived each and every game of the day. They were home by four thirty and things got back to normal.

* * *

The envelope arrived in the mail on Wednesday morning. Chip ran it up the stairs to William's apartment. William took his time adjusting his reading glasses as if to draw out the suspense. He opened it and removed several sheets of computer print outs.

"Hmm. . . . Hummm . . . HmMMM!"

"Soooooo?" Chip asked impatiently, raising his hands in the air.

"One low score. Others pretty good."

William had that gleam in his eye that told Chip his words had not been intended to convey their literal message.

"You know what the term percentile means, Chip?"

"Yeah. Sort of. It's like if you get a score in the 75th percentile it means you did better than seventy four percent of those who took the test."

"That's close enough. Well here's how things came out.

English, 98th, History 98th, Geography 98th, Reading 99th, Science 99th, but then here's the low one. I guess we'll have to begin working overtime on it."

"What? What? Chip said, ready for the bad news.

"Math, a measly 97th percentile."

William chuckled. Chip paused only a moment before he caught onto the set up.

"Sorry you've done such a *horrible* job of teaching me math, Sir," Chip joked laying it back on William.

William reached out and drew Chip close for the longest hug the boy could remember.

"I would have been proud of you no matter what scores you got because every day I see how hard you work at your studies, but I have to admit I am overjoyed with how well you did."

Chip looked up at him.

"I guess we make a pretty good team, *Teach*."

"I guess we do at that, *Stude*. It's cause for some kind of celebration. Get everybody up to Gert's place. We'll raid her cookie boxes and I'll deliver the good news."

The celebration took longer than as necessary. They just enjoyed being together. After his fourth piece of cake, Chip rubbed his stomach and groaned.

"I think my stomach has been *overtaxed* – woops, sorry for using that word."

Everyone could chuckle about it. The tax problem remained but *life* rather than the *problem* had become their focus.

* * *

The tree arrived. Not only did the bridge crew deliver it they had devised a water container for it to sit in and had fashioned a series of supports to hold it up. It stood eighteen feet tall and spread ten feet side to side at its base.

By the fifteenth it was fully decorated with lights, red pine cones, and white paper chains draped from branch to branch. Ernie had constructed a two-foot-tall, silver, star to put on top. After supper was finished at Maude's, they all gathered in the entry hall for the official tree lighting. Chip was selected to plug it in – not because it was seen as any kind of special privilege that he deserved, but because he was the only one limber enough to bend down and reach the outlet on the baseboard.

The women oooed and ahhhhed. The men nodded their approval. Chip clapped, overjoyed at how pretty it was. They looked at it from up close. They backed away and viewed it from near the front door. Regardless of the angle, it came out the same.

“Simply magnificent,” Maude proclaimed.

Chip had a moment of sadness when he realized there would be no money for presents to put under it. That passed about as soon as it had come and they all went to Rosie's for hot mulled cider.

The doors were to open at nine o'clock the next morning and everything was ready. More than two dozen local crafters had joined them so a tag system similar to Chip's Halloween sales plan was used. The cash box was filled with change. The punch bowl was in place – they had decided to serve free punch. Stories had been run in Connie's school paper and in three other local newspapers, the largest doing a full page, full color layout in the Sunday edition. Just why that one seemed so insistent on making such a production of it was not explained, though it had certainly been welcomed.

William had made up a work schedule so everyone knew what they would be doing and when they would be doing it. Chip had suggested that Maude dress up like Mr. Santa Clause and sit in her rocker sewing doll clothes during the next several weeks. It was a nice touch – such a nice touch that not only did she sell completely out of clothes and dolls but had enough additional orders to keep her fingers busy for another six months.

By the evening of December 23rd, they had sold everything there was to sell. Gert had garnered dozens of standing orders for her baked goods. Whether she would be able to honor them or not remained a question – Indianapolis would be a long drive just to deliver a few dozen Sunday morning orders of breakfast breads.

The man in the window had not shown his face again, although the blue Chrysler had been seen both in town and passing on the road out front. They had not been able to corner the driver but decided the car probably just belonged to some overly inquisitive nearby resident.

Chip had been invited to join a club for gifted kids his age at the school in town. It was going to meet every Saturday morning beginning in January and focus on creativity. It

sounded wonderful to Chip and William but he had not given them an answer pending the outcome of things at the *Villa*. 'Things' did not look promising.

When Grady totaled up all the income and subtracted all the expenses, the profit fell well below their needs. It came as no surprise to any of them but it *was* the point at which they began letting themselves feel disappointment.

"We have at least one more week here," Rose said. "Let's make it the best week we've ever had."

Chip seconded the motion and the others nodded, none of them sure just how to go about it.

"We'll have a dance tomorrow night," Chip said, trying to get things going.

"Let's make it a costume party-dance," Maude added. "We can all come as one of our favorite characters from novels or history. I have dibs on Scarlet O'Hara."

She struck one of her humorous, overly dramatic poses with the back of her hand to her brow.

The men were clearly not as enthusiastic about the costume idea as the ladies, but they'd go along.

"I'll come as Galileo," Ernie said not having the slightest idea what a man of Galileo's era wore. The women would take care of that.

"I'll come as Mark Twain," William said after a short period of reflection.

"How about Daddy Warbucks from Annie," Grady said.

Gert would be Cleopatra and Rosie – no surprise – would come as Mae West (for the younger readers, Mae West was the best known of the "feather dancers" in the early days of the movies). Chip gulped, wondering just how far she might go to properly impersonate Miss West. It would be very embarrassing if she went too far. (On second thought, it was probably an embarrassment he could learn to live with!)

They all turned toward Chip waiting to hear. Maude figured it might be Huck Finn. William would have bet on the - younger of the mystery solving Hardy boys. The others had no ideas.

"Tarzan! I'll come as Tarzan. Can I invite Connie? Maybe she'll come as Jane."

A round of enthusiastic nods signaled unanimous approval

for Connie's attendance. Refreshments were quickly arranged and the setting would be the spacious entry hall under the watchful eyes of the beautiful tree. They would draw names and keep it a secret – each one making a present for the person they drew. It filled the letdown they were feeling with new energy and the prospect of a good time. Everyone hustled off to attend to their own parts of it all. Chip called Connie. She agreed to come – *and*, as Jane.

William overheard Chip's end of that phone conversation.

"I'm going as Tarzan. Will you come as Jane?"

She answered him and he reacted.

"Great!"

She spoke. He answered.

"Just a loin cloth I guess. There's a fake leopard skin curtain in the basement I can use."

She apparently had a question.

"I don't care what you wear – as little as your Mom will allow would be nice."

He giggled. Apparently, she giggled. William chuckled and shook his head. He just hoped they showed up with all the essential parts covered. Kids those days had a different concept of modesty from what he and his generation had – well, except for Rosie, perhaps! It brought another smile (and just a hint of Chip-like rapid breathing).

The *Villa* was alive with activity – all quite secret, but alive nonetheless. Costumes were put together. Gifts were created. Refreshments were baked and brewed. The night arrived. Connie arrived. It was plain that the two youngsters felt little necessity to have more than the essentials covered. After the initial skin shock, it was generally agreed they made a very cute jungle couple – handsome even.

William's big white mustache kept falling off and at one point fell into 'Miss O'Hara's' cleavage making for an awkward, then hilarious moment. Ernie had difficulty keeping his pointed, star studded, hat in place and eventually pinned it – open end up – to the side of his long, black robe and stashed goodies in it. Rosie provided the music – mostly slow dance tapes from ancient times – the 1940's and 50's. Connie had brought a few of her own and Rose worked them in from time to time. At first the old folks stood back and watched the youngsters when those were played

but eventually they all gave it a try. It was the source of much laughter. Chip and Connie clapped their approval as Rose and Ernie did a mean free style rock and roll production. (Or was it Disco or the Charleston or perhaps a mixture of all three? Nobody cared.)

Each was intrigued by what fine dancers the others were. Partners were changed regularly during the first several hours but toward the end of the evening couples seemed to have been established: Chip and Connie, of course; Gert and William; Ernie and Rose; Maude and Grady. Had the Chipper been right *or had he been right?*

Connie's mother picked her up at eleven and Chip insisted on walking her to the car. It was twelve degrees outside; not your typical barefoot-Tarzan-in-a-loincloth-weather. He shivered himself back inside and went right for a mug of hot cider. They all agreed it had been the most fun they'd had in years. By midnight they were each back in their own apartment. No one knew what the next week might bring but the scales were heavily tipped toward a move to Indianapolis.

On Christmas Morning, they gathered at the Christmas tree. They sang carols and exchanged the gifts they had made. At William's suggestion, they took turns relating some tale about a special Christmas in their past – happy, childhood memories. Chip had not volunteered. The other six had each taken their turns.

"I'm not going to tell you about my best Christmas at home because it would just make you sad." (It was the Christmas Eve his parents had drunk themselves into unconsciousness before they could lay a hurtful hand on him.)

"Since I'm still a kid I figure it's allowed that my best childhood memory of Christmas can be this one. Thank you all for everything. I'm going to cry if I say any more so I'm going to stop." Then added, "Tarzan doesn't cry."

Rose broke the tension, saying, "But he cuts a mean rug with Jane, I can tell you that."

They all laughed. They all understood. It was fine to just leave it at that.

* * *

On the morning of the 29th, the sheriff's car returned. It was the same young deputy that had delivered the bad news that

first time. The envelope he carried was labeled, *Notice of Delinquent Tax Sale Date*. Again, it was Rose who took the envelope. She handed the young deputy a plate of holiday cookies and wished him a Happy New Year. He returned the wish. They had both been sincere.

The *Villa* would be sold from the front porch at twelve noon on January third. Highest cash-in-hand bid would take the sale. On the slim chance, no one would bid more than the \$4,387.00 they had in their cash box, it was agreed that Grady would make the first bid. The documents gave the residents ten days to exit the premises once the sale was finalized. Rosie noted that would fall on Friday the 13th.

* * *

"I bid \$4,387.00," Grady said, getting the bidding underway. He was immediately bettered with a bid of five thousand dollars.

"Six," came the next bid.

Chip had perched himself high in a tree so he could keep track of the events. Grady had loaned him his binoculars. Chip focused in on the various bidders. One of them was the man whose face he had seen in his window. Chip shifted positions so he could view the line of cars parked along the road. He was searching for the light blue Chrysler. There it was. Worse than that, right behind it was a long, blue, Lincoln, limousine.

Chip was terrified. His wonderful new life was suddenly at risk. He climbed back down the tree and crouched, moving behind bushes to the back of the house. As he disappeared down the cellar steps, the last bid he heard was sixty-three thousand dollars.

He put on an extra sweater under his thick, winter coat. He had kept his backpack well stocked and ready for an emergency exit ever since the day he arrived. He slipped it over his shoulders, and without looking back pushed his bike up the steps and across the back lawn into the woods. He was on his way south once more. He had no plan other than to make his escape from the blue limousine and the private terror it represented from his past. His hands trembled. His eyes teared. His heart pounded. Life as Chip had known it was over. He hoped his dear old friends would understand and forgive him.

CHAPTER TEN

The Blizzard of the Century

By one o'clock he was speeding along a little used, hard dirt road. It was one he had discovered while searching for grapevines. He would follow it for as long as it headed in a generally south easterly direction.

By one fifteen snow flurries appeared and well before two he was peddling with effort through a full-fledged blizzard. The wind hurled the snow against his cheeks like tiny ice pellets. His stocking cap was white and stiff, and his feet grew cold as the temperature continued to drop.

'South is supposed to be warmer,' he thought to himself. It didn't seem humorous at that moment. The dirt road ended and he took a right onto an unfamiliar, single lane blacktop heading due south. It was slick, which slowed him down considerably. From time to time the snow swirled in such a dense curtain that he couldn't see more than a few feet ahead. He peddled on with increasing effort and decreasing progress. He saw no other option.

To keep his mind off his immediate dilemma he played William's game – well a variation of it. He recalled the wonderful times he had experienced at the *Villa*. He made sure he could recall exactly how each of his old friend's looked, how they moved and the sounds of their voices. He didn't want to ever forget those things. An occasional smile would flash across his reddened face and quickly chapping lips. Tears froze solid against his skin. He couldn't turn them off.

At three o'clock he made a decision. Conditions had

grown too severe to continue and he needed to find a barn where he could wait out the blizzard. Soon the road would be high with snow – so high the bike would be unable to move. He couldn't see far enough through the dense snowfall to find a structure of any kind.

He came to a cross road. The one to the right was narrow with fences close to its edges, which made him think it was a lane. He turned and followed it, thinking – hoping – there would be a building of some kind at its end. What he found first was a large orange construction sign which read, "Danger Ahead."

"No kidding," he said out loud. "Here I am in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the worst blizzard I've ever seen, in the middle of a panic attack. *Danger?* I'd say so!"

The snow became so deep he could no longer force the wheels along so he dismounted and pushed the bike beside him. About ten minutes and a mere hundred yards further down the road he came upon an old, wooden, covered bridge which ran east and west across a ravine. It would be almost as good as a barn, he figured. Inside there was no snow on the wood, plank, floor. The northerly wind was blocked by the thick, stripped, sides. The roof had long before collapsed in several places but he soon found a more or less cozy spot.

He was exhausted. He slipped out of his backpack and took a seat against the southern wall; he figured *it* might be less cold. From his backpack, he removed the one blanket he had brought along and covered himself shoulders to feet.

The planking on which he was sitting became cold. He flattened his backpack and arranged it so he could sit on it. That helped. He re-draped the blanket and was soon warmer than he had been for several hours. He talked to himself.

"I'm going to be okay. I'm warm enough now. No wind in here. I hope it doesn't change direction and begin blowing in one end of this thing. I'll just stay the night here. I need to sleep. I didn't sleep well last night, worrying about the sale. Then by morning I'll be refreshed and ready to move out. The snow will probably be so high that I'll have to push the bike. That's okay. I can do that. I'll need it to ride when I get further south.

"What if some wild animals decide to come here and join me tonight? I've heard there are wolves down here. That wouldn't be good. Fire! They're afraid of fire. I have some

candles in my pack. I'll get them out and keep them handy in case any threatening critters come my way. I won't light them 'til I need them. Have to save my supplies."

A few minutes later he had rearranged things one more time and had the candles and matches in his coat pocket and his flashlight on his lap. Before long he had fallen asleep.

Several hours later, he was awakened by a strange sound. The World was dark. He flashed his light from one spot to another. As far as he could tell nothing seemed out of the ordinary. He heard the sound again. It was a creaking sound. He told himself old structures creaked with changing temperatures. It would be okay. The eerie sounds grew louder and lasted longer. He felt a jolt beneath him. The creaking suddenly became cracking. He reached for something to hold onto. There was nothing available. The bridge began trembling as if in an earthquake. It was at that moment Chip realized it was falling. The weight of the snow had apparently been too much. The old bridge was collapsing. The last thing he remembered was reaching for his beloved bike.

* * *

He heard himself groaning even before he realized he was waking up. He lay amid a pile of rubble. His right leg and arm were ablaze with pain. He tried to sit up but couldn't. His ribs screamed with every breath. Daylight had returned. He had apparently been unconscious all night. The ground was strewn with wooden wreckage most of which was covered with snow and ice.

With his left hand, he tried to examine his throbbing right arm through his coat. It was padded so that didn't work. He attempted to remove his arm from the sleeve but that hurt too much. He assumed the arm was broken. Using his left arm and leg he struggled into a sitting position. He reached down with his left hand to examine his right leg. It was soon clear that it had also been broken in the fall. Through his jeans, he felt along the bone in his lower leg – the part that was hurting – to make sure the skin was smooth. He remembered something from health class that clean breaks remained smooth. The more serious breaks formed bumps and sometimes even had the broken bones protruding through the skin. If it was broken it was a clean break. It seemed strange that discovering a cleanly broken leg would

seem like good news.

He continued his self-examination. He opened his coat zipper some twelve inches and slipped his left hand down into the inside of the right sleeve as far as he could reach, feeling all around. It was the upper bone that was the seat of his pain. He felt the spot where it had broke and formed a bulge to the outside of his bicep. He could move his fingers – something he thought he should not be able to do with a broken bone.

"Splints," he said aloud, looking around for something suitable to use. There were several short narrow boards within reach.

"Now to find some way of binding them to my leg."

He had packed three pairs of socks in his back pack. He scanned the area for it and eventually saw it sticking out from under a large, wooden, beam some twenty feet further down the slope.

He hadn't taken time to specifically determine where he was. He looked around. It was a narrow, deep, tree lined ravine. With so much snow on the ground he couldn't tell if there was a stream there or not. Considering the week of freezing and near freezing temperatures just past it would have been frozen over anyway.

He tossed the slats down the hill close to where the pack laid. The snow was roughly eight inches deep making it relatively easy to scoot down the hill. Still, it took several minutes of careful maneuvering. Each movement caused severe pain. He reached the pack and with considerable difficulty unzipped the ice-matted zipper. He reached inside and searched for the socks. He found a pair and placed them on his lap.

He positioned the slats underneath and along the sides of his leg and using his right hand to hold one end of a sock in place he got the upper one tied. The lower one would be more of a challenge. He couldn't bend far enough to reach it. His ribs burned with pain. He sat back to think, knowing he had to somehow get a tight wrap around the splints near his ankle.

Suddenly he had the solution. He tied another sock just below the first and then, using a small branch, began pushing it – sliding it – down his leg. Five, persistent and patient minutes later, the wrap was positioned near his ankle. The elasticity of the knit sock allowed it to tighten against his leg. When he first tried

to move that leg, he realized that at least one more binding, near his knee, would be necessary to keep the leg immobile. He located a second pair of socks and used the same tie, push, and slip method with one of them. It worked fine but did very little to ease the pain.

Even that small amount of effort had exhausted him. How would he ever manage to climb up the steep hillside to the road and where was his bike? He was weak and hungry. Next, however, he needed to find a way to fix and splint his right arm. There was a fallen tree near-by with a branch protruding at shoulder height as he sat on the ground. He scooted toward it, slowly and deliberately. He leaned back against the log to rest before continuing. He knew what he had to do and that it would be no fun at all.

A few minutes later he grasped the branch with his right hand. My, how that hurt! With steady pressure, he pulled back away from the branch wincing from the worst pain he had ever experienced. He felt his bone snap back into place. He ran his hand again down inside his sleeve. The knob that had been protruding beside his bicep was gone. The bone was set. There would be no using that hand to help tie a binding onto the arm. He sat back again to think. Ice cold tears lingered inside his eyelids and clouded his vision. He wiped at them with the stray sock.

An idea came to him. He methodically collected four, narrow, slats that had been splintered from the bridge wood as it crashed into the ravine. He opened his coat and carefully slipped each piece down the inside of his sleeve – one on the bottom, one on the top, and one on each side. The heavy coat held the slats tightly against his arm providing adequate support all around.

"Warmth. Burr! I need a fire. There's plenty of wood."

Chip gathered wood and laid it out carefully, tiny pieces on the bottom and then larger and larger as he built it well over a foot high. He found a candy bar wrapper in his pocket and placed it under the splinters. He lit it. The wood caught fire and soon a wonderful, bone warming, fire blazed before him. He needed to make another on the other side of him but he was too tired.

His ribs hurt but as far as he could tell they were not broken, though he had no way of being sure. It probably didn't really matter since he had no idea what to do for them whether or

not they were broken. He had to breathe though wished it weren't necessary. Each breath was agonizing.

"Slow, shallow breaths," he said to himself.

He struggled to pull himself up into a standing position using the branch and tree trunk for support. He was overcome with pain. His head became light. He felt faint. He talked to himself again.

"Let's see, for shock you put the feet up and head down."

His last thought before blacking out was to fall so his head would lay downhill from his feet. He lay unconscious, spread eagle, on his back.

The snow picked up, swirling and whistling as the suddenly stronger wind rushed through the ravine. The last remnants of the old bridge above groaned and teetered as it mounted its final, unsuccessful, stand against the wintry onslaught. It soon surrendered to the elements and went crashing down onto the spot where Chip lay on the floor of the narrow, snow covered valley fifty feet below.

* * *

Earlier, strange things were also happening back at *Oakton Villa*.

"I have one hundred and twenty-two thousand dollars," the auctioneer sang out to the gathering of several dozen people. "Do I hear one hundred and twenty-five? . . . One hundred and twenty-five . . . Going . . . Going . . . SOLD to the gentleman in the blue parka for one hundred and twenty-two thousand dollars. Thank you all for coming. Drive carefully on your way home. I understand there's a doozy of a snow storm headed our way from up north."

In a mere ten minutes the *Villa* had slipped away. It was a sad time. The residents stood in the entry hall, somber and dejected. It was time to move on. The plan was to sell the furniture and other belongings they wouldn't have room for in their smaller quarters in Indianapolis, pack what remained, and move on the thirteenth.

There was a knock on the door.

"Probably the eviction notice," Grady said, going to answer it.

It was the man in the blue parka – the one who had just made the purchase.

"Come in out of the cold," Grady said offering him his hand. "I'm Grady, one of the former owners."

"About *that*. Mr. Carter would like to speak with your representative in his limo, just outside. Will one of you accompany me please?"

The old folks looked at one another.

"And why should we do this?" Rose asked, moving toward the man, her arms crossed and gait determined.

"Mr. Carter is the one for whom I made the purchase and he is the only one who can explain things. Please. Someone?"

They looked at each other and then all eyes came to rest on William. In a quiet and unspoken way he had become accepted as their leader. He shrugged his shoulders, buttoned his coat, and followed the man outside. The snow had just begun and the wind was picking up. The driver opened the back door and William slid in beside a man who presumably was Mr. Carter. He wore a suit and tie, and was perhaps forty – maybe a bit younger. The door was closed. It was comfortably warm but William made no move to open his coat.

Mr. Carter offered his hand and William accepted it.

"Edward Carter, CEO of *Carter Enterprises* – banks, newspapers, apartment complexes – business such as that. I just purchased the house. You would be William, I assume."

"Yes. I don't understand. How . . .?"

"I'll answer all your questions in due time. First things first. You and the other former owners of this beautiful old place will be able to stay here as if it were still yours. It's a magnificent edifice and I plan to restore it. I'll take care of all the routine expenses like taxes and upkeep. You will personally act as the liaison with my company."

William was taken aback and more than a little confused. He found nothing to say in response to the man's pointed pronouncements.

Edward continued.

"Second, as you may have guessed by now, I am Chip's father. The boy had every reason to run away from home. He is an honest kid and I assume that what he told you about his situation was essentially correct. His mother and I are alcoholics – *recovering* alcoholics of the AA variety *now*, I am pleased to report. We are also in therapy – his mother for depression and I

for anger management.

“My security staff – you have just met Robert, my head of security – located Chip a few days after he landed here. They ascertained he was safe and in excellent hands so his mother and I decided to leave him with you and use the time to begin getting our personal lives in order. It seems unbelievable now that it took such an extreme event to wake us up to what we had become.

“Third, we need to work out a plan to reintegrate Chip back into our home if he'll have us – without leaving you wonderful people out of his life. I have some ideas. I'm sure you will have some as well. Next week I'll come back – at your invitation, of course – and we will work out the details.”

William nodded, agreeing that – provided the man's story about his recovery was on the up and up – Chip should most certainly be with his parents.

“Fourth, I'm not going to force myself on Chip today. I hope I can count on you to relay to him what I have told you. In this envelope, you will find the names, addresses and phone numbers of people and professionals who can verify the changes and improvements I have spoken of. I want you to speak with them *all* so none of this will be based just on my say so, you see. You have every reason and right to be skeptical.

“Fifth, I have this check for you to cover the time and expenses you have incurred while caring for him.”

"Sir," William began, sitting up straight and looking him squarely in the eyes. "There is no way any of us here would ever accept a check intended to cover such things. The boy has become an angel in our lives. He has brought us joy and wonder, and hope for the future. No amount of your money could ever equal what the lad has already brought to us."

Edward nodded and withdrew the check.

"You are every bit the man I have been led to believe you were. Until next week then? This day and time?"

"Yes. This day and time will be fine. How may we contact you?"

Edward handed him a card and on the back scribbled his private cell phone number. William accepted it with a smile and a nod.

"I can see, now, where Chip gets his abominable handwriting."

It brought the first smile to Edward's face. He patted William on the knee and nodded.

"Anything you need just call. There will always be a blank check at my end. Tell Chip that his mother and I love him."

"I think that should wait to come from you next week, don't you?"

"Yes. I suppose you're right. Yes. You are a wise man."

Edward pressed a button on the console to his left and William's door popped open. William moved to get out. The driver offered his gentle assistance.

"Oh. There is one more thing," Edward called after him. "It appears that Grady's hospital bill got paid somehow. The red tape involved in undoing a thing like this is unimaginable so I hope he'll just let it be."

"You are a good man, Edward. Thank you for that, for the house and especially for *The Chipper*."

Edward's eyes moistened and the door was closed. Robert, the man in the blue parka, took William by the arm and escorted him back up the rapidly icing walk to the front door. He handed him his own card.

"Sorry if my presence has caused you or Chip problems. I never intended for him to see me. It was my own foolish miscalculation. I will be at the Winston Motel in Bloomington for the rest of the week if you need anything. I've jotted the number and room on the back."

William turned and watched the cars pull away wondering how he should present the news to the others. He would need to be subtle, gentle, restrained – just ease into it. He entered the house calmly, with his thoughtful plan of action well in mind.

"Crimenettley people! Would you believe that was Chip's father?" he said excitedly! "The kid must be worth hundreds of millions. Everything is going to work out fine!"

Well, so much for subtly and gently easing into things!

The others did not understand and looked at him in silence, waiting for additional information – information that might make sense of his apparent gibberish.

"Let's go up to Maude's place where we can all sit down. Where's Chip? He needs to be with us for this."

They looked at each other, shrug after shrug failing to answer his question.

"I saw him climbing up into the Oak tree on the West side of the front lawn just before the sale began," Grady said. "I loaned him my binoculars so he could watch the proceedings."

It was all anyone had to offer. William crossed the hall to Chip's door knocking as he looked inside.

"Not in here."

"You don't suppose . . . ?"

"I'll check for his bike in the basement," Ernie said and he hurried off with Grady at his heels.

The others gathered at the top of the basement steps and waited for them to reappear.

"It's gone," Ernie called back to them. "And the outside cellar door is open," Grady added.

"That poor little . . ." Gert began, too upset to gather her thoughts further.

". . . generous, caring, helpful little relative?" Rosie said, finishing the thought.

"What can we do?" Maude asked wringing her hands.

"Everybody up to Maude's place," William said swishing the others into motion ahead of him as if herding sheep.

Rose and Maude put on a fresh pot of coffee and Gert arrived a few minutes later with a tin of cookies. Once they were all seated William began his explanation. He related his conversation with Edward.

"*Carter Enterprises*," Grady said. "Yes, I've heard of them – banks, newspapers and a chain of funeral homes the way I recollect. A huge operation. All over the mid-west."

"Probably why that one newspaper took such an interest in us," Ernie suggested.

"So much for all that," Rosie said impatiently. "How do we find Chip? It just wouldn't be sensible for us to head out looking for him in the wake of a snowstorm."

"Carter Security," William said. "Let me get Robert on the phone. He has the resources and connections to launch the search."

William went back down the stairs to the phone. The others followed. Being there as he made the call tempered their sense of helplessness. He explained the situation and Robert assured him his organization would take care of things.

"Any ideas where he might be headed."

"South," William said. "He once spoke of traveling south to a warmer climate. You'll keep us informed?"

"Certainly."

The conversation was over.

It has often been called a collective sigh and that is just what it was as the residents of *Oakton Villa* began their vigil. The problems of the past few months – of the past lifetimes, really – were not singly or in combination as grim or as important as this one they now faced so helplessly.

"At least we are together. We have each other, now, to help us see this through."

They had been Gert's words but each one's private thought.

"I suppose I can go up and unpack, now," Grady said and he climbed the stairs.

"I feel like baking," Gert suggested and she followed.

"Not a good day for horse shoes," Ernie said, moving to the front door and watching the driving snow whirl one way and then another as if it couldn't make up its mind where it wanted to go.

"Not a good day for *anything* out there," Rosie added. "Poor Chip. I can't imagine what he must be going through."

"Maybe he got far enough south so he's out of the blizzard," Maude said hopefully.

The others nodded. William understood that would not have been possible. He knew their Chipper was out there at the mercy of the relentless storm. No matter how resourceful the lad might be, could *any* twelve-year-old survive such an onslaught?

"I think I'll go back to my place and read," he said at last, and he went upstairs with Maude at his side.

It left only Ernie and Rose in the big hall. They stood watching the storm.

"He's a resourceful lad," Ernie said trying to offer a positive spin on the terrifying situation.

"Yes. He is resourceful," she said, smiling up at her friend's face. "Come on into my place. We can wait for the phone to ring in there."

Ernie nodded and followed her into her apartment. The door was left ajar so they would be sure to hear the call.

* * *

Robert made several calls – the first to Edward, of course. There was another to the local Sheriff and a third to his office in Ft. Wayne. As soon as the weather cleared enough, a dozen of his men and two helicopters would join in the search. Until the snow let up no airborne help could be launched.

Robert requested a snow plow in the name of Edward Carter and one was immediately made available to him. It was a huge, ten wheel, orange, dump truck loaded with cinders and sporting a heavy, V-shaped plow up front. The driver was the most experienced in the fleet. Robert outlined what he knew of the possibilities on the map the driver had pulled from the glove compartment.

"He started from here several hours ago. The general consensus is that he was heading south on his bike. He wasn't seen leaving on this road that runs in front of the mansion so must have taken some back road. Are there back roads that don't show on this sheet?"

"Several. My best guess would be that he either took the dirt road behind the woods here, or he went south on 231."

"He was running away so probably wouldn't take a well-traveled road. What else you got?"

"Well, that dirt road hooks up here with a blacktop that heads due south for about fifteen, maybe eighteen miles. Then it dead ends into this east-west county road."

"Let's try for that route – the dirt road to the blacktop to the county road. The snow hit just about the time he left. How much has fallen?"

"Four or five inches, I'd say. Drifts probably up to two and three feet in places. Lots of wind. Betty Lou will get us through, though."

"Betty Lou?"

The driver patted the dash.

"Most dependable truck in our fleet," he said only indicating the answer.

At two-fifteen they entered the dirt road some ten miles to the west of the Villa. Chip wouldn't have traveled west but it was the closest access from the truck barn. Robert kept his office informed from his cell phone. The copters were still grounded. It would be more than an hour flight once they were airborne. Robert realized time was crucial and that the responsibility had

fallen to him, the driver, and Betty Lou.

There were other trucks out looking as they worked to clear the main roads but it was unlikely the boy would have chosen any of them. Had it not been for the woods along the north side of the road, finding it would have been impossible. They moved ahead at a slow but steady pace. Being able to spot Chip's tracks was unreasonable, but they kept looking, nevertheless.

"The old mansion is about directly north of us here," the driver said.

Robert nodded and redoubled his vigilance. They had just entered Chipper territory.

"Looks like maybe another two inches down here," the driver observed. "Not good weather for a bike ride, I'll tell you that."

Robert raised his eyebrows but remained quiet. They were soon at the dead end into the single lane blacktop."

"Right? South, I guess?" came the driver's question.

"Yes, South. It's really all we have to go on."

The truck could move faster on the blacktop. It blew the snow to each side like giant, silken, wings. There was no sign of Chip but then neither had a good idea what to look for short of seeing the boy standing alongside the road thumbing a ride. If he had fallen he'd just be a bump covered in snow. They couldn't stop to investigate every roadside lump.

Robert was banking on finding the bike first. He reasoned that as it became impossible to ride, Chip might have abandoned it. Sighting the bike would at least let them know they were on the right track.

They spotted no bike. Eventually, Hank stopped the truck at the east-west county road. (They were miles south of the old covered bridge.)

"Which way?" the driver asked.

"Hear me out on this, Hank. The boy started out from the old mansion about the time the snow began. When was that a little after noon?"

Hank nodded. "Closer to one."

Robert continued.

"We're talking about a thirteen-year-old – well built, strong, probably in excellent physical condition. Do you think he

could have gotten this far in this weather?"

"No, Sir. Probably not half this far. I raised six boys. Not even the best of the lot could have got this far in such a storm."

"My thoughts too. Let's turn this thing around and head back."

"*Betty Lou*. Let's turn *Betty Lou* around. No need to ruffle her feathers by calling her *this thing*."

The two smiled. It helped break the tension. They headed back north slower and more deliberately.

"Side roads?" Robert asked.

"Not many. Just two farm lanes in this section is about all. One just ahead off to the right goes up to the Abernathy place. Sets back about a mile. Then there's the Kosnick's on up another three or four miles."

Robert nodded. "I guess all we can do is check them out. Let's just take them as they come."

He called an update into his office and then to the *Villa*. It didn't lift anybody's spirits but it seemed to help just knowing what was going on.

They reached the Abernathy's house and walked to the door through ankle deep snow. Hank knocked and Mrs. Abernathy answered.

While she poured coffee and the men warmed themselves in front of the fireplace, Mr. Abernathy and his two sons went out and searched the barn and other outbuildings. They returned a few minutes later with nothing helpful to report. Robert thanked them and he and Hank were soon headed back out the lane.

The next lane was considerably shorter but the results were no better. There was no sign of the boy.

They continued to drive up and down the back roads until nightfall. Hope dimmed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hope Fades

During the night, there had been a short break in the snow to the north and the company helicopters were able to fly into Bloomington and then to the sheriff's compound just north of *Four Corners*. By dawn, however, the snow had returned and the copters were again grounded.

By six thirty it became clear that the aircraft weren't going to be of any help until after noon when a let up was predicted. So, Hank and Robert got back in the big truck and retraced the same stretch of blacktop they had searched the day before. They shared the feeling that it was the only place the boy could be. Their hope of finding him safe had dimmed but neither spoke of it.

During the night, the wind had sculpted drifts that inched their fingers out onto the road. The going was slower than the day before. They were on the blacktop, several miles south of the dirt road on which they had begun their search the previous afternoon, when Hank squinted off to the right and pointed into the sky.

"Smoke, you think?" Robert said, also squinting, unable to differentiate it in any reliable way from the snow.

"I'd say smoke. It's a risin' and the snow's a fallin'."

"Any way to get close to it."

"There's an old lane I plumb forgot about yesterday. It used to go up to the Trent Estate on the hill over there. Stopped using it several years back because the bridge was condemned – one of them covered bridges Brown County to the South is famous for."

He slowed down, searching for the entrance.

"Right here, I think, between those fence posts – or what you can see of them over the top of the drifts."

The truck turned and crept west. They passed the big orange sign which had been blown into the ditch by the fierce wind. Hank brought the truck to a stop a few yards from the gaping hole left by the fallen bridge.

"Not sure when it fell in. One thing's sure. The boy couldn't have crossed the ravine without no bridge."

"What if it fell last night under the weight of the snow?" Robert asked. "Would such a fall have started a fire like that?"

He knew the answer in advance.

"Can't see how."

"Then someone must have started it. Maybe Chip?"

"Maybe. I guess it's hoofing it from here on. Better get into the boots under your seat. Those city shoes won't work out here now."

Soon, with his pants tucked into the calf-high boots, Robert joined Hank outside.

"No path down there I can see. We'll just have to make our way down the hill best as we can," came Hank's evaluation of the situation.

"After you, then," Robert said. "Don't dawdle."

"Dawdle," Hank said, smiling. "I guess you ain't entirely citified."

He chuckled as they began the descent.

Between the trees that covered the slope and the driving snow they couldn't see the bottom of the ravine. It was a long and tiring trek.

"There's the bridge, or what's left of it," Hank said at last, stopping and pointing.

Robert moved ahead and hurried toward the wreckage. Much of it was ablaze with flames leaping high into the air. Chip was nowhere to be seen.

"Oh, oh!" Hank said, arriving at Robert's side. He pointed to the ground. "Wolf tracks – or dogs – but I'd bet on wolves in this weather."

"Chip! Chip! You here?" Robert called out over and over, first in one direction and then another.

There was no answer.

"Let's start moving the rubble and douse the fire with snow. I'll call in for assistance. How do I direct help to this location?"

"Old Covered Bridge at the Trent place will get 'em here," Hank said handing Robert an extra pair of leather work gloves. Robert nodded appreciatively as he made the call to the Sheriff's office.

"I'd say get that fire out first, you know," Hank continued as Robert pocketed his phone. "If the kid's underneath . . ."

The heat from the fire and the hot smoke it produced had been turning the falling snow into rain. As a result, the top of the ground and wood was coated with a sheet of ice. It made the process of finding loose snow difficult and it was the loose snow they needed to quench the flames. They worked for the better part of thirty minutes. Robert continued to call out from time to time though hope faded with every passing minute.

Eventually, just one size able bonfire remained, separated from the rubble. They kept it going to provide heat and as a signal for those coming to help. They began removing the wood from the tangled heap and slid it out of the way down the slope.

"I found the bike," Hank called. "It's a mess but it means the boy is probably here."

Robert made his way to where Hank was working. He shaded his eyes and looked up to where the bridge had been.

"What is that – a fifty or so foot drop?"

"About that. You thinking the boy might have been inside?"

"Seems like a possibility, or just peddled off the end of the road and fell before he realized the situation. Why else would he be down here?"

Hank shrugged his shoulders but nodded his head.

"Looks like a backpack, here beside this log," Robert said at last, standing up, puffing. "We're bound to be near the right spot."

His phone rang. It was from the county road crew. They had spotted the smoke and were asking directions. Robert handed the phone to Hank who talked them in.

Within minutes there were a dozen, additional, strong, backs at work.

"I see a leg here," one of them called.

He was ten yards south of where the backpack had been located.

"And believe it or not, the leg's in a splint."

The others rushed to help. Board after board was lifted carefully and tossed aside. At last Chip's head was uncovered. His face was white like the snow. Blood, frozen into icicles, hung from his eyebrows. Robert patted, then slapped the boy's cheeks. Chip's eyes opened, squinting against the sudden bright light.

"You the cavalry?" Chip asked in a weak but matter of fact manner as he wavered between his John Wayne movie dream and wakefulness.

"Chip, you're alright," Robert said, relieved and clearly overjoyed.

Chip's response was slow and measured.

"Well, I wouldn't exactly say alright, you know. A broken lower right leg and upper right arm. Probably some broken ribs. Other than that, frostbite, and being starved, I'm *probably* what you could call alright."

For the first time, he looked directly into Robert's face.

"Hey, you're the face in my window. Should I be getting concerned, here?"

"I'm Robert, your father's chief of security. Take my word that everything is going to be fine. Nothing to worry about, now."

"Not sure why I should trust you, but at this point I can't really be choosy about who I call friend, can I? Thanks for coming to my party by the way. I'd make a snow angel but . . . I hurt something awful. Everywhere! Can you do something about that? Please!"

While the workers cleared away additional debris so Chip could be moved, Robert made two calls. The first was to Edward and the second to the *Villa*. There were tears and expressions of joy and thanks on the other end of both conversations. The siren in the distance signaled the arrival of the EMT's. The snow picked up and Chip was moved so he could sit back against a fallen tree trunk near the fire. He was covered with blankets from the emergency packs and soon hot soup had been prepared in a metal cup. It had been nearly a full day since he had eaten.

"Thinnest steak I've ever had," Chip joked, sipping from the cup. "So, what gives? What is it that I'm not supposed to be

worried about?" he asked, looking up at Robert.

Robert had not thought that far ahead. How should he answer the question?

"Well, there is good news for you about your father and mother, and your dad bought the mansion so your old ... er friends can remain there just as before – well, better than before, I suppose since he will stand all the expenses."

He was rambling.

"And why this new Edward Carter?"

Chip's tone was sarcastic and uncharacteristically it was devoid of respect.

"He will need to tell you that. He and your mother are already on their way back from Ft. Wayne. Once the medical people are finished with you, I'll take you to the Mansion – *Oakton Villa* I believe you call it. I've let them know you're alright. You handed them an awful scare you know."

"Can I plead just being a stupid twelve-year-old?"

"You don't have to plead anything with me. It's all the other people, you know – the ones who love you so much."

"You're saying that suddenly includes Mom and Dad?"

Again, there was disbelief in his tone.

"It certainly includes your Mom and Dad."

"You've been keeping your eye on me, haven't you?"

"Yes, since the second day you arrived."

"Thanks, *I guess.*"

"You're welcome, *I suppose.*"

It was good for a brief chuckle between them.

"Guess I didn't cover my trail very well, huh?"

"You did fine right up until you selected a girlfriend. Her dad's a psychological consultant for your father's business. He heard about the runaway son. Figured the description fit the kid her daughter couldn't stop talking about and from there it took very little effort to find the new kid on the block."

"Couldn't stop talking about me, huh? Did Connie's Mom know about me?"

"No. We told no one. It was your father's directive. I was not to disrupt things here. He had the residents checked out and felt it was a good spot for you to remain in until he and your mother could get things worked out."

"Worked out? Like putting bars on my windows and

locks on my door – importing a good bullwhip maybe?"

"You can't understand until you speak with them. You'll be better off if you don't continue to beat them up so. I haven't been blind to your plight the past few years. But what could I do?"

"Well, I won't see them and if they just barge in uninvited, I'll close my eyes and not speak to them. I'm not going to take anymore from them."

It was spoken with wide eyes and a thoroughgoing anger his friends at the *Villa* would not have believed possible.

Chip grew silent. The man in the blue parka seemed sincere – nice even. And he *had* rescued him. Of course, if he hadn't his father would have certainly had his hide. Letting his only son die in a snow storm would have put a big black spot on Edward's public record. Clearly Chip had no faith in the implication that things had really changed. The scars on his legs and buttocks dictated against all that.

Chip was bound onto a stretcher and carried to the top of the hill by six of the strongest looking men he had ever seen. They tried to be gentle but every slip, every jiggle, every turn, was agonizing for the helpless youngster. By the time he arrived at the ambulance, he had again lapsed into unconsciousness from the pain.

Hank led the way in Mary Lou, snow flying, light whirling and horn honking at every intersection. Robert rode in the ambulance with Chip. The trip to the hospital took over hour. Chip wavered in and out of consciousness. The attendant started an I-V and periodically took his blood pressure. She massaged Chip's feet and hands fearing frostbite may have already wrought its damage. She applied a heating pad to his head and ears.

"He's not throwing up," the attendant remarked, looking at Robert. "That's a good sign."

Robert nodded. He was pleased to hear anything that resembled a good sign. He made short calls from time to time keeping the others informed.

Chip's eyes fluttered open and he spoke in a soft deliberate manner.

"If Connie's been told about my stupidity she should be called and told I'm doing just great."

He rattled off her mother's phone number and Robert

punched it in. They *had* heard and were relieved and thankful for the call.

"I assume you've told William and the kids at the Villa that I'm doing great, right?"

"Absolutely!" Robert said.

"You don't lie any better than my dad. Let me hear you tell them."

Again, the buttons were punched.

"This is Robert again. Chip wants to hear me tell William and *the kids* that he's doing just fine."

"Not *fine*. GREAT!"

"I suppose you heard that in the background. . . . Yes, I will. Good-by."

"Yes, you will *what*?"

"Yes, I will tell you how much they love you."

Chip nodded and then winced from the ensuing pain.

"They really mean that, you know," he said looking back and forth between Robert and the EMT. "By the way Ma'am, I'm Chip and I don't think I've thanked you for whatever it is you're doing for me."

She nodded and turned to Robert.

"His temperature is rising fast. He's hovering on the verge of delirium. This often gets interesting."

"Delirium; out of my head; gibberishing; bouncy babbling," Chip went on and on, as if to prove he was still in full control of his senses and which, of course, only tended to prove the opposite.

"I have this urge to talk about Connie but I think I should just go back to sleep thank you and goodnight."

He was asleep again.

When at last he awoke, he was in a hospital bed in a private room. It was Robert's smudged and unshaven face he saw first.

"You're a *really* ugly nurse," Chip joked through his slowly clearing mental fog.

"My leg and arm feel really heavy. Is that okay?"

A woman's voice answered from the other side of the bed.

"Considering they are each carrying about ten pounds of plaster, I suppose that could be considered normal."

"Hey. You're put together much more like a nurse should

be. My name's Chip."

"I'm Amy. How's the pain?"

"I'd say the *pain* was doing very well. It's establishing a *Pain Free Zone* here that interests me more right now."

"You sound like a college professor."

"I've been called worse. So, about the *pain*?"

She popped two tablets into his mouth and offered a glass of water. He sipped from the straw and swallowed. She felt his wrist to take his pulse.

"The emergency room doctor was quite impressed with the splint jobs you did on yourself," she said. "He can't understand how you managed to pull it off one handed. He'll stop up later with lots of questions."

Chip nodded feeling no explanation had been called for from her.

"I'm starved. Do you feed your patients?"

"I imagine I can rustle up something. Promise to behave while I'm gone?"

It was just one of those well practiced nurse phrases and she didn't wait for an answer.

"What time is it?" he asked, looking at Robert who had taken a seat near the window.

"Going on two."

"A.M. or P.M.?"

"P.M."

"What day is it?"

"The day after your grand adventure began."

"You look awful, Sir."

"So do you."

"But I got a good reason."

"Believe me, son, so do I."

Chip nodded, a sheepish look washing across his face.

"I'm sure you do. Sorry. That was being pretty selfish of me."

A sandwich, glass of milk and ice cream arrived. Chip ate and then slept.

"Got a problem," Robert said, speaking with Chip's father on the phone as he stood in the hall just outside the boy's room. "He refuses to see you."

"How long do they expect to keep him in the hospital?"

"Just overnight to make sure he's stable. Aside from the broken arm, leg and four ribs, he's in remarkably good shape. Frost bite was minimal. Apparently, having the bridge fall on top of him and catch fire actually saved his life."

"We won't intrude on him just yet, then. You doing okay?"

Robert was taken aback. The man had never in all of the fourteen years he'd worked for him inquired about his wellbeing. Robert stammered.

"Me, Sir? Yes, I'm okay. Tired and filthy but, yes, I'm doing fine."

"Want some relief? I have help with me here at the hotel. I can easily send somebody over."

"The fewer people in the boy's life right now the better I imagine. I'll just stay here with him."

"You're a good man. There'll be a sizeable reward tacked onto your check next month."

It irritated Robert and without thinking he reacted.

"You still just don't get it. Pardon me for saying so, Sir, but I don't want your damn money. We thought this boy was surely dead but we kept fighting our way through the worst blizzard this part of the state's ever seen just on the slim chance that he wasn't. Then we found him – alive. *That's* my reward, Sir. We found him *alive!*"

It grew quiet on the other end of the line.

"You're right, of course. I have a long way to go before I *get it*, I guess. I'm sorry if my offer offended you. It's all I know how to do."

There was a short pause before he continued.

"It should have been me who was out there searching for him, you know. The feeling you have is the one I should be having. I suppose I'm jealous and probably ashamed. Keep me informed and let me know when he's moved back to the mansion. I'll get William on the line now and see what counsel he may have to offer on all this."

The nurse returned with a towel and washcloth.

"I figured you'd want to shower, Sir. I can scrounge up a razor, too, if you like."

"You're very kind. Yes, that would be nice. Will you stay with the boy until I finish? I don't want him waking up alone. He

hasn't begun to deal with the terror he must have felt out there all alone."

"Of course, I'll stay. Take your time. I guess I'm not sure what your relationship is to the boy?"

Robert smiled down at the sleeping Chip.

"Neither am I, I suppose."

He flashed a brief smile at her and went into the bathroom.

* * *

Back at the *Villa*, William was on the phone with Edward. They talked for more than an hour. William was not shy about asking pointed questions. Chip's story of neglect and abuse was pretty much the way he had told it. The business had been started by Edward's father and Edward had never wanted to be a part of it. The pressures of leadership after Edward, Senior died were too great for him and he had fallen into the nightly abuse of alcohol – and the abuse of his wife and the son he had not ever really wanted.

Responsibility of any kind was apparently too much for the man and, early in his marriage, when he found his wife was pregnant with Chip, he insisted on an abortion. She left him until the boy was born and then returned at Edward's insistence. He reported she had several affairs but didn't place the blame for them on anyone but himself.

They talked about the boy's refusal to see his parents. Edward was willing to be patient. They spoke of alternate plans for raising Chip. Edward had a difficult time keeping money out of the equations. Each time it surfaced, William would just shake his head and wait until the man caught himself.

* * *

The following morning Chip returned to the *Villa* in Robert's car. The two of them found they were quite compatible, with many interests in common.

He was met with a "WELCOME HOME CHIPPER" banner painted on a sheet, which rippled in the breeze out front. The men had taken turns with the snow shovel and with major help from Hank managed to carve out a wheelchair-wide path from the road to the porch.

They were all waiting at the door when the car arrived. They watched through the windows as Hank helped Robert lift

Chip from the front seat into the chair and a few minutes later carry him – chair and all – up the front steps. Hank said his good-byes outside and Robert pushed the boy through the eagerly, opened, door.

Chip, of course, was the first to speak.

"Well, don't just stand there! Hugs and food. In that order. Come on!!"

The hugs were gentle and tearful all around. Eventually Robert spoke.

"Well, it appears you have things well in hand here. I'll be on my way, then."

Chip looked at him, puzzled.

"You can't leave. Who'll lift me in and out of bed? Who'll carry me upstairs to supper at Gert's tonight – it is Gert's night, isn't it?" he asked, looking at the others who nodded.

"I guess I hadn't thought ahead far enough," Robert admitted. "I'll arrange for a male nurse."

He reached for his phone.

"Male? That won't be any fun," Chip said, more seriously than humorously.

The others laughed and nodded, knowingly, as Robert completed the arrangements. Then it was Chip again.

"Why can't *you* stay? You were better than any of the nurses at the hospital – not as pretty, granted, but better in all other ways."

"I have a large security force to supervise. I've been handling it by phone for several months now from a motel room. I need to get back to my office."

For a single moment, Chip looked hurt. It was immediately replaced by the Chipper smile. He nodded and playfully poked Robert in his arm.

"Okay then. Well, thanks again for all you're help. I owe my life to you, you know."

Robert had no response. His lower jaw quivered below his smile.

"Well, do you hug or not?" Chip asked reaching out with his left arm.

Robert bent down and held the hug for a long, long moment.

"Be good to these folks, here," he said as he straightened

up. "If I get any reports to the contrary I'll have to come back and set things straight."

Chip nodded and smiled up into his new friend's face.

Robert turned to the others.

"Where do you want him stashed for the time-being – his bed, his wheelchair, the woodshed?"

Chip smiled at the humor.

"I probably need to get into my bed. I'm really beat. When will the hairy nurse be coming?"

"About noon. His name is Jim. Be nice to him. I understand he's into weight lifting and mixed martial arts."

"And I want to get out of this flimsy hospital gown and into some real clothes."

"That won't be so easy," Maude said. "The casts aren't going to fit into jeans or a shirt."

Chip got that look on his face. The others waited knowing his mental wheels were turning.

"Okay then. I can wear my blue robe with the baggy sleeves and my Tarzan loin cloth. How sexy will that look!"

Robert helped him change clothes and he and Ernie lifted him into his bed. Presentable at last, his door was opened, ready to receive visitors.

"I need to talk to William, alone," Chip said to Robert as the man prepared to leave.

Robert nodded and he and Ernie left. William soon appeared.

"I *will* not see my parents. I will *not* go back home with them. I won't have *anything* to do with them. I just want you to know so you can be sure they understand how it is."

"I certainly get your message and it has already been given to them by Robert. You get some sleep now and when you're more rested I want you to read through the material in this envelope. Will you give me your word that you will at least read through what's inside?"

Chip shrugged – well half a shrug – his right shoulder wouldn't move.

"Okay. But if it's stuff about them I can tell you right now it won't change my mind. I decided to leave them forever way back when I was just a little kid and that's what I did – left them forever. I can stay here with you, right?"

"You know you can, insofar as we have any control over it. You do need to consider how reasonable that may be in the long run, however. We're old. Your parents are young. We're poor. They're wealthy; they can give you the World."

"I don't want the damn *World*."

He burst into tears.

"I want love ... and caring ... and trust ... and friendship ... and smiles ... and laughter . . . and hugs – all the things I found here that I'd never believed would ever exist for me."

William leaned down and planted a gentle kiss on his forehead. It was the first time he had been so open with his affection. Chip leaned his head into it, ever so slightly.

"You sleep now. We'll talk more later. I promise you things are going to work out."

He turned and went to the door.

"Rose and I will take turns checking back every so often. Want the light on or off?"

"On, I guess. I got your word you won't let my parents in here, right?"

"You have my word. More importantly, you have *their* word as well."

Chip frowned, not entirely understanding, but relaxed about it and was soon asleep.

The others gathered in Rosie's living room to discuss the newest problem. There had been so many things for them to absorb and adjust to during that past forty-eight hours. It had all just begun settling comfortably into the bigger picture when Chip's refusal surfaced.

"I have no doubt he can be stubborn," Ernie said.

"And by his parents' own admission, he does have reason to harbor grievances against them," William added.

"Do you think they could really change so fast?" Gert asked. The question, clearly laced with skepticism, was directed at William.

"The reports suggest they have. I still have several of the professional people to contact by phone."

"Reports and experts can be bought, you know," Grady said, clearly uncomfortable with the information.

"There's one thing we do have to keep in mind through all this," Rose began. "We have to separate our feelings about how

much we want the boy here with us from what's really the best for him in the long run. If he has good parents, he should be with his good parents."

The others nodded, realizing there may have been some selfish motivation in what they were feeling and their quickness to judge his parents so harshly.

"I only hope the Carter's can be as unselfish about it," William added.

"You've spoken with the father," Gert said. "What's your take on him?"

"I tend to trust people until they prove I shouldn't, so I'm probably not the best one to make that call."

"What are we going to do, then?" Maude asked.

"Chip has agreed to read the reports his father gave me. I'll make the calls I still need to make. Then somebody will have to sit down with the boy and hash out a plan. His parents *are* going to be a part of his life in some way. Edward is clearly not a patient man. He's used to having people hop when he says hop. We'll just have to play it by ear for a while I suppose."

Across the hall in the safety of his room, Chip slept on. It was a restless sleep, punctuated by groans, driven by his pain ridden body and the pain filled images of parents past.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The day arrived. Chip was scared. His parents were terrified. William was as apprehensive as he had ever been about anything in his life. At ten o'clock Lynn and Edward Carter were to arrive and face their son for the first time since he had run away. Ten days had passed since he had arrived home from the hospital – that is, back at the mansion.

Although he couldn't split the wood, he insisted on being bundled up so he could sit on the porch and watch Hank wield the axe. He liked feeling a part of it. He liked Hank. He missed Robert even though he had received a call every day since the man returned to Ft. Wayne.

By eight o'clock the wood was cut and delivered to the apartments. Chip, Hank, and the other men always had coffee and cocoa together after that. It had become a time they all looked forward to. Each day Gert would see there was a plate of goodies for their new friend to take home. He wouldn't hear to being paid. Occasionally Maude sent along frilly doodads or starts from her African violets for his wife.

It had been a wonderful ten days; yet, the constant undertow of anxiety over the uncertain resolution of Chip's long term status tempered it all. Chip and William had many long talks. The others added their advice in both subtle and not so subtle ways. Edward, in an act of misguided love, sent a psychiatrist to the mansion to see Chip. Chip's indignant refusal to meet with the man was a surprise to no one but his fully baffled parents. The doctor, himself, had predicted as much even before he arrived. Upon leaving that day he scribbled a note to Chip on his prescription pad.

"Chip - If I were in your shoes right now I certainly wouldn't have spoken with me either. Good luck. - Doc Simon."

Chip kept that note and reread it from time to time. He was one to keep his options open.

William's ongoing contacts with the professionals who were treating Lynn and Edward led him to believe significant progress was being made and that the motivation for permanent change was genuine on both of their parts. He shared that impression with Chip who was still not inclined to buy any of it.

Privately, William also wondered if a man who had treated his unwanted son so brutally could actually ever change enough so Chip would be safe when alone with him. If such a thing could be interpreted as positive it was a fact that the man had only abused his son when he was drunk, and he had not had a drink since Chip went missing.

* * *

Chip and William waited in William's apartment. Chip sat in his wheel chair near the front window watching for the familiar blue limo to arrive. He had decided that if they were late he would not see them, though he had not shared that with William. Either they cared enough about him to be on time or else. It had been his private, unspoken, ultimatum.

The boy's view of the dynamics of his relationship with his parents had gradually made a 180-degree shift. It had become clear to him since he left home that of the hundreds of other people who knew him, none of them disliked him. His two newest adult friends liked him – Robert and Hank. The problem his parents had about him therefore certainly didn't stem from *him* but from *them*. The reports from the high-priced psychiatrists also said as much.

He wanted to hear them admit all of that without any prompting. He wanted to look into their eyes while they told him they loved him. He felt certain he would know if they were sincere or not. He wanted to hear them tell him how sorry they were for the abuse and how it would never happen again. He wanted some incontestable assurance of that.

Even if all those things fell into place, he was not convinced that he should ever associate with them again. If they loved him – really loved him – they would allow him to stay where he was. In his mind, it had become his ultimate test of their love.

What he really wanted to do, and what he had done many times over in his fantasies those past few months, was to scream at them and make them feel bad; make them feel guilty; make them feel worthless. He wanted to make them relive with him every excruciating moment of pain he had felt at their hands; the terror he experienced every evening as the sun went down and the bottles came out. He wanted to see them cry and he wanted to see them down on their knees begging, pleading for his

forgiveness, which he had determined he would never give them. He wanted to view the expressions on their faces when he sent them away and refused to ever see them again. It was revenge he wanted. Retribution. Pay back. Exacting his pound of flesh. For once *he* would be in charge and they would be at *his* mercy.

His heart pounded in anticipation. Oddly, it suddenly became the scariest moment of his life when Rosie escorted them through the door. Chip continued to stare out the window.

“Hello, son,” Edward said. It had been rehearsed dozens of times for proper tone and style. Yet, his voice still broke.

Lynn could only put her handkerchief to her face and sob. William stood and shook Edward’s hand.

“Good to see you again, Sir,” Edward said.

“Yes,” William answered, “And good to meet you, Ma’am.”

Lynn made no attempt to offer her hand.

It was awkward and uncomfortable, and William held little hope it would prove in any way useful.

They took seats on the couch across the coffee table from William.

Chip continued to look out the window, not yet acknowledging their presence. He pulled the drapes back and saw Robert below, standing with his back against the Limo. He waved tentatively and Robert waved back. There was a brief smile followed by a more deliberate wave.

“You’ve made quite the impression on Robert, Son,” Edward said sensing what was going on.

Lynn sobbed louder.

William tried to set the stage.

“I’m not sure how to proceed. Chip agreed to the meeting somewhat reluctantly but it was his agreement and I applied no force. Is that correct, Chip?”

Chip nodded, though had still not diverted his view from outside. Then, as a welcome surprise to William – who wasn’t sure where to go next – the boy spoke, his eyes still fixed on Robert.

“You were on time. Ninety-six seconds ahead of time to be precise and I know how important being precise is to you.”

Edward looked at William, nodding, as if to say, ‘So far things seem to be going well.’

William still wasn't convinced. Jostling damaged TNT seldom produces pleasant results.

"Chip has a lot he wants to say to you. Most of it is anger driven. Not sure when he will feel ready to begin," William explained hoping to make legitimate to both sides, what he felt would be the imminent and inevitable onslaught.

Silence.

Chip slowly turned his chair in the direction of the others but continued to sit well out of the circle. He looked first at William, then at his mother and finally at his father.

"So?" he said, feeling he had opened the meeting successfully – cordially even.

"Yes. *So*. That certainly seems to put the conversation in my court," Edward said, catching Chip's steady stare with his own.

Again, Chip surprised William by snapping, "Not *yours* - YOURS."

With that, Chip pointed back and forth to both of them, feeling that as usual, his father's assessment had left his mother out of things.

It was then it began – thirteen years of anger and terror, thirteen years of anguish and pain. Chip's cheeks streamed with tears even before the tirade commenced.

"Can you possibly know how much I hate you two – Dad, you for the terrifying torture and Mom, you for allowing it?"

That was as far as he had it rehearsed. The rest emerged naturally from deep within his soul.

"Do you know how much you hurt me? Do you know how it was for me to sit in school all day long being terrified of having to come home at night and face your fist and your whip? What did I ever do to deserve any of that? I'll tell you what. I got born. That's my only crime the way I see it. You always made me think it was all my fault. And you were good at it. It wasn't until the angels led me to this place that stormy night that I began learning how wrong you were.

"I'm a nice person. I'm a good person. I know that now. How could the two of you have been so stupid to have missed that? I'll tell you how. You're self-centered, self-absorbed, selfish, sons of bitches, that's how."

Lynn started to respond but William put his finger to his

lips and shook his head ever so slightly. She sat back.

“You know how long I’ve been planning to run away from you? Since my *fifth* birthday. That’s the night I told myself as soon as I got old enough I’d leave you forever. I figured I’d be old enough when I turned thirteen. Well, I just couldn’t last that long.”

He rolled his chair to within a few inches of his father, leaning close and staring directly into the man’s, moist face.

“That last night you just kept hitting me and hitting me and you looked so angry at me. I really thought you intended to kill me that night. I knew I had to leave or the next time you would. Doing that would have ruined your life, you know?”

Everyone in the room, including Chip, was surprised at his last statement. Chip grew quiet and turned his chair so he faced the wall, but remained close to his father. Edward reached out, tentatively, and gentled his hand onto Chip’s arm. He said nothing. Chip made no attempt to move from it. It was the first time the child could remember receiving a tender touch from the man.

After a few moments, Edward moved to withdraw it. Chip hastened to cover it with his own hand and hold it in place against his skin. Still, no one spoke. Little by little Chip began stroking the back of his Father’s hand – first with just his thumb and then with his whole hand. He turned his head and looked his father in the eyes. His words came slowly. His tone was as sad as a human voice has ever been.

“It’s thirteen years too late, Dad. I don’t know . . .”

The idea was left unfinished. The hands remained together.

His mother got up and stood behind Chip’s chair. She put her hands on his shoulders. Again, Chip made no effort to free himself. He gradually laid his head over onto her left hand as if to hold it there forever. William removed several tissues from the box on the end table and sobbed along with the other three.

Eventually, Chip sat up, wiped at his eyes with the cuff of his robe, and turned the chair back toward his parents.

“I’m finally beginning to understand what William’s been saying to me right along. I don’t hate *you*. I hate *how you are*. . . . Still, I don’t know how I’ll ever be able to trust you; do you understand that?”

His parents both nodded. They had no words for such a moment. It was clear the boy was mature beyond his years – beyond *their* years, in fact.

A bigger question suddenly loomed in Edward's mind. Would *he* ever reach the point where he could trust himself alone with his son? Having been able to ask that sincerely, was the essential breakthrough toward which he had been struggling.

Neither of their questions could be answered that morning. There was only one way for either to ever know for sure. Time together – well planned, safety assured, time together.

“We *do* love you son,” his mother said, bending down and kissing him on the top of his head. “The past few months have shown us *that* well beyond *any* doubt.”

She took her seat again beside Edward, taking his hand in hers. Chip turned his chair following her with his eyes. He was startled by the open show of affection between them. She continued.

“Now, your father and I have to learn how to love *ourselves*. When we've accomplished that, we'll be back to talk about taking you home – about becoming the family we've never been. Until then, we'd like to come and visit with you here – often. Later, when we all feel the time is right, we hope you'll be willing to try an afternoon or a day or a weekend back home with us.”

Chip's lower lip trembled. He nodded, deliberately, engaging his parent's eyes through his tears. They understood he was sincere. They also understood it meant, ‘Yes, I'll considerate it,’ not, ‘Yes, I'll do it,’ but in his nod, they found hope for a new beginning.

