

A scenic view of a lake with green trees in the foreground and a blue sky. The text is overlaid on the image.

*Family  
Portrait*

*By Tom Gnagey*

# **Family Portrait**

*Another Tender Story of  
Romance, Suspense and Personal Triumph from  
the pen of*

**Tom Gnagey**

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**Family of Man Press**

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## **CHAPTER ONE: Contact!**

Jason, the ruggedly good-looking owner of The Golden Frigate Restaurant, eyed the boy from across the spacious, pleasantly appointed dining room. Eric was sitting, waiting for the interview as patiently as a fourteen-year old boy can wait for anything. He appeared comfortable in the white shirt and blue tie that brought out the very best of his handsome, slightly tanned, angular features. He busied himself by chatting with and sketching an older couple seated nearby. Eric was fascinated by people of all ages, and the two willing subjects, with their engaging, furrowed faces and cheerful conversation, provided a sketchpad opportunity he couldn't pass up.

Eric was fourteen, with a physique suggesting sixteen. He had excellent references and previous work experience at The Green Mill, his Mother's small, neighborhood café, not five blocks away. Looking through the boy's application, Jason found that Eric seemed to be a perfect match to what the book said he needed in a new employee.

The Frigate was a cut-above fast food establishment, catering to families and senior citizens during the day and teenagers after school, evenings, and weekends. Again, he studied the boy. As he sat there drawing, Eric seemed thoroughly at ease as he chatted with, and apparently charmed, his two, new friends.

Still, Jason felt disappointed. He was hoping that this time the applicant would be a beautiful single woman in her mid-thirties. In his fantasies, she loved camping, dancing, and laughing, and best of all, she enjoyed quiet, intimate hours,

curled up with him by the fireplace.

Jason knew his friend, Dave, was right. He had to face facts - depending on fate was neither an efficient nor an effective means for getting himself back into circulation. Perhaps he persisted in that approach because deep inside he questioned whether he was ready for another such relationship. The pain and sorrow from his Karen's death thirteen months earlier continued as an ever-present barb in his mind - further back now than it once had been, but nonetheless, ever present and still painful. He figured that when the intensity of that pain became less than the pain from his loneliness, he would proceed to do something about it.

Crossing the large room with its blonde, wood plank, vaulted ceiling, and red tile floor, Jason approached Eric. He extended his hand as the boy sprang to his feet greeting him.

"Keep your seat, Eric. I'm Jason, the owner. Let's just sit and talk for a while, okay?"

"Fine," Eric replied sliding back into the booth. With an index finger raised in Jason's direction, Eric stole one last moment. He turned toward the older couple and said, "It sure was nice talking with you folks. Hope your daughter gets back on her feet real soon."

They nodded and smiled. He tore the page from his sketchpad and, with his patented smile, reached it to them across the isle. They o-o-oed and ah-h-hed appropriately and overdid their thanks to him. Eric returned his attention to Jason.

"So, Eric, it's the fast food world you have your eye set on," Jason began.

Eric proceeded as though Jason's opening statement had really been a question.

"Well, only for the time being, Sir. I plan to attend cooking school in Paris after high school and eventually become a chef in a World-Famous Hotel dining room. This job is what you might call an opportunity to learn the basics of the business while getting out from under my mother's thumb."

An honest, forthright answer, Jason thought. The lad knew what he wanted and how he was going to get there. He seemed like a smart, savvy kid.

"How well do you do in school, Eric?"

Ever prepared, Eric pulled his report card from where it was stashed in his sketchpad and handed it to Jason.

"Probably not as well as I could, Sir, but I've been working long hours at Mom's Cafe. Now that she has found other help, Mom and I figure I will be able to concentrate more on my studies."

All A's and B's and the boy feels he has been sloughing off. Jason didn't think they made kids like that anymore.

"Oh yes, that's The Green Mill, isn't it?" Jason said, squinting, trying to decipher the code explaining the circled comments on the card. He was sure that report cards had not been so complicated during his own school days.

"Right. She's had it since I was five. I'm two months away from fifteen now. I've helped her there right from the start – well, I hope I'm more help now than I was at five. She's the only real work reference I have. I didn't know how much stock you'd put in a Mother's comments so I brought these," he said, handing two, still sealed, envelopes across the table. "I suppose you would call them character references. One is from the pastor of our church who has known me forever, and the other is from the lady across the street. I help her with yard work and housecleaning, window washing and general handy-man kind of stuff."

Jason read two, most flattering, letters. He smiled to himself, thinking, ' If he were just a thirty-five-year-old female, I'd propose on the spot!'

"How many hours a week are you wanting?" Jason asked.

"Well, during the school year I'd prefer very few on week nights so I can study, but on the weekends, I'll take all you feel you can give me. This summer I can be available whenever you need someone."

"How would you feel about opening mornings with me at five a.m.?"

"That sounds great! I've always been an early riser. What sorts of things would I be doing when I opened?"

There'll be a lot of cleaning, setting up the ice cream and shake machines, picking up the litter in the parking lot, washing off all the tables and scrubbing the floors. There also might be an occasional window to do."

"I think you'll find I'll be pretty good at those things. I've logged a lot of clean-up hours both at home and at the Mill," Eric said smiling his wonderfully warm, natural smile. "Since it's always just been Mom and me, I've had the chance - like it or not - to learn a lot about dirt, scum and trash, and the most efficient methods for their removal." The smile continued. It was reflected by Jason's own.

Though it was perhaps none of his business, Jason, felt moved to ask, "And your father?"

"Well, Sir, my mother never married and I'm afraid I don't even know my father."

Jason wished he hadn't asked. Oh! How he wished he hadn't asked. How did one climb back from a faux pas like that? Eric rescued him.

"It's okay. Mom and I have done pretty well, we think. She says I've raised her to be a very good and dependable parent."

His smile slipped seamlessly into an impish grin - eyebrows raised and dimples full blown. He and his mother obviously had a good thing going. Ever-open Eric, continued his explanation well beyond what was required by Jason's question.

"I'm not saying I don't miss having a Dad. I really do, but Mom probably misses having a husband just as much - maybe more. I'm not sure how that works yet - though I do plan to find out someday. We both get lonely in our own ways but we kick each other's butts when one of us begins moping around or complaining. We trust each other. She knows I usually try to do the right things and when I don't, I know she'll be there to get me back on track. We have a really good thing, Mom and me."

"Yes, I can see you do," Jason said, then paused, fiddling with his folder.

Eric seized the opportunity and filled the moment with questions of his own.

"How about you, Sir, any children?"

"No. My wife wasn't able to have children. We talked about adopting but just never got around to it." Jason couldn't believe that he was sharing such things with a fourteen-year old stranger. There was certainly something uncommonly

comfortable, about this kid.

"I heard that your wife died in a car accident last year. I'm sorry for you about that. I think having had someone to love and then losing her must be a hundred times harder than never having had anyone in the first place - like me and a Dad, I mean."

'His age and gender notwithstanding, I may just propose anyway,' Jason mused to himself. His smile telegraphed his thoughts.

"What?" Eric asked responding radiantly to Jason's pleasant expression.

"Something you said just made me remember something. Nothing important."

Eric wasn't stupid. He could tell from the expression it had indeed been important, but he wouldn't pursue it of course.

"How about starting tomorrow morning at five o'clock, then?" Jason suggested more than asked.

"Really? Oh, yes Sir. That will be great! Just great! I'll be a good worker, you'll see."

"That's why we have a two-week probation period here – so I can see," Jason added, punctuating his words with a commanding nod.

"Before I go, Sir, I took the liberty of sketching a couple of ideas for logos for your Golden Frigate. I notice you don't have one. I doodle all the time. Just ideas you understand."

"Thanks." Jason gave them a thoughtful once over – clearly more than just a polite glance. "How interesting. Not a bad idea. I'll think about it. Thanks again. See you in the morning."

They stood and shook hands.

"By the way, Sir, what do you prefer that I call you while I'm here at work? Mom said to be sure and ask."

"We're very informal around here. Call me Jason. When you turn 15 you might even try, Jase." The man's trademark wink and smile made Eric feel as though he already belonged.

"Yes, Sir, Jase-on. And since we're being informal here, why don't you just go ahead and call me Eric," Came the boy's grinning reply.

We will get along just fine, Jason thought to himself.

We're going to be great together! Eric thought to himself.

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Eric ran the five blocks to The Green Mill, removing his tie and shirt on the fly. That made him feel immediately more comfortable in the face of the 90-degree early June heat and rainforest-like humidity. It was a familiar, middle-America street, with small, older houses, many still struggling to maintain the picket fence air of the nineteen-forties. Waving to the old folks on the porches and calling out teen-coded greetings to his friends, he trotted on at a ready clip to deliver the good news to his mother.

He could have painted the scene before he arrived. His mother, Abby - Abigail Sarah Covington, as her birth certificate reads - would be cooking the last of the breakfasts for the late risers. Ernie would be there, having his umpteenth free coffee refill, complaining, off and on, about not being allowed to smoke in the dining room. Ample old Maude would be picking at her pancakes and sausage - picking and complaining, but finishing every morsel. Mary would be waiting tables and Jean, the new lady, would be birthing aches and pains by reaching, bending and carrying, and doing up dishes. Eric knew the routine by heart. He wondered about - not worried about, as Eric was not given to idle worry - how long it would take him to learn the new routine at Jason's place.

Presently, he arrived at The Mill - the shorthand term he and his mother had always used for their restaurant - and was quickly inside through the back door. He unceremoniously deposited his shirt and tie on top of the refrigerator, grabbed a handful of unbuttered toast from under the heat lamp, and hurried to where his mother was busy at the grill. He kissed her on the cheek and then, as casually as a wildly excited teenager can speak through a mouthful of dry toast, said, "Well, I have good news and bad news, Mom."

She returned his kiss. With the back of his hand, he gently swiped at her cheek, attempting to wipe it clean of the toast crumbs his lips had deposited there.

"So do I. Good news is I'm glad to see you. Bad news

is, unless you get a shirt on before I count to one, you'll have to get out of my kitchen."

"Oh. Yeah. Sorry."

"Well, let's get the bad news out of the way first," she suggested, flipping an omelet with one hand and stirring the white, pepper, gravy with the other.

"Bad news is, you won't have me under foot around here anymore," Eric said beaming from sideburn to sideburn.

"That's the bad news?" Abby joked.

The good news, of course, was already out of the bag, but it was such good news that he went ahead and delivered it:

"I got the job at Jason's. I start tomorrow at five in the morning helping the owner open."

Engaging both hands, his mouth, and his groin, he struggled to untangle the mangled, white shirt.

"That is wonderful," Abby said. Feeling it deserved another kiss she leaned over and planted a big one on his forehead. He accepted it comfortably, even with several of the patrons looking on. The regulars were used to such goings on between the two of them.

"Jason seems like a really swell guy," Eric added, finally snugging the shirt up around his neck in preparation for buttoning. "He's single and about thirty-five, Mom. I'll be glad to make the introductions, now that I'm in a position to do so," he teased, tossing his head with an air of importance. Quietly, they individually wondered whether or not he had been kidding about that introduction.

"An older man, huh? Is that what you're after for a father these days?" she shot right back. Passing him on the way to the freezer, she, of course, straightened his collar. After all, she was a mother.

"Older by how much? Two years, maybe?" Eric chuckled, draining the last of the milk from a carton into an oversized glass. He closed the refrigerator door with that universal, kitchen-helper's, well-practiced, both hands full, shove from the knee.

"Older is older, now hush up or the customers will hear."

Looking out the passthrough, Eric surveyed the homey

dining room he had come to love. He would miss chatting with the regulars and hearing the travel tales from those just passing through. Like his mother, Eric enjoyed people - all kinds of people, all ages of people. With toast in one hand and the glass of milk in the other, he strolled out and began talking from table to table. He figured he better enjoy that while he could since he felt quite certain it wouldn't be part of the routine at The Golden Frigate – not at the outset, at any rate.

A few minutes later, Suzzy entered, no, made her entrance would be a more accurate description – precisely as one would expect from a perky, I-know-I'm-gorgeous, precisely tanned, cheerleader. She was Eric's current girlfriend - the first young lady his mother had allowed him to really date. Suzzy was blond and beautiful with all the right parts in just the right places. She was fifteen - almost sixteen.

Suzzy was worldlier and more street wise than Abby would have preferred for her son's first head-over-heels love, but she knew better than to interfere. Anyway, Abby trusted Eric. Being the mother of a teenage boy was difficult enough, but having grown up, as she had, an only child in a fatherless home, made her feel doubly unprepared for that assignment.

Eric was a nice kid and Abby was proud of him. He had never been one to get into trouble. He had a level head on his shoulders. But it wasn't his head or shoulders that caused her concern. Her sleepless nights were related to other parts of his anatomy, all quite recently remodeled by Mother Nature.

When Eric was ten, they had suffered together through the obligatory parent-child discussion about sex. She doubted if she had been very successful, so she provided him with the recommended growing up books. She insisted that he take the sex education class at school. But still she worried, partly because of her own unfortunate experience at eighteen, and partly because life seemed so much more difficult for kids these days. There were so many forces catapulting them on toward things for which they could not possibly be prepared.

Abby, dutifully, and undoubtedly all too often, continued to caution and remind Eric about his responsibilities in romantic relationships. It had been so much easier back when

her little boy had, indeed, been a little boy. She believed there was much to be said for the girl-hating mentality of the nine-year old male.

Abby's own romantic experiences were severely limited, first by her mother's overzealous restrictions, and then by the presence of the baby itself. She had to fight her every instinct not to act toward Eric, the way her mother acted toward her. Perhaps in an attempt to compensate she leaned too far the other way. It was so difficult for her to know. Boys seemed so different from girls. Men seemed so different from women. It was perplexing, even disconcerting, to think about Eric as a young man with sexual interests and needs.

Those thoughts aside, there he was, sitting in a corner booth with Suzzy, holding hands across the table and looking into her face as if she were the one and only Queen of the World. Their chat ended quickly, somewhat of a relief to Abby, though she really didn't know why. As long as they remained within view, there should be nothing to worry about. They stood up and he kissed her on the lips - nothing long or obscene, very sweet actually. Still, Abby couldn't help wondering what the conniving little trollop had up her skin-tight sleeve!

On her way out, Suzzy poked her head into the kitchen and called a cordial, "Hi and bye Mrs. C."

"Hi and bye, Dear," came Abby's response, sweet and sincere in tone, if not in fact.

Eric returned to the kitchen. "What a lady, that is, huh, Mom!"

Lady. Trollop. There were probably some similarities there somewhere, Abby thought, wishing her perspective were different. She smiled at Eric and nodded through her reluctance as if in agreement.

"Suzzy has a picnic in the works for tomorrow afternoon. Betty and Randy will be going, too. It's out at Suzzy's Grandpa's farm by the creek. Randy's bringing his badminton set, and the creek's handy for a swim when it gets hot. It's okay that I said I could go, isn't it?"

"Sure. Sounds like great fun," Abby said, relieved there would be another couple along. She liked his friend, Randy, and she knew Betty's mother. "Anything we need to fix or get

for you to take along?" Abby asked, as mothers always ask on such occasions.

Eric grinned, unable to let the opening pass. He leaned close to his mother's ear and whispered, "Just a good supply of condoms, I suppose."

Eric was kidding and his mother knew it, but still, she felt moved to slap his face – playfully but clearly meaningfully. She was glad he would joke with her, even if not talk seriously about such things. Perhaps she even preferred it that way. Abby truly didn't know how she would respond if he ever initiated such a conversation. Like her son, though, she was seldom at a loss for words, so somehow, she would handle it.

It was at times like that she most longed for a man in the household. Not just any man, of course. Her long time, on again, off again, Johnny, would have happily become that 'just any man' if she would have allowed it. No, it would have to be a very special human being. A wise man with a sense of perspective, a sense of humor, and enough love to go around for both Eric and her. In thirty years, no such man had yet come knocking on her door saying, "Here I am. Take me." Johnny was a friend of convenience and not much more. She didn't even really like him very much, but there were times when having almost any man's company seemed preferable to enduring her terrible loneliness.

For over a month, Johnny had been out of town welding on a pipeline. It had been both a relief and a letdown to have him gone. Eric made no secret that he hated the man, but courteously put up with him for his mother's sake. When Johnny was around, Eric wasn't!

Johnny was a large, burly, balding man, whose quiet, agreeable, and generally considerate demeanor gave way to that of an obnoxious and verbally abusive brawler when bitten by alcohol.

Time and time again, through the years, Eric said, "Mom, you can do so much better than Johnny. Why don't you at least go looking for somebody?"

When he was eight, Eric finally agreed to stop bringing stray men home to meet her - not that he hadn't wanted to on occasions - but he stopped. His mother explained that it was embarrassing and that anyway, it was her business. Eric felt

that getting a father should have been at least partly his business, but, since age eleven or so, he had pretty well given up on that, also.

\* \* \*

Abby knew it was Jason Marshall the moment she first noticed him standing there, framed by the Pennsylvania Dutch trappings that decorated the old-fashioned entry to the Mill. Eric had described him as nice and congenial. From her perspective, he was tall, tan, and titillating. He paused, surveying the picturesque scene and running his hand through his wavy black hair before making his way through the maze of snugly arranged, red and white gingham covered tables, toward an unoccupied booth in the far corner of the cozy little room.

Abby wiped her suddenly nervous hands on her white apron, untied it, and laid it aside. She removed her hat, shook her shoulder length auburn hair down around her face and sighed from her toes before starting across the dining room to greet him. It wasn't often another restaurant owner frequented her little place.

"Hello, I'm Abby Covington," she said, extending her hand at the precise moment Jason was halfway into seating himself.

Managing to straighten up, meet and shake her hand, he said, "Yes, I know. I'm Jason Marshall from the Golden Frigate down the street."

"Yes, I know ... too," Abby replied, her tongue suddenly running far behind her head. Determined to recover, she tried again. "It's not often we have a high-class restaurateur visit us here at The Green Mill, although I understand Duncan Hines gave the place his seal of approval back in the forties. Anything in particular I can do for you?" That seemed like a more than adequate recovery, she thought.

"I suppose Eric has already told you that I hired him."

"Yes. He's so excited. He'll probably be there an hour early tomorrow morning," Abby said, easily and sincerely conveying her excitement for her son.

"Well, I make it a point to meet the parents of all the youngsters who work for me, just to see if there are any questions or anything. If you have a minute?" With a turn of

his extended arm, he motioned her to be seated.

Abby took a seat, thinking how gallant that had been. "Contacting the parents is a really nice thing to do. Really nice. No, I guess I don't have any questions for you. Perhaps you have some for me."

"No. Not really. I was just heading home for a break and thought this would be a good opportunity to stop in and meet you."

There followed one of those interminable and seemingly unfillable moments during which they each gazed about the room, smiling and nodding. Had there been water on the table, each would have surely reached for a glass. Presently, Jason found a direction and continued. "If your son's work is half as good as his first impression, I think I have myself a real winner."

"Eric is all of that. I'm very, very proud of him. I'm sure you will be pleased. More than likely if there is a problem, it will be the other way around."

"You lost me," Jason said, shaking his head and crinkling his brow.

"I mean, Eric has his own very particular standards, and if you or the Golden Frigate don't live up to them, he'll be the one saying good-bye."

"I see. Well, I'll certainly try to be on my best behavior, then," Jason said producing what he intended as a smile of understanding.

Abby interpreted it as meaning that she had been too blunt and had made herself sound snobbish. "I didn't mean ..."

Sensing her second thoughts, Jason interrupted: "Hey, no need to explain. It's rare to find a young man with high standards these days. Nothing wrong with that. I just hope we can meet them."

Eric had been right. Jason was a nice man.

Another moment of silence joined them like an unwelcome guest at the table. They intentionally avoided engaging a glance, though neither understood why.

"Well, I suppose I should be on my way then. I know how busy a one man – er woman - operation can get."

In his head, he kicked himself for having mangled it that

way. He hadn't meant to put her place down for being small or less important. "I meant..."

"I know what you meant and you're right. It's long hours and lots of work, but it's what I enjoy doing most, other than being Eric's mother."

Like Eric, earlier in the day, Abby rescued him from another of his, all too frequent, verbal quagmires. Relieved, he surmised that tact and diplomacy ran in their family.

There was yet another unexplainably uneasy moment as Jason got to his feet. Abby followed suit.

"Well, again, it's been nice to meet you, Mrs. Covington."

"Abby, please."

"Abby. If you ever have any questions, don't hesitate to call or drop by."

"Same goes for you, Jason." Her tone seemed more contemplative than matter of fact.

Jason nodded gently, in the style of a southern gentleman, smiled, and walked toward the door. At the entrance, he paused, turned slightly and signaled with his upraised hand as if to say, "Catch you later." Abby sank into the chair wondering why she had become so tongue-tied, and suddenly felt a renewed urgency about air-conditioning The Mill. The brisk swishing of the menu would have to suffice for the time being.

Eric, who had been witnessing the show from the shadows of the kitchen, rushed to join her. In one smooth motion, he pulled out a chair, turned it around and slid into it. "Great guy, huh, Mom?"

"Yes, I see why you like him. He makes a nice first impression."

"Nice? Just ni-ice?" Eric said playfully, his breaking voice unintentionally giving the second "nice" an extra syllable.

"Ok, great! He makes a great first impression," Abby admitted, slapping playfully at her son's hands, which were folded across the back of his chair.

Eric grinned his impish grin and asked, "Anything I need to know?"

"No. He just wanted to introduce himself and meet me. He says he does that with the parents of all his teenage

employees."

"Yeah. When they have drop dead, beautiful mothers like I do!"

Eric planted a peck on her cheek.

"Well, I'm off to Randy's to shoot some hoops. Do you need me over lunch or supper today?"

"It would sure help if you could be here over lunch, this being Jean's first, full, day and all."

He glanced at the comfortably out of place Coo-Coo clock across the room. "I'll see you in about two hours then." He carefully replaced the chair, straightened the tablecloth, and hit the door at a full trot.

"How did I ever raise such a remarkable kid?" Abby wondered out loud, continuing to fan herself with the daily specials. Eric was a terrific human being: everyone said so.

That soothing thought not only brightened her moment but it made her day - well, that soothing thought along with the white-hot image of Jason, still branding itself into the depths of her being. Perhaps a splash of cold water to the face would not be out of order. Playfully, she wondered if there would be steam!

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **New Relationships**

Looking back on it, Eric decided that his first week of work had gone exceptionally well. Jason told him several times what good help he was and how he really enjoyed having him there. "Not working with me," Eric reminded himself, but "having me there." The two were very different in Eric's mind. The second implied friendship. That pleased him because he had readily cast Jason in the role of a friend.

They enjoyed talking with each other while they worked. Talking for fun was frowned on once patrons begin arriving, so Eric felt lucky they had those early morning hours together. They laughed and shared small pieces of their lives. It was a good time. Since it was summer with no homework and no restrictive labor laws for fourteen-year-olds, Eric was opening every morning. He was always there waiting, getting a jump on the parking lot litter when Jason drove up in his red convertible. It appeared to Eric that Jason was as eager to see him, as he was to see Jason. It was true. They had grown to enjoy each other's company.

Eric gave himself a good talking to about the fact that Jason wasn't his Dad, just a grown-up friend. He realized the relationship wouldn't last forever and he had to be ready to end it when the time came. Still, it was great to think about spending those mornings together.

"Hey, Eric, I have an idea," Jason said, as the frozen yogurt machine began shaking and making its familiar clattering noises during the morning rinse cycle.

"What's that?"

"Well, I'm taking this weekend off and I plan to go up to a place I have on Bear Lake. It's six acres with a spring, an outdoor fireplace and a one-holer. I tent camp up there. I wondered, since you're off too, if you'd like to come along? We could fish and hike around, swim - just do lazy, guy stuff."

Eric remained quiet, thinking it over. Jason was about to speak again when he realized that Eric's wheels were turning. He remained quiet, smiling to himself about this ever thought-filled lad who was rapidly gaining a toehold in his life.

Eric thought out loud. "I promised Mrs. Hayes, the lady across the street, I'd do her lawn Saturday, but I can take care of that Friday afternoon. I have a date with Suzzy Friday night, but that's an easy switch." He paused briefly, consumed by a faraway look, as he considered all that he would be missing.

"I'll have to check with Mom to make sure she has all the shifts covered and really doesn't need me - she'd say yes, even if she wasn't covered, you know. If that checks out, and Mom says it's okay, I'm on. It sounds absolutely great, Jason! I can tell you for sure this afternoon."

"Would it be best if I asked your mother?" Jason asked.

Deep in thought, Eric missed the unspoken plea in Jason's voice to allow him the pleasure.

"No, I can handle it okay," Eric said, immediately kicking himself for having ruined such a natural way for his friend and mother to reconnect.

They continued working in silence. Eric was soon whistling. A few minutes later, Jason approached the yogurt machine, which was enduring the cleaning of its life from careful, methodical, thorough Eric.

As if it were an afterthought, Jason said, "I think it's best if we don't spread it around that you and I do special things together. It might hurt some of the other guy's feelings around here. You understand?"

"Oh sure. No problem. I understand. I'll mention that to Mom and it'll just stay among the three of us."

A special feeling welled up within Eric. He wasn't sure what it was. It seemed to lay somewhere between being held close by his mother after a bad dream when he was a boy, and Suzzy's sweet lips.

Although he wouldn't, Eric wanted to shout it out for the whole world to hear. Imagine! Eric and Jason were really friends!

Presently, Eric felt a wave of sadness as he wondered if Jason was, perhaps, such a lonely man that he was willing to just settle for the two-bit companionship of a kid over nobody at all. He didn't like that thought so he pushed it out of mind - a maneuver which Eric had mastered years before and probably engaged far too often.

During the rest of the morning, Eric felt torn between the comfort of being there with his friend and the intense desire to race home and solidify the weekend plans, with his Mother.

Nine o'clock found him making the rounds, saying good bye to Jason and the four, recently arrived, day-shift workers. It was a ritual that ever-considerate Eric never failed to do. He put his equipment away and changed clothes in the locker room. Though he thought it was absurd to have to don his T-shirt just to walk through the store to the door - as per regulations - only to strip it off again as soon as he got outside, he dutifully obliged.

He jogged toward home at a faster than usual clip. With the stride of a graceful young gazelle, he vaulted yellow hydrants and red wagons, the later momentarily abandoned by their young owners where they stopped, when old Mrs. Stevens beckoned them to her porch for fresh, warm sugar cookies. Eric, himself, had enjoyed his share of her delicacies in his younger years so he fully understood the necessity of dropping whatever you were doing at the moment she appeared.

Abby insisted that since the day he took his first steps, Eric had always been on the run. Eric figured it was probably true. He loved to run and always did well in cross-country. A coach once told his mother that it was definitely Eric's sport.

To Eric, sports were merely games that he played because he enjoyed them. That attitude didn't always win the approval of coaches. Once committed to a season, he would train diligently, but in the end, sports were just games. As long as they remained fun and not a chore, he'd stay out.

He assumed that trait came from his Mom. She always

said that life should be fun and not drudgery. Funny, he thought - or sad, perhaps - so much of her life seemed to be just that - drudgery. At any rate, the trait fit him well and he wore it proudly.

"Mother, dearest," he said crisply, announcing his presence as he entered the kitchen door at the rear of the cafe.

"Oh, Oh!" His mother replied, wondering what was about to be sprung on her. "Mother dearest, is it today? What you got up your sleeve, this time?"

"Why you'd think I typically have ulterior motives, love of my life. And anyway," raising his arms and looking down at his own tanned, bare chest, "for the life of me, I can't find sleeves anywhere."

"Well if you're in my kitchen you'd better find some and in a hurry, young man," his mother reminded him without bothering to look.

In his excitement, Eric had forgotten - no disregarded - the well-established rule. It was the second time in as many weeks.

"Sorry Mom," he said sheepishly, as he stepped back out of customer view, pulling the T-shirt from his belt and quickly slipping into it. He even donned the required kitchen cap - bill toward the rear, of course - before closing in on her and nuzzling a kiss onto the back of her neck. It was another sure sign he was up to something, but his mother delighted in the attention so let it pass with no comment.

"Jason asked me to go tent camping with him up at his place on Bear Lake this weekend."

Eric removed the schedule clipboard from the hook next to the door and began examining it. When convinced all of the shifts were adequately covered, he continued.

"I'll do Mrs. Hayes yard tomorrow afternoon and change my date with Suzzy. I'll get our yard this evening after it cools down. Looks like you are well covered here. What do you say, Mom, pretty please with hollandaise sauce on it!"

Enjoying the moment of power - a rare occasion anymore when it came to Eric - Abby asked: "You mean you'd trade an evening of Suzzy's kisses for a weekend in a smelly old tent with Jason?"

An impish grin broke across his face. Deciding to go for the outrageous, Eric countered: "Well gee, Mom, you see it's just that I've never had any of Jason's kisses."

Instinctively, he positioned his hands in front of chest in preparation for an attack. His efforts were well taken. Towel twirling, his mother scooted him out of her way by playfully beating on whatever part of his anatomy she could find undefended. Eric gleefully danced himself out of her way, for that moment fancying himself the most accomplished bullfighter in Spain.

"If that's what you want to do this weekend, it sounds fine to me – camp with him, that is, not kiss him." They exchanged a mother-son smile that witnessed to their deep love and growing understanding. "Find out what food or other supplies you will need to take. Do that as soon as possible, okay?"

"I suppose you'll want to call him and verify the trip, won't you?" His question held the air of a suggestion that didn't surpass Abby's notice.

"Why would I want him to do that?"

"Well, I could just be using it as an excuse to go out to the gravel pit for an all-night beer party and naked orgy, you know."

"Well, no, I guess I didn't know, but thanks for the warning. I'll keep that in mind the next time your plans sound less than reasonable." Their grins met as understanding reflections.

Abby knew she could trust Eric and Eric knew she trusted him. The two of them were hopelessly honest. Abby couldn't imagine trying to raise a teenager who you couldn't trust; well, she could, but it scared the beejeebies out of her. Other mothers' admonitions that all teen boys were animals aside, she really did trust her son. Now Suzzy the Hussy, that was a whole different matter!

It suddenly occurred to her that she knew very little about Jason Marshal. Never having had a teenage boy of his own, what could he possibly know about caring for one? Perhaps he went up to Bear Lake to drink himself into a stupor. Perhaps, once out of his business, he became reckless and irresponsible. Perhaps he was a child molester

and had his perverted sights set on her young and handsome, well built, Eric

Soon after Eric left, Abby made calls to several friends and Pastor Miller. Jason passed her inquisition with a score befitting Billy Graham. She convinced herself that it was probably best for Eric if he didn't know about her research. She understood, however, that it was really just more comfortable for her if she didn't have to admit to him what she had done.

Several hours later, Eric returned to help set up for the dinner hour.

"Well?" he asked his mother, just letting it drop as if to tease a bit.

"Well, what?" she answered, deciding to play his game.

"Well, did Jason pass your big deal investigation?"

"Investigation? Why I have no idea what you might mean," she replied coyly, her nose in the air, feigning a swagger of nonchalance.

"Come off it, Mom, I was over at Parson's checking Jason out myself when you called."

She stopped in her tracks and turned toward Eric. "We certainly are a trusting pair, aren't we?" Abby said, laughing out loud and lovingly resting her forehead against her son's.

"Better safe than sorry, I guess, huh?" Eric said after a moment.

"I guess so," she confirmed, separating with a peck to his cheek and handing him a clean apron, signaling that conversation was fine but that it didn't preclude getting on with the work. "What caused you to go see Parson?"

"After that dumb remark I made about Jason's kisses, I felt a revolting chill run up my spine. It started me thinking. Why has he been so nice to me? Why would a grown man choose to spend time at the lake with a kid? You know? He should be up there rolling naked in the grass with his lady friends. Pardon that wording, Mom, but ... well ... anyway, Parson says Jason was a scout leader for ten years. He gave it up after his wife died. Bottom line: he comes highly recommended and Parson says he probably just really misses being around young guys. Parson says he's ... well, you know what Parson says; you grilled him about Jason yourself for a

full five minutes."

"Feel better about things now?" Abby asked.

"Yeah. I knew he was great, you know. I guess if anything I feel ashamed I checked him out. Friends should just trust each other."

"And now you can trust him, so feel happy, not guilty," was his mother's advice.

As he stacked the plates, he watched her working over the grill. "What a wise lady I have for a mother," he thought. "She'd sure make some thirty-five-year-old man a fine wife." The wheels, which, in all honesty, had been in motion from the moment that he exited the Frigate that first day, were suddenly shifted into a higher gear.

\* \* \*

Jason and Eric were a bedraggled, but happy looking pair when, right on schedule, they pulled into Abby's, cobblestone driveway at seven o'clock Sunday evening. She first noticed them through the side window. Rather than obeying her first instinct, which was to rush out and greet them with hugs and kisses, she paused and continued to watch – spy, perhaps – from a distance. Why had she curtailed her initial impulse? There was no doubt. It was Jason's presence. She wondered why.

They attempted to extract from the trunk the few things that Eric had taken along - a fishing pole, an inflatable mattress, and a duffel bag. The fishing pole though it had obviously, somehow, been stowed there, appeared too long to be removed. The inflatable mattress inflated. The duffel bag unrolled. In and among the escalating mishaps, ever-grinning Eric made an animated comment of some kind, and Jason slid to the ground in laughter, his back bolstered against the rear bumper. Helpless, he sat there pointing up at Eric, tears streaming down the well-defined, though suddenly rounded angles of his face.

Hers were a different kind of tears. She continued to follow the comical, Chaplinesque, scene unfold outside. Their silent laughter was infectious. She giggled, through her ever-moistening cheeks and quivering lips. There was no need to insert the dialog cards, of old, onto the screen that she was watching. Words were not required to understand the

uncommon relationship reflected in the player's antics.

Procuring a paper towel from the roll over the sink, she patted her cheeks dry, flipped her hair this way and that, and went out to greet the two, slaphappy, campers.

"Well, did you two manage to utterly waste a perfectly good weekend?"

"Oh Mom. It was the greatest time I've ever had." Eric said, pausing just long enough to make sure she understood he hadn't intended to slight all of the wonderful times she and he had experienced together. He recognized immediately that she understood, so he continued. "If it was legal and could be done in the wilderness, we did it!" he reported proudly, administering a rib busting hug to his mother.

"You have quite a camper here, Abby," Jason said, struggling to his feet, his smiling face still drenched.

"I'm glad you had such a good time. How about giving me the short version over a cup of coffee?" Abby asked, looking to Jason for the answer.

The guys looked at each other and again broke into rounds of laughter, that time sending Eric to the pavement holding his stomach and flailing his legs. When the merriment subsided, Eric said: "Sorry about that Mom, I'll fill you in later. Sure, we have time for a cup of coffee, don't we Jase."

Abby looked at Jason for confirmation.

"Sure. That'll be nice. Just let us bring Eric's things in first - if we can figure out some way to corral them."

A few minutes later, Eric's belongings were stowed in his room and the campers collapsed onto the kitchen chairs.

"See, what it was, Mom," Eric immediately began explaining, "Jason makes boiled coffee over an open fire and just pours the grounds into the big metal pot to brew. When he thought it was finished, he told me to drop an egg in to settle the grounds to the bottom. So, I pulled out an egg and dropped it in - still in its shell. I didn't know I was supposed to break it open first. He laughed for five minutes before he could tell me what I'd done wrong. Every time he'd try, he'd start roaring all over again. By that time, I was laughing like a fool myself and I had absolutely no idea what it was all about!"

Abby smiled, finding that she was giggling right along with them, as if to share some part of the private time they had

spent together. She was pleased they got along so well. She set a cup and saucer in front of Jason and poured. Then, she did the same for herself, replacing the pot on the stove.

"A-hum," said Eric. "I think you forgot your newest coffee drinker, here, ma'am."

Already seated, Abby said, playfully, "New coffee drinkers get to fend for themselves in this kitchen."

Ever-energetic Eric popped up and obliged with a smile.

"Eric said he wasn't a coffee person. I hope you don't mind that I let him try," Jason explained. "I'm afraid he's hopelessly hooked, now."

"Not at all. That time comes. They grow up so fast."

"I suppose they do," Jason said, looking across the room at Eric's back, as the lad stood there filling his cup. Abby sensed a hint of regret and sadness in his tone.

"So, did my young whirlwind wear you out?" she asked, breaking Jason's somber reverie.

"Close to it." Jason said with a quick shake of his head.

"Nobody could wear this guy out, Mom. He was still singing, never before heard verses to Camp Town Races, when I finally fell asleep last night - well, this morning."

As Eric continued his non-stop monologue, Abby recognized that both fellows looked beat.

The coffee cups were empty and Abby's suggestion for refills was waved off all around.

"Not as good as your whole egg brew, I guess," she said, kidding them.

"Oh, yes, Abby it was great. I may have to change to your brand, myself," Jason said. "I really have to be on my way, though."

As Jason moved to the door, Eric walked along, stride for stride, continuing to run off at the mouth, not letting the man's face out of view for a second.

"See you at five in the morning," Eric called after him, as if supplying a necessary reminder as Jason backed out of the driveway.

"I'm afraid so," Jason called back, waving.

There was no doubt about it! Eric needed to hug someone, so his mother received the honor. He continued

talking nonstop until, at ten-thirty, she finally called a halt and dispatched him to bed. But even when forced into solitary there in his room, Eric couldn't turn off his memory machine.

\* \* \*

Jason's tent was an old, green, thick-canvas, umbrella model – an apparent relic from the fifties. It sported numerous patches, a musty odor, and retained the smell of wood fires now long out. It wasn't said, and Eric didn't ask, but he wondered if Jason had shared that tent with his wife.

The rolling lake country was magnificent. The woods and meadows wore the full spectrum of greens, from the nearly black to the might be yellow. The blue of the lake took its shades from the color of the sky – sometimes azure, often lighter, always on the verge of changing as if mindfully shedding a thousand disguises so as to never be found out. At dusk, the lake put the blues to bed. Its gently rolling surface danced with the wind, its crests - for those few moments - appropriating the golds and reds, the violets and purples of the distant sunset.

The flowers and bushes offered a boundless spectrum of colors. From the deep purple hues of the wild iris, to the pale whites and pinks of the berry bushes; from the grand, polished ivory, catalpa blooms, to the tiny, textured blues of the bachelor's buttons; from the yellow streaked reds of the bleeding hearts, to the bright sunny cushions of the dandelions, the place was a living palette.

Had it not been for the sweet aroma of the mimosa, the dank scent from the woodland floor might have seemed disagreeable.

At the breaking of dawn, as the world lay mostly dark and formless, there was a wonder filled moment in which the hues of the land rose up, rushing ahead and emerging as a spotty and indistinct imitation of a tempestuous Van Gough.

And then there were the creatures, as small as the ant and mosquito, as large the deer and bear. Eric felt fortunate, if not comfortable, that it was only the smallest of the creatures that ventured into camp. The fish – from the smallest, gray-black minnow to the largest, iridescent bass – provided a constant parade of fascinating forms and colors. The minnows danced together as if from years of practice. The

Bass and Blue Gill stood watch at a distance, surveying the scene with apparent indifference. Eric soon discovered that the smallest ones were the most inquisitive. They would boldly venture close and nip at his toes and fingers. The larger ones avoided contact. Perhaps it was because of their aloof attitude that the big had survived to grow so large. Eric was relieved that human society was not run according to those same precepts.

In and among it all was Jason. He was a patient man who seemed to delight in showing, explaining and helping Eric acquire all the necessary camping skills. Soon after their arrival, they erected the tent stabilizing it with ropes and stakes. They stowed the sleeping bags, air mattresses and cooler inside. The fishing poles stood watch outside by the flap. Cans of pop were placed in a net and hung in the cool water of the nearby spring, which also helped feed the lake.

Although the water looked far more inviting to Eric, the next item on the agenda was to gather firewood. Jason showed Eric how to collect a wide assortment. They would need thin, fast burning varieties for cooking and thick, slow burners to stay the night. Before long, Jason judged they had enough. They sorted it by type and size and stacked it into piles under a huge pine tree, which would offer shelter from the unlikely, yet possible, late afternoon rain.

Eric learned to lay a fire for cooking in the open circle of rocks, many of which were cracked and blackened from repeated exposure to the heat of leaping flames and lingering coals. It was a well-worn spot that had served Jason well for many years.

"Well, eat or swim first?" Jason asked at last, looking around as if fully satisfied with the newly established campsite.

"Swim!" There was no doubt about the choice in Eric's mind.

"Great! I skinny dip up here," Jason announced, in a matter of fact manner. "That won't bother you, will it?" he stated more than asked as he began peeling off his cloths. "You go ahead and wear your suit if you're more comfortable that way. I understand how it is at your age."

Eric had never been skinny-dipping – in fact, he had to think twice about the term before grasping what Jason meant.

Neither had he ever been known for his modesty – except around his mother – so he shrugged his shoulders and joined right in. “There’s a first time for everything,” he thought.

The water was as cool and refreshing, as its ice blue hue suggested it would be. The lake’s hard packed sand bottom sloped gently away from shore, until at ten yards, it was over Eric’s head. Eric estimated that the lake was a mile across – perhaps a bit more. He had visions of swimming it. Who knew, there might be a girls’ camp on the other side. He shivered in delight at the thought and twirled around in the water. This skinny-dipping felt pretty good. He shook off further fantasies.

Facing the shore, he noticed a wooden boat, inverted, its paint-flaked bottom reflecting the morning sun. Perhaps on some other visit it would get their attention and once again become seaworthy. Eric investigated several rotting pilings, which signaled the placement of a long since defunct pier.

Eric and Jason swam and played. They dunked one another with great glee. With his foot in Jason’s cupped hands, Eric was repeatedly propelled up and back into exciting and unpredictable dives and flips. They dove after rocks, and just stood quietly, watching the minnows and occasionally larger bass and blue gill swim between their legs. Eric attempted handstands on the bottom and lost all of the breath holding contests to the better-practiced, Jason.

Eric was beside himself with joy. It radiated from his eyes. It invaded his smile and the tone of his voice. Eric had never been on an authentic camp out and he had never before had the total and undivided attention of a man like Jason for an entire weekend. Heaven should be so good, he thought!

As a fourth grader, he had attended two Cub Scout meetings but gave it up as a lost cause once he determined he was required to do the projects in precisely the preordained fashion. Eric was more of an innovator, a fly by the seat of his pants kind of kid. That, do-it-by-the-book-routine, rubbed him the wrong way. Now he wondered if perhaps because of his aversion to such regimentation he had cheated himself out of many wonderful times at scout camp. What was done, was done, of course, and he would certainly settle for what was happening in his life at that moment.

Drying off in the sun and gentle breeze, they lit a fire, brewed boiled coffee, fried eggs and bacon, potatoes and apples. After they had eaten their fill, they cut sticks and roasted marshmallows.

Looking back on the outing, Eric thought the best times had been after dark. With the fire blazing and the sounds of the wilderness nightlife as a backdrop, they sat and talked. Eric figured that he had done the lion's share of the talking. Jason was a good listener who frequently answered questions with questions. That made Eric feel that he respected his intellect. It was as if he were saying, "Son, with just a tweak in your perspective I think you can find the solution yourself." He didn't present himself as the big know it all. Eric appreciated that. It was as far from being with Johnny as Eric could imagine.

Eric felt free to talk about most things with his mother, and he had done so, but this man to man arrangement was in some important way different – more relaxed, perhaps, or maybe just uncomplicated by gender. He couldn't be sure if it was the setting, the company, or merely the time in his life, but talk flowed easily and the answers that evolved felt right and comfortable – reassuring, even.

After two nights of getting to know and trust one another, it seemed that no topic could ever be off limits between them. Somewhat to Eric's surprise, they even talked about girls and women. It was never anything off color or demeaning. Jason clearly respected women. But there were things Eric wanted, needed, to know. He felt at ease, asking. They talked about relationships and of personal preferences. They discussed how guys and girls think and feel differently about so many things. In the end, they agreed that the mere presence of females in the world added a wondrous and mystical component to a man's life, whether he was young or even an ancient, thirty-five.

They talked as if between men. They talked as if between boys. They talked as if between friends who were growing to appreciate and treasure their new relationship. Jason was a very special person and Eric felt so lucky to have become a part of his life.

\* \* \*

It was with such thoughts and memories that Eric drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \*

As he fell into his favorite chair and kicked off his shoes, Jason still hadn't stopped smiling. He reached over and took his Karen's picture from its place of honor on the table beside him.

"I am just back from a wonderful weekend, my Dear. I suppose it's too complicated to translate into a few words, but Eric makes me feel needed again, the way you always did. It's not the same, of course, but needed, nevertheless. That feels so good! He talked with me just like I envisioned our own son would have talked. I don't know how to explain it. Of all the youngsters I've been with through the years, Eric stands out as special. I know this sounds trite - downright dumb, even - but it just seems like he and I were supposed to get together.

"Eric has a lovely, loving, mother, a single lady. Lady is the right term, I think. I believe I could like her, Karen. I think I could like her a lot. I know you and I agreed, and meant it, that if anything happened to one of us, the other was to go on and have a full and happy life with another partner. Well, maybe, just maybe, I'm finally willing to let that begin.

"It sounds like I'm using Eric to get to his mother. You know that's not my way, of course. I'll keep right on enjoying Eric even if nothing ever comes of things between Abby and me. Abby, that's her name, Karen. She's about five feet five, I suppose, with long auburn hair and blue eyes like Eric. She's not slender ... large boned, I guess you might say, but certainly not heavy. She laughs from her toes the way you always did, Karen. She smiles so easily and so genuinely. I guess she reminds me a lot of you. Perhaps that's what I have been waiting for.

"Dear, Dear, Karen. I do still love you and miss you so much."

He pressed her picture to his chest and began sobbing softly, a stark contrast to the cheerful, carefree manner which had infused his being a brief moment before.

The phone rang. He allowed five rings to regain his composure, then answered. It was Eric.

"Hi. It's me. I just had to call and thank you for the weekend, Jase. I've never had a whole weekend with a man friend before – just him and me, I mean. I know you probably can't understand how much it meant to me, but I needed to call and say thanks."

A few more phrases and they hung up. To himself, Jason added: "Oh yes, Eric, I do understand!"

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## CHAPTER THREE

### The Set Up

Several weeks passed. The local paper ran a picture of an egg frying on the sidewalk. The white, cane-laced, ceiling fans in The Green Mill worked overtime, though few realized they were running. The regulars didn't seem to mind. Abby wished she could afford air-conditioning but a check of her accounts quickly told her otherwise.

Eric could have cared less about the summer heat. He was experiencing that proverbial seventh heaven, a relatively carefree fourteen-year-old with a loving home, a great job, a wonderful new grown up friend - with whom he is spending more and more time. Then, of course there was his perpetually horny girlfriend with whom he could hold a single wonder-filled kiss for thirty minutes. He wondered if that was a record. His search of Guinness proved to be of no help. After an evening under the railroad trestle with Suzzy, his weary pucker barely allowed him to sip a coke through a straw.

Eric was concerned that there might be a problem brewing with Suzzy. She had been pushing for more than just kiss and grope sessions and Eric was not willing to risk siring a child. Understanding what it meant to be fatherless, there was no way he would allow himself to be a party to that. He was certainly not ready to marry at fifteen. Suzzy had the well-practiced answers for all of his arguments, but none Eric found convincing - not yet anyway - and that was part of his problem.

Although troubled by that situation, he decided they

would just stay away from the trestle for a while - keep things more out in the open or near open. If their relationship had to depend on going all the way, then he would just have to end it. My how he would miss her kisses. Suzzy was at the top of all the guys' great kissers, lists, and for the last four months, they had all been his. Was life great or what!

It wasn't that he didn't dream of going all the way with Suzzy; he was male and almost fifteen, for gosh sakes. He fantasized about it all the time, but as much as he desired it, he wanted even more to protect against that terrible possibility of untimely parenthood. For the time being, fantasies (which worked out pretty well, actually) would just have to do.

Eric wondered how Jason managed to exist comfortably without having someone to hold close and kiss. It didn't seem natural. It was sad. Close on the heels of that thought, emerged the image of Jason holding and kissing his mother - an image at once both agreeable and repulsive. A dilemma! He would just focus on them as a happy couple, delighting in each other's company, and stow the other image in some inaccessible crevice of his gray matter. Of course, first, Eric had to find a way to spark an interest, or at least get them close enough to one another so they would begin noticing the possibilities. He was convinced that it was totally up to him to make it happen.

In fact, from some of the comments his mother had made recently, it sounded like she felt she should stay away from Jason, in order not to invade Eric's territory. Eric told her she was mistaken - that he would be happy to share. More than happy, actually. His mother seemed to dismiss it. He decided that it was time to stop pussyfooting around. He would change his approach from merely planning to bold-faced plotting.

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It was nearing eight o'clock and Eric was helping his mother put the cafe to bed for the night.

"Next Thursday is Jason's birthday," he mentioned, nonchalantly.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I was thinking that since he's been so swell to me, it would be nice to do something special for him, you

know."

"Nice idea. Like what?"

"I'm not sure."

That was not entirely true, but Eric quickly decided that it surely qualified as a harmless white lie. Now, to finagle her into suggesting a birthday meal at their place. He cracked his knuckles, expecting it would take all of his cunning. Or would it?

His mother spoke first. "How about inviting him over to our place for a birthday dinner that night. I could take off early and we could eat around eight if you'd be willing to help.

Eric was stunned but he was no fool. He quickly understood. She had noticed Jason after all. His Mom on the prowl for a man! Unbelievable! He choked back his excitement.

"Well, I don't know." (Of course, he did!). "It sounds like a lot of trouble for you." (A chance to see how eager she really was!).

"It's your decision, but I think he'd enjoy a home cooked meal for a change." (Home cooked! Eric was convinced!)

"I'll bet you're right, there. Okay, then. I'll ask him tomorrow morning, or do you suppose that maybe you should do the inviting – you being the parent and all?"

"Jason is your friend, Dear. I think you should do the inviting."

The look that accompanied his mother's last phrase made Eric think his question about who should do the inviting may have made his matchmaking intentions a bit too obvious. Oh well, he thought, at least the stage was set. Now he just had to get Jason to agree to the invitation and figure out a legitimate way of leaving the two of them alone after dinner. He would work out those details later.

The next morning, as Eric's shift at the Frigate was ending, he popped the question. With a smile and more enthusiasm than Eric had anticipated, Jason readily agreed to the invitation. Eric had felt sure he would accept, but hadn't expected such a ready response. Regardless, he found it hard to contain his joy.

Once down the block, he didn't! Performing a high five to no one in particular, he let out a squeal that seemed to

rock the rain right out of the clouds above. Off came his shirt. The rain felt wonderful. He slowed down, and with arms outstretched he twirled 'round and 'round, enjoying the cool relief it brought to his hot and sweaty torso.

Such a welcome sight (the rain, not a stripping, twirling, Eric) brought many of the neighbors onto their porches to inspect the much-needed shower and to revel in the suddenly cool, refreshing, morning air. Most of them had known Eric his entire life and they delighted in his charming, boyish, antics. He might look fifteen, they agreed, but he still exuded the same unfettered zest for life that he did as a little boy. For that moment, he made them all feel younger and quieted their grown-up cares.

\* \* \*

Eric was convinced there had been some grand conspiracy afoot to keep Thursday from arriving. It had been a week crammed with overtime at the Frigate, several extra lawns to mow, due to the weekend downpour, and three days of subbing at the Mill for a down-in-the-back Jean. Its only saving grace had been the several rounds of late-evening, pucker busting, roll on the grass and kiss sessions with Suzy.

As if the conspiring forces of Nature had, at last, run out of excuses, Thursday finally arrived. Eric returned home from work at nine-ten and immediately plunged into the most thorough cleaning that house (or, perhaps, any house) had ever received. An attentive onlooker surely would have heard the old home's timbers groan and its floor scream out in response to the indelicate onslaught of dusting, vacuuming, scrubbing, and polishing the lad was inflicting.

Eventually satisfied with how the rest of the place looked, Eric turned his attention to his own room. In the past, Jason hadn't seen it at its best. Eric wanted to instill the impression that in that room lived a willingly neat and tidy boy – correction, young man. For just a moment, he was concerned that might be a misrepresentation of the actual case. He soon decided that since it was usually his true intention and desire to be that kind of person, it was, indeed, not a falsehood. Anyway, on those previous occasions, it had been the fault of uncontrollable forces, wantonly unleashed by the universe itself had that precluded him from living up to his

intended standards.

Eric rearranged things in his closet and, to his surprise and delight, found its door actually shut - with a click and everything. He resorted to using the rake for extracting basket after basket of long forgotten, mostly disgusting, items from beneath his bed. (To list them would only define and illustrate the interests of nine to eleven-year-old boys, and that would be all quite revolting, and perhaps, illegal.) By two-thirty, the chore was finished (and the house was heard to sigh and seen to settle ever so slightly in glad relief). Eric surveyed his domain. It looked great and, for some reason, which at that moment escaped him, his room sported an unfamiliar, though not altogether unpleasant, non-locker room-like bouquet.

His mother left a step by step set of instructions and at precisely the stated times he took things out of the freezer or placed things into the oven. He turned on the window air-conditioner a bit early, just to make certain it would be pleasant in the dining room. On his own, he even cleaned off the back porch, washed the seldom used porch swing, and potted a few geraniums from the side garden to sit here and there, enhancing the view from the swing. He felt it needed to subtly set the mood without appearing conspicuously romantic - a porch swing, flowers, a private place. Yes, Eric decided he had done it all up fine!

Next, he needed to establish his excuse to exit the affair. Brian, a co-worker at the Golden Frigate, agreed to get sick at work promptly at nine o'clock, and call him to come and take over closing for him. It was a plan that couldn't fail. Of course, it would cost him ten bucks on top of the three-hours salary, but it would be an investment worth every penny.

Right on cue, his mother walked in the door at seven ten. She checked the oven, admired the beautifully set table, and took a turn around the house, meeting Eric as he was coming out of his room.

"Looks like you're on top of everything, Son. Nice job! The house looks fabulous and," peeking in through his open door, "your room hasn't looked so good since the day I brought you home from the hospital."

They smiled and chuckled, and traded pecks to their

cheeks.

"What else can I do?" Eric asked.

"You might turn that air-conditioner down a notch. We don't want Jason to wish he'd worn his scarf!" she chided.

Abby went into her room to change, leaving the door slightly ajar so they could continue their conversation. Eric sat on the floor in the hall, leaning against the wall - a well-practiced arrangement. Conversation always flowed easily between them. That evening was no exception.

Shortly, Abby reappeared wearing a dark green dress. It wasn't fancy, but was something she felt fit the occasion perfectly.

"Mo-om, you're not going to wear tha-at, are you?" Eric grumbled.

"Well, yes I tho-ought so. That's why I have it on," she said, kidding him a bit, tickled at his reaction. "What did you have in mind?"

"I thought your short brown skirt and blue and white sweater might be nice."

"Eric, I'm not a cheerleader, I'm your mother, and besides, it's far too hot for a sweater. It would seem out of place."

"But I just thought ..."

"But, but, but! Discussion closed. You'd better get your shower and change yourself, okay?"

"Okay," came Eric's less than enthusiastic reply.

The shower finished, Eric, as usual, streaked from the bathroom to his room, and also, as usual, called out, "I'm naked, Mom. Don't look."

"I wouldn't think of looking," came Jason's deep voice, laughter in its tone.

Startled, Eric turned to see Jason standing there at the end of the hall, his right hand covering his eyes with two fingers separated slightly, feigning a teasing glance. Glad to see him, Eric took several steps in his direction before realizing he still needed to make himself decent.

"Hey, come on back and see my room," Eric called, motioning to him.

As Eric dressed, Jason examined the collection of baseball cards, the music posters, and even managed to pat

the centerfold on her comely behind

"So where do you keep your Playboys?" Jason asked making small talk, still in a teasing mood and certainly not expecting a response.

Eric lifted up the corner of his mattress and sure enough, there they were.

Jason smiled, shook his head, and ruffles Eric's hair.

"Mom knows they are there, of course. I just got used to stashing them there before I was sure how she'd react. Now it's like my library spot."

"And how does she react?" Jason asked.

"I can tell she really doesn't understand, even though she says she does, but she doesn't complain or lecture about it or anything like that. Would you let your son have them, if you had a son?"

Jason was caught off guard by the question and it showed.

"I'm sorry," Eric said, "I wasn't thinking. That was a dumb question. Cancel it, okay?"

"Consider it cancelled," Jason said, forcing the barest hint of a short-lived smile. Deep inside, of course, it was one of those questions that couldn't just be cancelled.

In Eric's judgment, the meal moved along very well. Abby had planned the things that Eric discovered Jason liked best - ham, yams, green beans, creamed corn, rolls, and something chocolate for dessert. The conversation flowed easily, a real plus Eric thought, considering his Mom and Jason hardly knew each other.

Precisely at nine, the phone rang. Eric answered and a few moments later dramatically explained the unfortunate situation at the Golden Frigate. Jason suggested that he should go down and cover the position, but Eric insisted, it being Jason's birthday and all, that he would gladly do the covering. Before Jason could mount a protest, Eric disappeared into his room, reappearing moments later, fully uniformed and on his way toward the door. He veered back to kiss his mother, giving the two of them one more self-satisfied glance. Then, he was out the door on the fly, high-fiving the wind as soon as he was out of sight. "YES!"

"We've been set up, you know," Abby said.

"I know," Jason agreed, a warm, broad smile breaking across his face.

"What's the going rate for this type of shenanigans at the Golden Frigate?"

"I understand it's a ten spot on top of the hourly pay," Jason answered.

The two of them smiled at one another and giggled, a bit nervously, perhaps. It was not the smile and giggle expected between strangers just on the verge of becoming friends. It was a knowing smile between a man and a woman who already had acquired deep feelings for one another.

"I guess Eric really doesn't know that we've been seeing each other, does he?" Jason said, raising Abby's hand to his lips and kissing it tenderly.

"Aren't we the sneaky ones!" she said, wrinkling her nose and nuzzling it into Jason's hand.

They had each wondered how Eric would react to their becoming more than just friends who happened to share an interest in him. That it seemed fully acceptable to him had become obvious, but how should they let him know?

"I suppose it's time to tell him," Jason suggested.

"It certainly seems that way. Should we let him think he set it all up or should we be truthful?" Abby asked.

"Well, the truth is," Jason said, kissing her hand again and holding it ever so gently close to his lips, "if it hadn't been for Eric, my Dear, none of this would ever have come to pass. So, I suppose he really did set it up, didn't he?"

"I like the way you think. That means we play act the bit about getting closer over these next few weeks?"

"I'm game if you are," Jason's answered.

He leaned close to Abby, placing his hand behind her head as they pressed their lips together in a familiar union. Eyes closed, they linger over what was an all too infrequent delight.

"I'm still not sure how Eric is really going to react to all of this, once it's out in the open," Jason said, with some degree of concern in his tone. "I know he must think it will be a great arrangement, but when it comes right down to it, will he be able to share me with you and you with me?"

"I know," Abby said, shared concern showing in her

expression. "I certainly don't want to hurt him in any way. He's had it pretty rough, you know, with no father."

"Well, in some ways that may be true, but, Abby, you have raised one of the finest young men I've ever known, and I've known hundreds and hundreds."

Abby grew silent, her moist and glistening eyes studying Jason's face. "He is a gem, isn't he," she agreed, at last.

Jason gently tugged on her arm trying to lead her toward the couch.

"Eric fixed the porch swing for us so I suppose we should at least try it out," Abby explained.

A blast of heat from the open door met them as they made their way to the swing. Once seated and moving in the night air, it seemed cooler. The sun had just slipped out of sight and the crickets had begun their nightly serenade. Jason slid his arm around Abby and she snuggled close, laying her head on his shoulder. She wondered how Eric would react to such a sight. He had seen her with Johnny, of course, but never in an even remotely romantic attitude.

It was not that Johnny hadn't pressed for such a relationship, but Abby had maneuvered to keep it more platonic. She felt she had probably used Johnny and was somewhat sorry about that. On the other hand, he had benefited from her friendship and companionship as well. Still, she had to wonder how he would react to the upcoming word that it was over. If he ran true to form, he would be understanding – gentlemanly even - while he was sober. She was legitimately concerned, however, about what might transpire once he began drinking?

Enough of this sad song, she said to herself. They should be enjoying this time together, so lovingly arranged for them by Eric. She looked up into Jason's face and flashed a soft smile of contentment. He leaned down, and again their lips met. They shared a nearly forgotten, extraordinary experience of fondness and caring - an expression of their growing commitment.

During the next several hours they sat and talked. From time to time they kissed with subdued passion, neither of them allowing more than the most tentative, exploratory

romantic feelings to surface. It was a comfortable time. It was a disquieting time. What was it they were each seeking? What was it they each feared?

\* \* \*

Jason left at eleven-forty-five so he could get back to the restaurant and check on the last few minutes of the closing routine. As she waited for Eric to breeze in, Abby busied herself clearing the table and beginning the dishes.

Eric arrived more quickly than usual. He assumed the fact that the dishes had not been done was good sign - they had spent the time together. Yes! He casually surveyed the swing. It had been used. The thread he had attached to it was broken. Yes! Yes! He removed his shirt and shoes, and entered the kitchen, kissing his mother on the cheek as usual - a smiling cheek, he noted. Yes! Yes! Yes!

"So, how did you think the evening went?" he asked in an uncharacteristically bland, and therefore telltale tone.

"It was very nice, I thought, didn't you?" came her equally non-committal, cat and mouse, response.

"It was a great meal, Mom. Jason said he had a wonderful time. I really think he kind of likes you. I mean not just as my Mom but as a...." What in the world do you call it at their age? Girlfriend? Sweetheart? Darling?

"And I think I may like him that way, also. How would you feel about that?"

"I'd love it! Really, Mom? You mean you like him more than just as a guy down the street?"

"Maybe," she said with an unmistakable twinkle in her eye - amused by her son's take on what her opposite perception might have been.

There was a new radiance in her face, which Eric only then noticed. He was fully and totally convinced that he had pulled off the coup of the century. "Yes!" He thinks. "They are ... well, whatever you call it at their age ... that's what they were." He couldn't contain the little hop that bubbled up within him. He kissed his mother squarely on the lips and gave her the bear hug of her life.

"You're okay about this then?" she asked, needing just a little more, solid, feedback.

"Okay! I think it is only the greatest thing that has ever

happened in all of recorded history!" (One would think that should have qualified as, "just a little more, solid, feedback.")

Eric wanted to run and tell the World, but really, there was no one who could possibly understand his joy - not even Mom or Jason, he decided.

They finished the dishes and Abby was soon off to her bedroom. Eric was into the shower again, this time to remove the grill grease from his hair, arms and fingernails. In the quiet solitude of the shower, Eric suddenly and quite unexpectedly found himself crying. Not just dry-eyed, quiet sobbing, but tear gushing, chest heaving crying. He had never cried for joy before so he wasn't sure if that was what it was. He felt happy and he felt sad at the same time. Happy, he had expected. The sad part surprised and puzzled him. Perhaps it was merely a feeling of relief boiling up from some long-term holding bin deep inside.

The tears continued to flow for several minutes. Confused, Eric just stood there facing the water, hoping the gentle spray would wash away whatever it was that had invaded his happiness. Before they had actually stopped, he turned off the water, dried off – more or less - and trotted to his room. There he lay with his head at the foot of his bed so he could look up and out of the window at the night sky. Had they kissed, he wondered? If they had, was it lip to lip, or even tongue to tongue, perhaps? Those thoughts had an unpleasant feel about them. If it had been Jason with any other woman, he could have relished the fantasy, knowing how nice it would have been for him, but with his Mom? It seemed to present a problem he had not anticipated. Moms were women of course, though it was nearly impossible for him to imagine her as a romantic woman.

He tried to think of other things, but his mind wouldn't let go. He heard his mother still stirring in her room. He got up, secured a towel around his mid-section, and walked to her door. He rapped, lightly.

"Mom, you still awake?" he called, barely above a whisper.

"Come on in, Son" she replied, not at all surprised by the visit.

"Just sort of checking to see that you're okay and

everything, I guess," Eric stammered, suddenly uncomfortable and feeling awkward about intruding.

His mother was sitting up in bed, an open book in her lap, with her back against a pillow upright against the headboard. She patted the bed beside her, beckoning Eric to sit there as he had done so many times in the past when things weighed heavily on his mind. Hesitantly, he moved closer and settled into what had always before been his place of refuge and thoroughly comfortable port.

"Is something wrong, Son?" she asked, reaching out and taking his hand.

"I'm not sure, and I guess that's really what is wrong. I guess I actually don't know for sure how I feel about you and Jason. I sure thought I did. This whole unsure thing came as a complete surprise to me, I'll tell you that. I've looked forward to this for so long and now, well ..." His voice choked and he stopped, hoping to prevent the reoccurrence of the tears. His maneuver didn't work.

Abby had recognized the telltale signs of crying the moment he had come through the door. Her stomach knotted with compassion the way mother's stomachs have knotted since the dawn of man, when their sons were hurting. Arm around his shoulder, she pulled her precious package close, just as she had done so often back when the worst that life had to offer him had been a skinned a knee or a lost game. He sobbed without embarrassment. They sat together, quietly. She stroked his hair and rubbed the back of his neck, buying time as she tried to formulate the best phrase for the occasion. Sometimes the best way was the most direct way.

"I imagine it must be difficult to think of your own mother being romantic with a man, isn't it?"

How does she know exactly what I'm thinking? Eric wondered. He was not really surprised; she had always known what was on his mind. He had long ago chalked it up to being a mom-thing and he thanked the Universe for having so wisely installed it.

"I guess that pretty well says it. I love you, you know, and I've never been fonder of anyone else than I am of Jason. So, why do I feel so mixed up about it?"

"It would probably be easier for you if you had seen me

dating right along, all these years instead of just ..." Words finally failed her, also.

Eric gently released himself and sat up, looking her straight in the face.

"I suppose you're right. I'm just not used to sharing you, am I?"

"Well, not in this very special way, anyhow," she replied.

"Yeah. I don't even really know what love and the intimate part of romance is all about. You know? I mean I do, but I really don't. It's hard to think of you and Jason that way." A matched-pair of tears make their way down his cheeks.

"Maybe you don't need to think about that side of our relationship. I doubt if many of your friends spend much thinking about their parents in bed together, do they?"

"Mo-om. Don't talk like that! You and Jason surely didn't do that the very first time I left you alone, did you?" Eric said, agitated as if assuming the role of an overprotective parent.

"Of course, not, Eric, but let's face it, that is what is concerning you, right?"

"Maybe. Yes. I really don't know, Mom. Ya, I suppose it is."

Again, they sat together quietly. Abby looked at her little boy and saw a young man. Aware of her gaze, but unwilling to engage it, Eric stared down at the bed, poking at the mattress.

"Can I ask you something personal?" Eric asked at last.

"You can ask, if I have the right to refuse an answer."

"Fair enough." Continuing to busy his gaze elsewhere, and mustering all the gumption his young being possessed, he continued. "Did you used to enjoy having sex?"

"My, that's right to the point, isn't it?"

"I shouldn't have asked that. That's private. I'd hate it if you asked me stuff like that. I'm sorry. Just forget it."

"I think under the circumstances it is a fair question and it deserves a fair answer. Yes, I enjoyed sex very much. I must tell you, though, I haven't actually had the experience very often."

Eric focused his gaze on the darkened window across the room, not sure that he wanted to hear any more and yet knowing that he must.

"The only boy – man, I suppose - I ever made love with was your father. It happened fewer than a dozen times. I loved him very much, Eric. I would have given my life for him just as I would for you. It was that kind of genuine, thoroughgoing love and commitment that I felt for him."

Eric looked up, nodding, as if he understood, but, of course, he had no way of understanding. What he could understand, and what he was responding to, was her sincerity. He deliberately attached her gaze, reached out and took her hand once more. Receiving his reassuring gentle squeeze, she continued.

"Your father didn't feel the same about me, though I assure you, I truly believed he did, or I would never have allowed those things to happen.

"Do you still love him - the man who's my father?"

"You don't have any easy questions this evening, do you?" She paused, again needing to select her words carefully. "I love him still because he helped me bring you into the world, Eric. You are the greatest, finest, most wonderful thing that has, or ever will, happen to me. But romantically? No, I don't love him romantically. It died a hard death, but it did die."

Strangely and suddenly, Eric felt a new kind of kinship with his mother. He scooted closer.

"I love him that same way, can you believe that. I've thought about it a lot. I don't have any feelings for him as my every-day father, but I love him so much for giving me life. I think I used to hate him for not being around to be my father, you know. I don't hate him anymore. I don't feel anyway at all toward that part of him, I guess."

Eric shifted his gaze back to the window, the big question still on his mind. His mother knew the dreaded time had arrived. Trying to ease his discomfort, she spoke before he had to:

"I told you that when you were old enough I'd tell you who he is if you wanted to know. I meant that."

"I know you did. I never doubted it. I've been thinking

about that - a really, really lot, in fact! Is he still here in town?"

"Are you sure you want to have this conversation?"

"Yes, but that's all I want to know for now.

With the aid of a silent prayer and very deep breath, Abby mustered the necessary courage, and continued.\

"Well, then, yes, he is."

Eric sighed the sigh of all sighs. The tears returned. His mother extended her arms. With a feeble smile and a barely discernable shake of his head, he sat back on his legs, and raised his hand as if to wave her off. She managed to comply, although it was a disquieting withdrawal.

"He is well then, and doesn't need our help in any way?" Eric asked, choking on every word.

It was not the follow-up question Abby was expecting, but knowing Eric, it did not surprise her.

"He is just fine in all ways."

Then he asked the question of all questions. It was the one Eric had pondered for as long as he could remember. "Does he know I'm his son?"

"Have you really thought about where this could lead, Eric?"

"Oh, yes. I've thought about it, Mama! Night after night after night, ever since I was old enough to understand what it meant to be a bastard. I've thought about it, all right!" His voice acquired a totally unintended angry tone.

After an awkward silence, Eric shook his head and looked up into his mother's face. "I'm sorry, Mom. I shouldn't have ever said that. I really didn't mean it to put you down. Really, I didn't. I'm so very sorry I said that."

He stood up and began pacing back and forth, the heel of his hand thumping his forehead. Dropping his hands limply to his sides, he stood looking at his mother. His bearing defined helplessness.

"Mom, I am so sorry I said that."

He moved to the bed and knelt beside it, laying his head in her lap.

"I really am so sorry! No one, I mean no one could have ever had a better mother than I've had."

They sobbed together quietly for a long time. She stroked his hair. They loved each other so much.

Partly to help him move on to another topic and partly out of the curiosity which was eating at her heart, Abby asked:

"Are you going to ask his name, Eric? I just really need to know if you are."

Eric sat back. Looking into her face and with an unmistakably solemn, resolute, and studied manner he answered: "No, I decided long ago that if he was okay and didn't need my help, I'd never ask his name. I do have a favor to ask about that though."

"And what's that?"

"I think you should seal his name inside an envelope and put it with your special papers in case some unforeseen event should occur and I'd need that information."

Reminded once again that her son was wise beyond his years, Abby removed an envelope from the drawer of her nightstand and handed it to Eric. On the outside, it read simply:

*Eric: In case you ever need or want to know the name of your biological father, you will find it on a card inside this envelope.*

*Love, Mother*

"Would you like to keep this with your things, now?"

"No! No, I'd rather you'd keep it. And could you please move to some other place so I won't know where it is? I don't want to be tempted – short term temptation - you understand."

"Certainly. That will be no problem. I'll put it right under the document that says you inherit all my millions or all my debts, however it works out."

Eric got to his feet, leaned down and with a lingering hug, kissed her good night. He walked to the door, turned and looked back, holding her gaze for just one more moment.

"He does know that I am his son, then?"

"Yes, he knows."

No more words were necessary where love and respect flowed so freely.

Eric closed the door behind him and returned to his room, feeling somehow better - somehow more a man - somehow more a son. Those perplexing tears had been silenced forever.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Tragedy

Out of the blackness, Eric heard voices – muffled, garbled, unfamiliar - as if from a concert of dying echoes playing out their last gasps against the walls of some foreboding canyon far in the distance. He was confused. “It must be night,” he thought. It was pitch black. Then, even before consciously feeling the excruciating pain that had prompted it, he heard himself groan. What had happened to him? Where was he? Why couldn't he see?

He groaned again, louder that time as detachment and numbness gave way to torturous agony.

"Help me! Won't somebody help me!" Eric thought he was screaming though it emerged as a mere whisper to the nurse there at his bedside.

"Hi tiger. It's about time you were waking up," came a soft, reassuring voice.

"I'm Eric, not Tiger," he said, his mind blanketed by fog. "What's going on?"

Again, came that same sweet voice. "You're in a hospital, Eric. You were hurt in a ... an accident, I guess you'd say. You can't see because there are bandages covering you eyes."

"I feel like God dammed hell," far from Eric's typically mild choice of expletives. "Where's my mother? Where's Jason? Are they all right?"

"They're both fine - just down the hall resting. I've already rung for them."

"Who are you?"

"I'm your nurse. My name is Janice."

"What happened again, Janice? I don't remember what you said happened."

"Here's your Mother. I'll let her fill you in."

Eric tried to reach out with his right hand to greet his mother, but it weighed a ton and wouldn't move. He tried the left, and though racked with pain, it moved more easily, though still not far enough for a greeting.

"Mom?" Eric was searching for her presence.

"Yes Eric. It's Mother and Jason. We're right here beside you, Sweetie."

"Hi, Old Man," came Jason's calm, deep voice.

"What's the deal here, Mom? Janice said an accident?"

Abby took her son's left hand, raised it to her lips, and gently held it there touching her face. During the next few minutes, Abby explained the terrible events that had transpired several days earlier.

Johnny had returned to find that Abby no longer wanted to pursue their relationship. As she had anticipated, he took it like a gentleman, at first, and left. After a day of drinking, however, quite predictably, he had become violent.

It happened three days after Jason's birthday dinner and that very special late night mother-son conversation. Eric was on his way home from closing. It was a few minutes after mid-night Sunday morning. Johnny, in his drunken state, apparently figured the surest way to punish Abby for her rejection, would be to harm Eric. Perhaps it was also in some measure a payback for Eric's open disdain. Regardless, the huge man lay in wait during that early morning hour. With a six foot two by four, he cut Eric's legs out from under him, breaking them both. Another blow to the face broke Eric's nose and collapsed his eye sockets. From the bruises and broken ribs, it appeared that Johnny had then delivered repeated blows and kicks to Eric's mid-section. Eric had been unconscious ever since - some fifty hours.

His legs had been set. His ribs were taped and right arm immobilized to protect a badly damaged shoulder. His nose had been rebuilt and he had undergone a five-hour operation to repair the bones in his face and eye sockets. There had been eighty-three additional stitches placed

elsewhere on his face and body.

It was more than Eric could comprehend, in so short a time. He was confused, but his pain, and the impatience it engendered, seemed more important to him at that moment.

"Don't they give a guy anything for pain in this damn hospital? " he cried moving his head from side to side. He soon realized that only increased his suffering.

A quick injection and the pain subsided. So, did his faculties. Eric slept.

"He'll sleep for six or eight hours now," the nurse said. "Why don't you two go and grab some shut-eye in a real bed. There's nothing you can do here and he is in no danger now. Just be sure to tell the desk nurse where we can reach you."

They returned to Abby's place. She made coffee, and, being famished, Jason fixed scrambled eggs and toast. Acutely aware that he was stringing one empty cliché after another, Jason held Abby close and told her things would be all right. She knew it too, but that was not the point. The man she loved was there to offer support and comfort. As they sipped their coffee, they sat and held hands across the table. For long periods, they would just look into each other's faces. At length, they realized just how exhausted they were.

"We do need to get some sleep," Jason suggested. "I'll pull into Eric's room again tonight, okay."

"No, it's not okay, Jason." Her tears began again. "I need you to hold me. Come be with me tonight."

He held her close and tenderly. He ran his fingers through her hair. He kissed the back of her neck and her shoulders. He told her they would get through it all together. It was what she needed to hear. It was what they both needed to believe.

"I love you, Jason."

"I love you, Abby."

They slept.

\* \* \*

Eric was groaning himself back to consciousness as Jason walked through the door. Abby had stopped to complete insurance papers. All quite gently, he put his hand on Eric's shoulder.

"Morning, Pal," he said more cheerfully than reasonable, all things considered.

"Jase? That's you?"

"Yup. Here I am. Your Mom will be along in a few minutes."

"How's she doing? Really, now, be honest with me!"

"Better than you might think, Eric."

"Is it morning, really?"

"Seven fourteen, to be exact."

"What day?"

"Wednesday."

"Who's opening?"

"Gerald and Sharon." Jason had to smile.

"They're liable to ruin the yogurt machine, you know."

"I'll risk it. Stop worrying about the store."

"So, Mom's really ok? I hope you stayed with her last night. She loves you, you know."

"Yes, I did, and yes I know."

The corners of Eric's mouth lifted ever so slightly. Under other circumstances it wouldn't have qualified as a smile, but that morning it qualified as a beautiful, full blown grin. Eric reached out with his left hand, searching for Jason. Jason met his hand and held it securely. That felt good to Eric. It had not been tender and uncertain, like his mother's and Janice's, but firm and safe and reassuring.

"Why me, Jason?"

"We figure it was to get back at your mother by hurting what Johnny knew she loved the most."

"I'm glad he didn't hurt her. He didn't hurt her, did he?"

"No. He hasn't even tried to get close to her."

"Okay, then, it was worth it."

Jason's eyes teared. The nurse handed him a towel after taking one for herself. This was quite a young man.

"Well, if there is any really bad news about me, I want to have it right now, before Mom gets here. Talk to me, you two. You're still here, aren't you, Janice?"

"Janice's shift is over. She'll be back tonight. I'm Millie. I'll be here with you during the day."

"Good to meet you, Millie. Pardon me if I don't stand up."

Eric was still somewhat befuddled but his sense of humor surfaced out of habit. It was probably best that Eric remained partly sedated. Jason reiterated the several problems, and Millie helped field Eric's questions. Eric always had questions.

"So, you seem to be saying that it's not good in the short run, but the long run may not be so bad. Is that is what you're saying?"

"That's pretty much it," Millie replied.

"My sight is still a question mark, I take it?"

"Doctor says he has every reason to think your sight will return and very likely be completely normal."

"Hey, this is sounding better and better."

"There is one thing, Eric," Jason began.

"Ya, go ahead, just say it, Jason." Eric projected a demanding tone.

"There will be some scars on your face. The doctors aren't sure how your face is going to heal. It was very badly bruised, and deeply cut in several places."

"Hamburger? Is that what you're saying?"

"At least," Jason said, pulling no punches. He again took Eric's hand.

"Jason, your hand is all wet. Are you crying? You've got to stop that. Mom needs you to be strong now, so just cut out the god dammed crying!" They were silent.

"How bad? I mean unpleasant bad or run away down the street grotesque bad? How bad are the scars going be?"

"Like I said, the doctors just don't know yet. That's as honest as we can be with you now. They said it may be a month before they'll have a good handle on that."

Millie broke in: "The doctors are doing great things with scars these days, Eric. Try not to worry. It won't help. We just have to wait and see. Anyway, it's time for your bath now. You smell like a gym shoe, and we frown on that around here."

"Seems to me I smell like gauze. I want Jason to stay, okay?"

"Well, that's not according to regulations, but I think we can bend those rules for today."

"Keep Mom out!"

"Okay, no Moms allowed, just Jasons."

Eric mustered another faint smile. When he heard the door close, he relaxed.

It felt good to know he was being cleaned up. He thought he would be embarrassed, but he wasn't. He held Jason's hand – a white knuckled grip, much firmer than Jason had imagined possible. Conversation stopped. It was not words that were on his mind. It was pain. Eric soon gave up the brave boy routine and groaned out loud. It hurt so much when Millie touched or moved him. He'd make it, though. He had always made it and now he had two people in his family to help him. That was certainly cause for another smile, but it would have to wait until later.

\* \* \*

The bath over and the door open, Abby arrived bearing the breakfast tray.

"Good morning, Son. I hear you showered and everything just for me."

"Well, hardly a shower, but Millie here gives a mean spongy. Kiss me if you can find an open spot. I really need a kiss."

She found a spot on his forehead and it did everything it was supposed to do.

"Breakfast has arrived," Abby announced. Let's see what goodies we have here. Mmmm. Jell-O, hot tea with milk and lots of sugar, and very soggy toast.

"The doctors don't want you to chew for a while," Millie explained. "In a few days, you'll be getting all the solid food you want."

"Sounds like you plan to starve me till then."

"No Sir, your orders say to stuff as much Jell-O, tea and soggy toast down your gullet as you can possibly take!"

"Whoopee!" Eric made a half-hearted attempt at a circle in the air with the bed-bound index finger of his right hand.

It took far longer to finish breakfast than Eric had expected. His face was wired and the opening left at his mouth was tiny. He soon discovered that sucking helped deliver the goodies in a more or less efficient manner.

More alert at that point, Eric began exploring himself

with his left hand. He could just reach the tops of his two leg casts. He felt his right arm cinched up against his side. The bandages on his face seemed huge - nose, eyes, cheeks, and even the top of his head. His chest and abdomen hurt everywhere he tried to touch them, so he gave it up. Moving down still further, he suddenly came to an embarrassing conclusion.

"Hey, I'm stark naked here, guys!"

"No, you're not," Millie explained firmly. "There's a sheet draped across the bed above you and down the side rails. You're completely covered. We wouldn't ever embarrass a guy like that." Then she explained why. "To have the sheet or a gown touching your skin would be far too painful for a while.

"You're saying I'm just going to have to 'bare' with you on this."

There was a group moan. That was sufficient to satisfy Eric.

It wasn't that he didn't believe Millie, but just the same, he raised his hand up over his midsection, making sure he could, indeed, touch that promised sheet. He could. Millie was going to be okay!

"What happened to Johnny?" Eric asked at last.

"No one has seen him," Jason said.

"Who found me?"

"Mrs. Hayes phoned 911 and told them where to find you. She apparently witnessed the whole thing. She identified the assailant as Johnny without any doubt. He has just disappeared."

They were quiet.

"All this exercise has worn me out, guys. I'm going to sleep. You two go take care of things as usual. Millie and I will be fine here, right Mill?"

Millie smiled. "We sure will, Sport."

Eric anticipated and received his mother's familiar kiss on the forehead. Then, quite unexpectedly, he received a second.

"Sleep well, Son," Jason whispered in his ear. Eric's tears seeped unnoticed into the bandages covering his eyes, while a wonderful new feeling seeped into his heart.

\* \* \*

Jason dropped Abby off at The Green Mill and went back to his apartment. He needed to shower and change, and to transform himself back into a human being again. His mind replayed the night before at Abby's. It had been wonderful to be there with her, to hold her close, to comfort her. It had been more pleasing and agreeable than he had imagined - and he had to admit that he had spent some time imagining such things.

Imagining and worrying, he told himself. He had not been with another woman romantically since Karen's death, and he still felt an intense loyalty to her. Although he could say it was now time to put the past behind him and strike out toward the rest of his life, he was hesitant - fearful, perhaps.

Abby's suggestion that they share the same bed had at first sent uncomfortable vibrations throughout his being. He was not prepared for such an offer - if it were an offer. He was both relieved and troubled when her proposal had not caused an erotic rush within him. When it became obvious that a sexual encounter was not in her thoughts, Jason had been able to relax. It then became comfortable and wonderful. He yearned for such intimacy. He needed such intimacy. Why was he so reluctant to pursue it?

After his shower and shave, he collapsed into his favorite chair and automatically reached out toward Karen's picture. He had become used to talking to her there, those past months. Those conversations cleared his mind and helped him weather the sad and often depressing weeks that followed her death. But how could he talk with her about this? To merely tell her he was becoming fond of another fine woman was one thing. To ask her permission to begin a more intimate relationship, was quite another.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Mirrors Don't Lie**

"Boy, am I glad to be home!" It was easily the thirtieth time that Eric had said it during the two hours since arriving back in his own bed. Those two hours, however, seemed like twenty to a fourteen-year-old.

"Mo-om," he called, for perhaps the tenth time.

"Just a minute," came her patient reply.

Presently she arrived, carrying blue sweat pants that were large enough for the two of them to wear simultaneously.

"What the?"

"I've been trying to figure out something you could get on over those huge full leg casts of yours so you can cover up with something other than a towel. I considered a skirt – kilts even - but thought you just might balk at that."

"It would depend entirely on who else was in the skirt. But seriously folks, those sweat pants sure look big enough to me."

Eric drew his modesty towel tightly over his mid-section and down between his legs. He and his mother giggled like they hadn't giggled together for a month, as the two of them fought to get the sweat pants around the casts and up his legs. Once it was slipped high enough to be within his reach, Eric said, "Turn your back and don't peek while I pull 'em on."

Abby smiled and obliged, thinking to herself, "He's okay about having every nurse in the hospital see him naked, but he's still modest around his Mother."

It took quite some doing with only one arm in working order, but finally he proclaimed victory: "There we are. This

feels great. Super idea, Mom. One more problem solved. You can turn around now. Thanks. Boy, that was strenuous. Anything to eat?"

Life already seemed more normal than Abby had imagined it would ever be again. So much had happened in just three short - no, three excruciatingly long, draining, heart-wrenching - weeks.

"Real food or junk?"

"Bring - on - the - junk!" he said, emphasizing every word.

My how she had missed having her son around!

\* \* \*

Jason arrived a little after six, bearing a brown paper bag containing an assortment of sports, camping and automobile magazines. Jason met Abby at Eric's bedroom door. Out of habit, allowed by the Eric-free household those past weeks, he greeted her with a kiss - a brief, tender peck on the lips. Eric took notice but averted his eyes before they realized he had been watching.

"Oh," Abby said, glancing at the sack, "Products in a plain brown wrapper, huh? I've heard of such things. Perhaps I should play the censor, here."

Jason quickly tossed the bag to Eric and winked.

Eric was so happy to see Jason that he set the sack aside.

"How are things at the store today?" That was always Eric's first question for both of them.

"Doing as well as can be expected, considering the best help I have refuses to get his behind out of bed and come to work."

"Believe me," Eric reassured, "If it was just his behind that needed to get out of bed, he'd have been there three weeks ago. That was about the only part of me that wasn't broken, bruised, dented or mutilated."

Three faces smiled. Three hearts ached

"I'll leave you guys alone while I rustle up some supper," Abby said and she left, sniffing to herself.

Jason turned toward Eric, a serious look on his face.

"What?" Eric asked, never being able to endure that look for long.

"I don't know for sure how to say or ask what I have to say or ask."

"If it's about you kissing Mom just then, I think it's great. Nothing to worry about from me. Millie and I unscrambled it all in my head. I'm not ten anymore, Jason. I didn't think you two were just sitting around twiddling your thumbs these past three weeks, you know - at least I hoped you weren't."

Jason wasn't sure if he felt embarrassed or relieved, but he could see from Eric's expression that the message had been sincere. Again, it had been Eric to the rescue!

"You are some kid. You know that? I'm glad you're okay about it. I really am very fond of your mother, you know."

"No, Jason. No. Back the cart up a block. We need to get that part of this arrangement straightened out right now."

Jason couldn't imagine what was to follow – a condition, he was learning, Eric frequently engendered.

"Who you are fond of is Abby, and that makes it okay. Okay? When I thought of you with my Mother, I was confused and disturbed. I'll admit it. Millie helped me see the difference. So, from now on when you talk to me about you and her, how about if you call her Abby instead of 'your mother'?"

Jason nodded slowly and deliberately. "That's a deal I can live with. I hope I'm allowed a few slips of the tongue here at the beginning, though."

Feigning the delivery of a sideshow barker, Eric began: "Since you appear to be a moderately intelligent young man, I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Sir. I'll allow you not only one, not only two, but three, hear me, three, entire all new slips of the tongue."

"You've been watching way too many game shows at the hospital, I can tell."

Then there was another serious glance from Jason. That one Eric understood.

"Yeah, I know. We have to do the therapy on my shoulder."

"Sooner the better, don't you suppose?"

"Yeah, let's get to it. Tell Mom to stay out, and close the door. I don't want her to see me cry. She's been through enough. Poor Mom."

The physical therapist at the hospital had taught Jason how to do the basic therapy exercises, so he could perform them when Eric got home. They were range of motion and stretching routines, and they still inflicted major pain - fifteen minutes of agony every morning and another fifteen, every evening. It was not an easy chore for either of them. Eric took a deep breath and surrendered his right arm into Jason's loving, if not tender, care.

Abby heard Eric groaning and occasionally calling out in pain. She felt every twist, every twinge herself. A parent hopes to protect her child from pain, but there come times when it seems that's just not part of the plan. Eric never once complained. As usual, when the ordeal was over, Jason sat beside him on the bed and held him close while the pain abated. Eric dried his face, breathed deeply several times to regain his composure, and thanked Jason. The boy never failed to thank him. That alone, tore at Jason's heart.

"It still hurts like hell, but I'm moving it better, don't you think?"

Jason agreed. "No doubt about that. It's moving farther every day. In no time at all you'll be able to flick a tick off the middle of your back."

Silently, Jason wished it were Johnny's arm his was working over twice a day.

Abby took her clue from the opening of the door and she soon appeared with a home cooked feast for Eric. She flinched as she saw her son's, still, red, eyes but calmed to his cheery greeting.

"Mom's cooking! Boy, have I missed this!"

He motioned with his head for her to come and receive a kiss. She happily accommodated.

"Speaking of kisses, Mother dear, I'd like to see a little more feeling when you pucker up with this guy here."

"Eric Covington! I declare! My puckers are to be of absolutely no concern of yours! If you weren't so delicate you'd be getting the rib-tickling of your life."

They smiled at one another, each knowing how much they both wished he had been up to it. Abby's eyes then met Jason's. Eric followed the loving glance and relished the moment, having to suppress a giggle, bubbling within him.

"Go! Scat! Skedaddle! you two. Don't you see these pancakes and I need our privacy here!"

"Call if you need anything," Jason said.

"Oh, don't worry, Jason, he doesn't hesitate to call, believe you me," Abby added with a wink.

Eric ate and then busied himself sorting through the new magazines. There was no Playboy. He was disappointed, but not in the least surprised. Later on, he would find a way to wrestle one out from under his mattress. In the meantime, his much missed, door brightening, centerfold lady would work just fine. She needed a name. "Veronica," that just fits her.

\* \* \*

Abby and Jason enjoyed a leisurely meal together for the first time since, well, actually, for the first time ever. The months since they met, had been hectic. First, had been the problem of finding ways and times to be together without distressing Eric. Then there had been the hectic weeks of hospital life. There truly hadn't been many stress-free moments for them.

"Can you believe, this?" Jason said, helping himself to more green beans.

"Believe what?"

"We are actually just sitting here together eating with no where to rush off to as soon as we are finished."

"Mo-om!"

"That's what you think," Abby laughed, flicking her head in the direction of Eric's voice.

"Here let me take care of it," Jason said.

"No, Jason, it's such a pleasure to hear that voice again, I want to go."

Jason recognized a faint pang of jealousy mounting inside him. They were Mother and Son - parent and child. It was a relationship he would never truly have, or perhaps even worse, would never be able to fully understand. Although he had come to love Eric in his own way, he feared it could never be as complete and binding, as what Eric and Abby knew. "Nor should it be," he said admonishing himself out loud. It provided an enlightening and immediately comforting perspective.

"Nor should what be?" Abby asked, returning to the table.

"Oh nothing. I was just having a long overdue little chat with myself. What did Eric need, if it's any of my business."

"His foot itched!"\

They broke into undisguised laughter. Eric was one of a kind!

They finished their meal and cleared the table. Jason went to pick up Eric's tray. He was propped up against the headboard, totally absorbed in one of the magazines.

"Those okay?" Jason asked, nodding at the magazines."

"Well, headlights and bumpers weren't at the top of my list, you know.

"Oh, really?" Jason said, raising his eyebrows and repeatedly puckering his lips in Eric's direction.

"You dirty old man, you!"

"Hey, I was fifteen once, myself, you know."

"Fifteen," Eric repeated. About two weeks now and I really will be an old man of fifteen."

"What do want for your birthday this year?" Jason asked, placing the tray on the dresser and trying to keep the conversation light.

Eric turned and surveyed his face in the mirror, obviously studying what he saw there. A single tear rolled down one cheek.

With a sigh, his answer came slowly and laboriously. "Can't think of a thing, this year, Jase." He set his jaw, sighed again, more deeply that time, and swiped away the tear with the back of his still bandaged hand.

Moved to tears, but not allowing them, Jason seized the moment. Eric had not yet been willing to discuss his disfigured features.

"About time we discussed that, don't you think?"

"What's to talk about? I'm a freak. I'm ugly. I'm hideous. I'll never have another date as long as I live. Who'd ever want to kiss this face, if you can even call it that? It's lopsided. I don't even have a left cheek any more. I don't see how you two even stand to look at me. End of discussion."

But it wasn't the end, and he knew that.

Eric leaned his face into a pillow and began crying. Not merely a sad cry, or even a cry of passing despair, but one that dredged up anger and torment from the very depths of his soul. It was long overdue. Jason sat close and held Eric as tightly as his condition would allow. Eric melted into his embrace. Jason gently leaned his head against Eric's, and shared the boy's tears as they trickled down his own cheeks. Neither spoke.

After a few minutes, Abby appeared to see what was keeping Jason. She stopped at the door and Jason put a finger to his lips, beckoning her in. He pointed to the mirror and then to his face. Abby nodded her understanding, and scooted in close on the other side of the bed, putting her hand on Eric's arm and also resting her head against his. He continued sobbing for several minutes before emerging from the pillow.

"Well, I needed that, guys," he said. He appeared drained as he leaned back against the headboard. His fixed gaze focused straight ahead as if through the wall and into eternity. "I guess I can talk now."

And talk they did, into the late hours of the evening. He spoke of his fears, of his dreams now dashed, and of those new and unfamiliar feelings of uncertainty and self-doubt. He worried aloud about rejection by his friends and worst of all, by himself. In the end, he agreed to visit the plastic surgeon - something he had refused to do while in the hospital, dismissing it as ghoulish science fiction. That, of course, had been more fear than fact.

Once Eric had talked himself out, Abby and Jason left him to sleep. They moved to the living room where they rubbed one another's now aching necks and shoulders.

"Thank you for being here for all this," Abby said. "I'm not sure how I would have managed alone."

"Well, you would have managed, and gotten an A+ in the process, but I'm glad I was here, too. You know how much I want to be a part of your lives. That means the downers as well as the uppers."

Abby believed him and took great comfort in it. Emotionally consumed, she snuggled in next to him as he sat on the couch. He offered her his reassuring embrace and

pulled her close. How lucky he felt just then. Two new people in his life to love and care about - both hurting now, but he would somehow help them through it. That's how love worked. It grew from adversity. It enhanced both lover and beloved. Soon, they would all revel in life once more!

\* \* \*

Dear, Dear, Karen. I made a wonderful discovery this evening. Perhaps it was there to see long ago, but it was this evening that brought it into focus. I will never love anyone the way I have loved you, Karen. That love will always be deep inside me. It will forever be a source of strength, and joy and irreplaceable memories.

But you know what else I discovered? Because you taught me about the boundless wonders of love, I find I have room to love again. I have extended my love toward two very precious people, and they have accepted it. It feels new and strange and still a bit awkward, but it feels right, Karen. I know you would think so, too. These loves will never replace you. That is not their purpose. But they will be fulfilling and they will provide renewed purpose for me, as I believe I will for them.

Somehow, I feel set free, not from you, Karen, but from my own reluctance, from my own fears of new relationships, from my sadness and despair over your loss - feelings you would have never wished upon me, nor approved of in the first place. I feel ... I feel loved once more!

\* \* \*

Abby checked on Eric one last time, pulling the sheet over him, as the late-night air seemed suddenly chilly. She stood and looked down at him remembering the first night when she had brought her baby home from the hospital. It had been a far smaller cover that she had pulled up against the chill that night, however. Abby thought about how the years had changed things, and, yet, how they had stayed the same.

He would, of course, always remain handsome in her eyes, but she understood that she was not the important beholder now. It was only Eric's perspective that mattered. She would have done or given up anything to ease his torment and restore his broken body. She had raised him to be strong.

She knew that somehow, he would find the strength to confront this.

She turned to leave, coming - well, one could say - cheek to cheek with the newly christened, Veronica. A feeble smile graced her lips as she shook her head in the realization that somewhere along the line, her baby boy had become a young man. Would he now be able to enjoy the delights due him? At that moment, it remained a question as large and unfathomable as the black of night, itself.

She missed having Jason there in her bed. She wondered, now that their exhaustion was ending, and life was resuming its more natural flow, if something more than just being close would emerge during their times of privacy. He had been so patient, so understanding, so much the gentleman about it all. Abby wondered if it had been difficult for him. Had it been an excessive strain? She feared that she really didn't know very much about male needs and frustrations. There was so much to learn about both her men.

Jason had previously been comforted by a woman who had grown to know all of those things about him. How could she possibly compete with that? She felt fifteen again. Uncertain. Awkward. Fearful. Hesitant and yet ardent.

Abby wondered what Jason was thinking at that moment. Was he, too, yearning for her? Was he missing her warmth, her presence? Was he, also, feeling lonely and apart? Abby had not imagined herself ever again engaging in an intimate relationship with a man. It would take some doing to make that feel agreeable. The last relationship, her only relationship, although it had produced her beloved Eric, had in all other ways left her empty and hurting, and more than a little apprehensive about men and their intentions.

She trusted Jason. That would be no problem. She trusted him and she loved him, so what was the problem? Eric seemed to have worked out his uncertainties about the relationship. Of course, she and Jason had never really talked relationship. Events hadn't allowed time or opportunity. But there was a relationship. They must talk. There were desires to explore and expectations to understand.

Because life had been necessarily centered on Eric and his problems, they had not had the opportunity to discuss

direction - to talk about where the two of them were headed and whether or not they were to be headed there as one. Now there should be time. She must just be patient and allow it to follow its natural course. She must relax about it - just let it happen. It was a comforting thought – to just let love mature in its own time. Abby smiled, and was soon asleep.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **Reality Checks**

As the sun began peeking through the three small panes across the top of his bedroom window, Eric was already giving himself his daily sponge bath - or at least the front half of his daily sponge bath. The currently dim prospect for a shower seemed like heaven, itself. With more than a little effort, he turned himself onto his stomach and waited, relatively patiently, for his mother to come in and wash his back and feet.

He heard the phone ring and smiled, knowing it was Jason's early morning check in call. His mother laughed at something. Eric chuckled to himself. He didn't need to know what had been said. The mere idea of his mother being so happy made her laughter contagious. It was good to see her smiling and hear her laughing. Eric had always tried to make her happy but had faced the conclusion that there was only so much a son could do. He was more than willing to share the responsibility with a guy as great as Jason.

That turned his thoughts to a new, potential, problem. If Jason and his mother ever got married - well, in Eric's mind it was just a matter of when, not if, - Jason's role would change from friend to Dad. He liked the idea of having Jason as a Dad, but he hated the idea of losing Jason as a friend. Perhaps he needed to discuss that with Jason, but not too soon. He didn't want to scare him off with premature talk of matrimony.

There was another problem, which he had to face, also. Suzzy. His mother said she had called every day since the

accident, or whatever you call it. Eric had refused to see her, or more accurately, had refused to let her see him. Abby had talked with her at The Green Mill on several occasions, and surprise of all surprises, she found herself growing to like the little trollop – beg your pardon, the young lady! (Sometimes the author has difficulty keeping up with the development of her characters.) Eric refused to take calls from Suzzy, saying the sooner she gave it up and found someone else the better things would be all the way around. He wasn't sure if he really believed that. His mother was sure that he didn't! Jason said he wasn't being fair to Suzzy - that he was selling her short. His mother said if he wanted to end it, he should be man enough to do it in person rather by default.

As his mother finished up the bath, Eric spoke:

"So, did Suzzy call yesterday?" He tried to appear quite casual about the whole matter.

"Yes, she did. Thought you weren't interested in hearing, or I'd have said something."

"Well, you know."

"Well, no, I guess I don't know," was his mother's calculated reply.

Eric lay silent there on his stomach as his mother gently patted him dry.

"We have to wash that hair again soon. You look like a greaser!" she said, making small talk.

Eric appeared content to remain in that position.

"I suppose I could talk to her on the phone if she really wants to talk to me, you know," he said at last. "Does she know how really awful I look?"

"I don't know how to answer that, Eric. She knows your face was badly damaged. It's impossible to describe these things. At any rate, she could care less about how your face looks. She's concerned about you."

"You've talked with her haven't you," Eric said, raising up on his elbows and turning his head toward his mother.

"Yes. We've talked several times down at the Cafe."

"What do you think of her?"

"She seems genuinely concerned about you. I can tell she is very fond of you."

"You sound like a mother," he said laying back down,

but still facing in her direction.

"Wonder why? Abby shot back."

"You really think she's fond of me? Still? I mean after all this? Just wait till she takes a gander at this puss of mine. She'll probably turn and run screaming into the night. I suppose I should get that over with though. Then I'll know once and for all, at least. She will, too."

"So, what are you saying," Abby asked, sitting beside him on the bed and beginning to massage his shoulders.

"I'm saying that I'll see her. You think she'd come today?"

"Why don't you call her and ask?"

Silence. Mom wasn't going to make this easy.

Abby left the room and soon returned with a phone. "I'll just leave this in here in case you want to use it. While you're in the mood to call folks, you might consider giving Randy a ring. He's terribly concerned about you, too, you know."

Randy had been a lifelong friend. From Abby's perspective, the two of them appeared to have absolutely nothing in common, and yet they had always been able to hang out together, sometimes for days at a time, talking and laughing and doing whatever it was boys did together.

"Randy'll be up by now. I'll call him first."

He seemed unexpectedly excited at that prospect. Abby helped him turn over and sit up against his headboard. She fluffed and placed pillows here and there thinking that he looked ever so much like the young prince in one of his, now well worn, picture books from childhood.

She kissed his forehead, gathered the bathing paraphernalia, and left him alone. She paused at the door just long enough to remind him that Jason would be there in a few minutes to do his therapy, and that he shouldn't let the phone call delay the man on his way to work.

It was a good conversation. In the kitchen, Abby cried - joyfully, she thought - as laughter and unintelligible, though clearly excited, phrases drifted out from Eric's room. Randy promised to stop by at nine that morning. Although Eric did want to see Randy again, he also had an ulterior motive. "Don't forget your Polaroid, you promised!" he said as he hung up.

Jason arrived and they endured the therapy session together. His shoulder was moving further and easier. The pain had not lessened, however. As had become his custom, Jason planted a kiss on Eric's forehead as he got up to leave.

"You know, Jase, when I return to work at the Frigate, you're going to have to remember not to do that every time we part company."

\* \* \*

"God, man! Gee, I'm sorry," were Randy's first words as he entered the bedroom and reacted, automatically, to the sight of his good friend's face. No amount of practice had been able to prepare him. Realizing the terrible words he had just let slip, he tried to recover. "I mean ..."

"Forget it. I'm sure it's a shock. It still is for me every time I use the mirror. Don't look at my face if it bothers you. That's okay."

It must have been no problem, however, because Abby heard non-stop laughter, giggles and whispered something-or-others for the next three hours. At one point, from the corner of her eye, she saw the flash and heard the familiar high-pitched whir of the camera. Three flashes. Three whirs. Three pictures.

One, Randy was to keep and show to Eric's guy friends if they wanted to prepare themselves before they came to visit him. A second was for Eric to keep as historical documentation. The third, Randy dutifully delivered in a sealed envelope to Suzzy, along with a carefully rehearsed speech about its contents and Eric's feelings and how he would understand if, upon seeing the picture, she decided against visiting him. It was all much harder on Randy than Eric could have possibly imagined, but friends go ahead and do those things - especially when you are fourteen. It wasn't as if Eric had not come through for Randy many, many times before.

\* \* \*

Suzzy would be there at four o'clock. Eric, being overly picky, supervised, as his mother straightened up his room.

"I guess you should remove Veronica for the afternoon," Eric said, indicating the centerfold by the door.

"It's Veronica, is it, Abby said as she dutifully saw too it,

more certain than ever that she really had no idea how the mind of a fourteen-year-old boy worked. Eric wondered to himself: socks or bare feet? Shirt or bare chest? He wanted to look as sexy as possible without being outright obvious. He decided on bare feet and his blue shirt, left open down the front.

It was three fifty-five. He felt his stomach churning. He watched his chest vibrating from the suddenly accelerated pounding of his heart. He hoped he wouldn't throw up but would take no bets.

"Fix the mirror so I can see myself, will you, please, Mom. All of me! "

He looked into the mirror for some time and sighed.

"Well, a grocery bag over the head might improve things, but ..."

Abby took his hand. He looked up into her face.

"Is this a mistake? I mean, I am really scared, Mom."

"It's never a mistake to get on with your life, Eric. It's often scary, but it's never a mistake."

The doorbell rang. "I'm going to pee my pants, I know I am," Eric said out loud. "God, why did I do this to myself?"

A moment later Suzzy was at his door, a beautiful red rose in her hand. Abby remained in the kitchen, praying without words.

"Hey, sexy, is it ever good to see you again!" Suzzy began. "I thought you'd thrown me over for some gorgeous nurse or somebody."

She walked across the room, handed him the rose, and seated herself, facing him, on the edge of his bed.

"Boy, Suzzy, it's really good to see you again, too! I've thought about you every day – heck, every hour."

His voice quivered and broke as he held out his hand and pulled hers toward his chest.

"I'm sorry I've acted so dumb about all this. It wasn't that I didn't want to see you, you know."

Suzzy responded with the sugary sweetness of an angel: "Of course, I know. It's just that you are a typically vain, pig headed, macho-hooked, male, who's afraid his personality may be so shallow that no girl could ever love him for anything other than his good looks and impressive pecs."

Preventing a response, she leaned toward him and without hesitation pressed her lips to his, the very way they had done so many times before. Dear Suzzy, Eric thought. How could I have misjudged you, so?

The kiss lasted about a minute. The visit lasted about an hour. Halfway through, Abby rattled down the hall and brought them lemonade and cookies.

"She's checking up on us, you know," a smiling Eric whispered, as his mother was about to enter the room.

"I know. Parents!" Suzzy said, as if exasperated.

Outwardly, Eric smiled and nodded, as boys will do with girlfriends. Inwardly, however, he repeated the word, "Parents," putting an entirely different spin on the term.

The lemonade and sugar cookies delivered, Abby left.

Eric and Suzy continued to talk. The time rushed by. Suzzy had to leave. With one final, lingering and arousing, tongue-tying kiss, that first of many visits drew to an end. In his room, Eric put his hands behind his head and sat there wearing the smile of all smiles. In the kitchen, Suzzy fell into Abby's open arms. They held each other, sobbing and quietly trying to come to grips with this new chapter in the life of the young man they both loved so much.

Soon after Suzzy exited the kitchen, Randy arrived, an envelope in hand and one of those, "I know something you don't know" grins, plainly furnished for Abby's benefit.

"Eric, Randy's here," Abby called, finding it easier to just ignore the set-up than to try and analyze one more teen boy's intentions. With a brief, but sincere, prayer of thanks that Eric had not been twins, she returned to her now cold cup of coffee.

Feeling he didn't need to be announced, Randy had just barged on in to Eric's room the way he done so many hundreds of times before.

"Did you get it?" Eric asked with undisguised excitement.

"Yup. Just as you said, a fifty-dollar gift certificate to the Log Cabin Restaurant."

"Great! Now to get Jason over here."

A phone call, and thirty minutes later, in walked Jason with Abby on his arm.

With all possible exaggeration, Eric ceremoniously cleared his throat. "In honor of the occasion - and don't ask what it is 'cause I'm not entirely sure myself - one Abigail Covington and one Jason Marshall are hereby requested to put on their fanciest duds and take themselves to the Log Cabin Restaurant for a night of great dining, dancing, and moderate hanky panky."

Eric handed them the envelope, his joy totally uncontained.

"Randy agreed to be my baby sitter. We promise not to have any girls over, and there will be no partying above and beyond what we know is allowed."

Abby and Jason looked at one another. "I think he wants us out of here," Jason said.

"Well, never let it be said we stuck around where we weren't wanted," Abby added.

She kissed Eric on the cheek and hugged him harder than she knew she should. Eric understood though winced. Jason signaled thumbs up from the door as Eric valiantly endured the discomfort.

"I don't want to see your faces around here again till midnight, but Jason, at midnight I will call the police and report her as kidnapped!"

"I'll have her home on time, Mr. Covington. I promise, Sir, I will," Jason replied complete with a click of the heels and a snappy salute.

\* \* \*

By seven, their wonderful dinner was but a lovely memory. They danced until nine.

"Well, still time to do something. Eric probably won't allow Randy to unlock the doors before twelve, you know, Jason said. "Since your place is out, how about mine?"

"Sounds delightful," Abby said.

It wasn't the first-time Abby had been in Jason's apartment. In fact, the surroundings there had become quite comfortable. "Coffee?" Jason asked.

"Sure. That would be nice."

Abby slipped off her shoes and drew her feet up under her as she eased back on the sofa, waiting while Jason pattered in the kitchen. For an apartment, the living room was

spacious. The pale, yellow-gold of the painted walls flowed naturally across the shadowy baseboards and onto the old gold of the closely cropped carpet. The couch and a matching chair were in brown tones – dark, but surprisingly crisp looking due in part to their trim, angular lines.

A second, strangely bulky, but wonderfully comfortable chair boasted a large floral print in which the greens and reds were boldly accented against a burnt orange background. The window treatments were a wedding of the masculine and feminine, with soft, lacy, ivory tone sheer curtains hanging as if protected between columns of fitted, heavily textured, tan and gold drapes. It was a clean, uncluttered, contemporary look, which contrasted sharply with the homey, rustic approach Abby preferred.

Nevertheless, she felt comfortable there. It was Jason's place and that in itself, made it comfortable. Abby noticed Karen's picture. There were no mixed emotions about it. Abby thought it was wonderful that Jason had known such a profound love. They had spoken of Karen together. The only sad part of those conversations had been that Abby had no similar memories to share with Jason. It was a void which they had not touched on.

In about as much time as it had taken her to survey the room, Jason arrived, an ornate silver carafe and matching tray in hand. He seemed comfortable amid such elegance. She wondered if he was also really comfortable among the simpler surroundings that characterized her home and lifestyle. She smiled thinking that surely her place was at least a cut above the musty umbrella tent and the outhouse he seemed to like so well at Bear Lake. They sat close, sipping coffee, smiling often, and talking easily, though about nothing in particular.

In short order, Jason moved on. He had things to say. They had been well rehearsed and he was eloquent. The words flowed slowly and deliberately, and were made all the more important by the time and effort he had spent in preparing them.

"I love you Abby. I love you all day long at work. I love you here throughout each evening. I love you in my dreams, and I wake to love your vision each morning. It's such a wonderful feeling, this love. I feel like a kid again and yet I feel

wiser and more sure of myself than ever before in my life."

Abby reached her lips toward his and they kissed, long and completely. She put her head back against his shoulder.

"I understand. Those same feelings seem to be my faithful and constant companions, also. Sometimes I shake my head to clear it, wondering if this is all just some adolescent illusion revisited. I love you, Jason."

They kissed again, this time as if some new force, some new purpose had encompassed their relationship. It had not seemed sudden. It had been emerging. They both had sensed it developing - perhaps, maturing, would be a more accurate term.

Jason turned on the stereo and extended his arms toward his beloved. They danced the night away. It seemed natural and comfortable. It seemed like things were as they should be. Again, they sat close and talked. They kissed, enjoying the quiet of the night and the unhurried tempo. It was a haven from the cares and unpleasant situations that still lay in wait for them just outside the door.

"Much as I dislike the idea, my Dear, I should get you home before your overprotective parent calls me on the carpet," Jason said at last, delivering a gentle, lingering kiss to Abby's forehead.

"I know. I could stay right here forever, though. And to think this is only our first, official date?"

"Not only was it our first official date, my Dear, but do you realize that your son picked up the tab!" It was comfortable to have thoughts of Eric slip into their evening together.

Jason continued, nibbling playfully at Abby's ear. "Do you suppose this was what he had in mind when he suggested an evening of dining, dancing and moderate hanky-panky."

"I decided earlier today that I have no idea, whatsoever, about what goes on in that young man's brain," Abby said with a sigh. Then, looking up at Jason she added: "I'm so thankful you are a part of our lives now, so you can help me understand him. Never having been a teenage boy, a mother is definitely at a disadvantage, here."

\* \* \*

All quite intentionally, they walked through the door, precisely at the moment the Grandfather clock struck midnight. Eric and Randy were hot at it in a game of Monopoly. It was as if that game were the only thing of any consequence in the entire universe.

"Did you have a good time?" Eric finally managed to ask, as Randy forked over big bucks for his wallet busting stay on Park Place.

"It was a delightful evening, thanks to you, Eric. We'll certainly find a way to make it up to you."

"As if you already haven't about a zillion-times over," Eric replied, halfway under his breath. He rolled the dice.

"Good dinner?" Eric continued

"It was superb," Jason answered.

"Good dancing?"

"Jason is wonderful! We danced till we dropped."

"Good hanky panky?"

"Our hankyng and pankying are none your business, Son," Abby said, overly sweetly and ever so motherly.

"Well, I was on a roll there, so I thought I'd give it a shot."

Jason offered Randy a ride home and he accepted.

"Don't think I missed the fact that you got yourself out of therapy this evening, young man," Jason said, trying to sound playfully stern.

"Oh no, Sir," Randy broke in. "He made me do that god-awful stuff to him as soon as you two left. I thought I'd shoot my cookies. I don't see how you do that day after day. He's all yours from now on."

Abby looked at Jason. "Like I said, not an idea whatsoever!"

He kissed her good night and the two guys left.

"So, you really did have a good time, didn't you?" Eric asked again, as he and his mother put the game away.

"Yes. We both really needed that, honey. Thank you."

"Both! Make that all three of us, please!"

Abby hadn't realized it until that moment, but Eric was right, of course. It had just been Eric, Abby and Jason for weeks now. Certainly, he had needed a break from them, as well. That part of the stressful scenario had not entered her

head. What a boy, or man, or whatever he was just then, she thought! Abby turned to leave his room.

"Can you stay a minute? Can we talk a little while?" Eric asked.

No answer was required. Of course, they could.

"What's on your mind?"

"Suzzy kissed me today."

"Oh? You didn't think she would?"

"I really didn't know, Mom. I still don't understand it."

"Understand it, what?"

"How could a girl kiss a face that looks like this one?"

Tears began to gently make their way down his cheeks. "I mean it wasn't just a polite peck or anything, Mom, it was a K-I-S-S, tongue twisting kiss! And not just one, either."

Abby was hearing far more than she assumed she had bargained for.

"Did you talk with her about it?"

"Yeah. She said that for me to think she wouldn't still like me, just because of this, only proved I was a typically vain, lame brained, male."

Abby could hardly contain herself, but knowing Eric was dead serious, she most certainly managed. "And?"

"And what? I suppose she's right! You women always seem to be right, and we guys always seem to be wrong. I don't get it. I'm not dumb or anything. I sure act ignorant, though." The tears had stopped. His head shook side to side like those of the plastic dogs in car's rear windows.

"You're right about most things, Dear. You just can't see some things real clearly right now, I guess."

"Is that true or are you being motherly? I need you to be completely honest with me about that."

"Of course, it's true. I've never been a fifteen-year-old boy, but I was a fifteen-year-old girl once, believe it or not."

That brought a slight smile to his face.

"When I was fifteen, I was sure the boys were always right and I was always wrong in most matters of romance. I see that it works the other way around as well. Maybe you should talk with Jason about it. I have an idea he was fifteen once."

There was another smile, that time sustained. "It's

really great having a Jason, you know?" he said.

"Yeah, I know. It is great."

"You going to marry him?"

"Eric! Jason and I have only known each other for a few months."

"Ya, but I know you love each other, and I know I love him, so what's the holdup? I think we should marry him."

"Oh. So, it's we, now, is it?"

"Well, not really, but, ya, kind of, sure it is, you know."

Abby drew his head onto her shoulder. "Yes, I really do know, Eric. But I think we got off the topic. What are you going to do about this Suzzy thing?"

"I wish I knew. I'm worried she's just pitying me."

"Did the kiss feel like a pity kiss?"

Eric couldn't resist. "Actually, it felt, pity-good."

Shaking her head, Abby managed a happy moan in recognition of her son's attempt at humor. Eric quickly became serious, again.

"Well, actually there were a lot of them, and no, I suppose they didn't."

"A lot of them, huh. I guess next time I'll need to make more deliveries of lemonade and cookies."

"Mo-om. All we do is kiss. There's nothing wrong with that, is there?"

"No. Kissing is one of the really nice things Mother Nature invented for us."

"I'll say!" Eric agreed, almost too readily, Abby thought. "If it's of any reassurance to you, Mom, I don't plan on sleeping with Suzzy, or any other girl, until after I'm married. Sometimes that's difficult to resist – I mean REALLY DIFFICULT - but I'm determined about it." \

Abby all but dropped her teeth. This was not the conversation she was prepared for. She didn't want to be hearing these kinds of things from her son, and yet she did want to hear them. She wondered how many boys his age felt free to speak of such things with their mothers? She wondered how many boys his age had this much common sense.

Sensing her uneasy silence, "I didn't mean to embarrass you by that, Mom. You just always said we could

talk about anything, and I thought you might be worried about that intercourse thing. I mean I know moms in general seem to always be worrying about this young male hormone stuff. Well, so do young males, I'm here to tell you! Every time I speak to Suzzy's Mom I feel like she won't feel safe about me until I arrive wearing a padlock on my placket.

Abby swallowed hard. The conversation – well, monologue, actually - wasn't getting better. But she told herself it was okay. Now if she could just think of something meaningful and motherly to contribute. The blank buffer zone between her and her mental faculties remained entrenched, however, so she settled for another hard swallow and the repetitious clearing her throat.

Eric handled the problem.

"Well, thanks for the talk, Mom. Like always, it helped a lot. I'm just going to go to sleep now. It's been a long and draining day. I'm glad you and Jason had a good time. I had no business prying into your private time together. It was really just intended as a joke, ya know. I won't ever do it again. See you in the morning."

He snuggled down like he had done since his was three, relieved about, and satisfied with life, such as it was

She turned out the light and looked around his room. How could two boys, one of whom was virtually immobile, reek such havoc on that small space in such a short amount of time? Regardless, she was thankful that he seemed to be well on his way toward becoming his old self.

One thoroughly baffling question remained; how could Eric have possibly felt that she had provided him with so much as a wisp of help that evening?

Equally as baffling to Eric would have been the knowledge that he had, in fact, been of immeasurable, and deeply appreciated, help to his mother.

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## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **One Step Forward. Two Steps Back.**

The wailing of the sirens on the passing fire trucks had roused Abby only slightly and she had just as quickly slipped back to sleep. The ringing phone, however, quickly awakened her.

"Hello, this is Abby."

"Abby Covington, of The Green Mill?" a man's voice asked.

"That's right."

"This is Firefighter Marks, Ms. Covington. Your Cafe is on fire. Looks like we'll save most of it, but you'd better get down here."

"Thank you." As she got out of bed, she wondered why one would thank the bearer of such terrible news. I must call Jason, she thought.

That done, she dressed and went into inform Eric.

"Eric. Eric! She called, gently, shaking his good shoulder.

"Mom? Yeah, what?" came his sleepy reply.

"Some bad news, I'm afraid. The Cafe is on fire. I'm leaving now. Jason's meeting me there. I'll call you just as soon as I know anything."

"The Mill or the Frigate?" Eric asked, trying to get his wits about him.

"The Mill, I'm afraid."

Infuriated that he was incapacitated and couldn't help, he sat up in bed and waited helplessly for the phone to ring. Just when life had begun to hold some promise again, it was

all getting shot to hell, he thought. A fire! How could that be? Mom was always so careful and there was the sprinkler system. The place had been rewired not three years ago. It made no sense.

It was Jason who called. "Well, the fire did major damage to the kitchen area but only smoke and water damage in the dining room. It's out now and the Fire Marshal is here poking around."

"Any idea how it started?"

"At first impression, the marshal says it looks suspicious."

"What the hell does suspicious mean?" Eric asked, obviously upset that he had to be stuck at home, doing all of this by long distance.

"He thinks it was set."

"Set? But who would ... Johnny!" Eric answered his own question even before he had finished asking it.

"That's my bet, too, Eric. There is a policeman on the way over to your place, just in case."

"Just in case Johnny shows up here, you mean."

"Well, yes. He'll announce himself as soon as he lets himself in the kitchen door. He has Abby's key. Do you understand? Are you okay with that?"

"Okay. Yeah," Eric answered, stretching out for his baseball bat and looking around for other possible means of protection.

"I'm going to stay on the line till he arrives, just to make sure."

"Will Mom's insurance cover it?" Eric asked.

"She thinks so. She called the agent and he is on his way."

"Boy I hope so. All she needs is one more expense on top of this thing about me."

A sinking feeling overtook Eric. "There goes my plastic surgery," he thought. Angry, he threw a book across the room at his door.

"Hey," came a voice from the hall. "You okay back here, Eric? This is Officer Paige."

"Yeah, Franky, come on back. Hey, Jason, the cop arrived. I'll let you go. Thanks for the call. Take good care of

Mom."

Eric knew Officer Paige from his little league days. He had been a coach - not much of one, but a nice guy. His fear subsided, but still anger intensified.

\* \* \*

Johnny, if that is who it had been, had escaped again. The fire had defiantly been set, and by an amateur. The insurance would cover the damage and even pay Abby something for the loss of income while repairs were being made. It would take four to six weeks to complete the remodeling and she was afraid her good help would probably find other jobs in the meantime. She didn't blame them, but ...

In addition to the chaos from the fire, it was also the day Eric was to get his casts off. What was to have ended with the celebration of all celebrations, was beginning as one of the Covington's saddest days.

It was after five a.m. when she returned home. She filled Eric in on what she had learned. She looked so tired.

"I can easy live with these clubs for a few more days, Mom," Eric suggested. "You need your time to line up contractors and things like that. Rest. You look awful. You need to rest."

"No, young man. We are not going to let old Johnny ruin our lives again. Those casts come off and the partying begins!" And then as an afterthought, "Awful? Did I just hear you say I looked awful?"

Eric should have known. His mother's indomitable spirit was always at its best during a crisis. Her refreshing resolve and determination buoyed up his rapidly sinking attitude.

"Ok, Mom! Get me my bathing supplies and while you take your shower, I'll get ready as best I can."

Bathed and refreshed, Abby brought their breakfast into Eric's room. They planned their day as they ate. Jason was short-handed at the Frigate, so he had to beg off the celebration. That was too bad, but the two Covingtons hadn't spent a day on the town together for a long time. They looked forward to it.

The doctor's appointment was for nine thirty. By nine forty-five the casts were history. Eric was surprised how weak and sore his once dependable legs seemed to be. He was

outfitted with crutches and warned - threatened, is a more accurate term - that under absolutely no circumstances whatsoever was he to take a single step without them for seven days.

"That's not six, that's not five, it's seven," repeated the doctor. Such an extreme admonition was not necessary, given Eric's disposition, but he took it all in stride (so to speak).

"I feel so light, Mom." He repeated it over and over on the way home. "Watch me bend my knees. Is this great, or what? I can hardly wait to take a shower!"

Abby drove by the Cafe and stopped so Eric could survey the scene for himself. The stopping had been her mistake. There was no use fighting it. Eric was bound and determined to give it his up close and personal once over. Initially, he struggled with the crutches. After a few trial and error encounters with the curb and water soaked ground, he was soon wielding them like he'd been a part of his life since his cradle days. He was soon satisfied that he knew what they had to deal with.

"You know, Mom," he began, as she held the car door for him.

"Oh, Oh!" Abby broke in, knowing all too well that was Eric's, 'here's-what-you-really-ought-to-do-now' tone.

"This would be an ideal time to add on that second dining room here on the Eastside, like you used to talk about when you first got the place."

Actually, it was not such a bad idea - just way too expensive. She smiled and said they'd have to think about it.

"Remember those plans we drew up, Mom. Where do you suppose they are?"

Abby knew exactly where they were, but not to get his hopes up, only to be dashed, she said, "We'll just have to search around and see if we can find them. I really don't see how I could afford it. There won't be a cent of insurance money left after the rebuilding."

Eric understood. That was his Mother's kind way of saying, "Shut up and forget about it." He'd shut up, but he wouldn't forget about it! His Mother realized that, too, of course!

Abby and Eric pulled into the Golden Frigate at about eleven thirty. "I thought we'd have lunch here with Jason. Does that sound okay?"

"Great. I'll race you to the door!" Eric said, hoping to provoke a rise.

"She reached behind his head, locked his door, and quickly slipped out of her own, heading for the door on a trot. Eric, crutches and all, was soon close on her tail. She won and pranced around just outside the door, raising her hands high signaling victory.

"Mo-om. Everyone will see you," Eric said, half embarrassed, half delighted and by then, up to a full giggle.

Then it hit him. "Everyone in there will see me."

"I don't think this is such a good idea after all," he said, and turned back toward the car. Because of the confusion of the morning and the excitement of having the casts removed, he had forgotten about his face. He had spent the morning out among people, letting them - forcing them - to see his face. He suddenly felt terrible.

"Eric Allen Covington! You've never had a cowardly moment in your entire life. Are you really going to give in to your vain, pig-headed, unreasonable, male ego? Isn't that the phrase Suzzy used?" (His mother had thrown in "unreasonable" as her own, personal rendering of his current state of mind.)

"But Mom, don't you understand, it's not so much that, as it is just not making other people uncomfortable - disgusted, probably."

"If other people feel uncomfortable, that has to be their problem. You are in no way disgusting looking, and I won't tolerate such B. S. from you. Jason's waiting, and I, for one, am eager to see him. You do as you please, I guess!" She tossed him the car keys, turned and entered the restaurant.

Eric had never before heard his mother come that close to swearing. It had helped mount a formidable attack on his basic premise.

Inside, Abby and Jason found a relatively private, corner booth. Abby began catching him up on the events of the morning and about Eric's second thoughts and sudden sullenness.

"Poor kid!" Jason said.

"Yes, poor kid, but if we give in to that, so will he. As hard as it may be, we have to suck it in and kick his little Covington behind around the block until he comes out of this."

"Gee, tough talk, Mom," Eric's said as he walked up from behind them.

Abby's lower lip quivered a bit as she reached out and helped him maneuver into the booth.

"Real legs again, huh?" Jason said, awkwardly reaching out to help with the crutches, well after Eric already had things under control.

"Yeaj. They feel so light, I can't believe it. Look!" One at a time, he bent his knees for Jason's inspection and approval.

"Will you be ready to get back up to Bear Lake this weekend?" Jason asked as if it were a done deal.

Eric looked at his Mother as if to ask permission. From her expression, he could tell the two of them had already talked.

"Fantastic! It will be great to get in the water and swim. That should be good for my legs don't you think? It'll be great to fish and have a fire and ...

"Make coffee!" Jason said, interrupting.

Eric, of course, lapsed into hysterics. Smiling that broadly, hurt his face. It was the first time he realized how much smiling hurt, now. It was the first time he realized how long it must have been since he had really smiled full out. Despite the fire, it was turning out to be a better day than he could have imagined twelve hours earlier.

Still, it did not escape his notice that he had to be concerned about Johnny's whereabouts. That's when it occurred to him. He and Jason couldn't go away and leave Mom alone all weekend. What if Johnny tried something? Disappointment set in and Eric remained quiet and contemplative during the remainder of lunch. There had to be a solution.

\* \* \*

They were halfway to Bear Lake when Eric realized he hadn't packed his swimming suit - and his mother was along. It hadn't been necessary before, but this weekend, with Mom

looking on, what would he do? Cutoffs should work, he decided at last, and relaxed about it. Surely, Jason had brought a suit, he hoped.

There was no doubt about it. With a female along, this weekend was going to be far more complicated than the guys were used to.

It wasn't mentioned, but the possibility that Johnny was out there watching, was on each of their minds. Through the rear-view mirror, Jason unobtrusively kept an eye on the road behind them. Eric and Abby had to be more inventive in the ways they managed their covert glances. It proved difficult to convince themselves he was not there even though he was nowhere to be seen. Eric concluded that trying to find something was undoubtedly less stressful than trying not to find it.

Nothing would do but that the moment they arrived, Eric, crutches and all, would take his mother on the grand tour. They enjoyed the view from the top of the hill with the lake to the west, the woods to the south and the rolling hills wrapping around the north and east. Barefoot, they strolled along the sandy beach. Soon clad only in cutoffs, Eric welcomed the soothing, warm rays of the sun on his pale, aching legs, and ever-painful shoulder.

It crossed Eric's convoluted mind that for him to actually qualify as truly barefooted, he would need to remove the plastic caps from the ends of his crutches. That was worth a major grin, but he decided it was best laid to rest inside his head.

With a tree by tree and cinch by cinch description, he explained to his mother how he and Jason had begun the construction of the floating log dock.

It was a lovely spot. Abby immediately understood why her men loved it so.

There would be two tents for the first time - Jason's bigger two-man umbrella tent, and an older, one man pup tent, Eric had dragged out of the basement. It was a relic from his backyard camp outs during the summers he and Randy had been ten and eleven. It was his intention to set his tent up down on the beach, in order to afford Jason and Abby more privacy at the usual tent sight, up the hill.

As he began dragging the tent down toward the lake, Jason called out.

"Where you going with that, Hopalong?"

Smiling about the new nickname, Eric explained his reasoning.

"That's not the way we have the sleeping arrangements planned," Jason, said, almost sounding like a father. "We'll put them both up right here. You and I will have the big one like usual and we'll fix Abby some fine lady's quarters in yours."

"Oh. Okay."

Fairness aside, it was a relief to Eric. What Abby and Jason did during their private times together was their business and Eric had accepted that. He just wasn't comfortable with the idea of having them doing whatever that private business was when he was within earshot. Without comment, he and his crutches dragged the tent back up the hill.

They all pitched in helping to prepare the campsite. Like Jason had done for him, Eric became his mother's patient tutor. His explanations were too involved and his insistence that she practice each step before moving on to the next took far too much time. Nonetheless, Abby and Jason were both tickled and moved by his tender care. According to any perspective, it was an extraordinary, love-filled experience.

Once the tents were in place and the coffee had been set to heat on the open fire, Jason suggested a swim. Abby declined, although she did have her suit in case the spirit moved her.

Whispering, out of his mother's earshot, Eric confronted Jason: "You did bring a suit or something, didn't you?"

"Absolutely! Brand new, florescent, chartreuse, boxers!"

They stayed in the water for over an hour. How good it felt to Eric. His legs were easily tired but the swim seemed to rejuvenate them. Eric and Jason played like ten-year-olds. Abby delighted in the scene. When you have your loved ones, even adversity pales.

At the appropriate moment – one Eric had alerted her to in excessive detail - she added the required egg to the

coffee - cracked - and poured a cup. The handle of the tin cup became immediately too hot to hold. She had to wonder what kind of logic allowed such a vessel to have been fashioned. Male logic, she decided. It would be easy to wash. It tasted dreadful and it tasted wonderful. It was camp coffee at their camp.

As night slipped in and dimmed their world, Eric built up the campfire larger than was probably necessary – and kept it that way. No one commented on its size, just as no one mentioned Johnny or his possible whereabouts. Transient shadows at the edge of clearing received more play than usual and quick sounds from the brush caused their heads to turn in unison

Abby sat close to Jason. His strong arms quieted her fears and brought her comfort. Eric sat close by, poking at the fire and talking about this and that at his usual non-stop clip. He again registered his plug for the addition to the Cafe and then let it drop before Abby could mount her counter offensive.

Eric had learned years before that so long as she had no opportunity to hear herself saying no, he still had a chance. Because of that he seldom pressed or argued, or even debated. He just dropped his suggestion and then beat a hasty retreat. It was a time proven strategy and he saw no reason to mess with it.

The strain from the unfamiliar physical exertion, moved Eric to turn in early - that and his desire to provide his Mom and Jason some measure of privacy for a good night kiss or two. He smiled as he heard them giggling outside. He wondered what they were up to. The images that initially came to mind were less than comfortable, so he muffled the sounds by covering his head with a pillow, and was soon asleep.

Abby and Jason lingered by the fire later than they probably should have, since Eric would have them up with the roosters. Just being close was wonderful. Being finally alone to kiss and caress was perfect. They continued to ignore the shadowy movements in the woods for they would not live in fear. To have done otherwise would have had them chasing every branch that bent in the wind and every inquisitive

raccoon waiting to explore their trash.

Eric groaned. Abby tensed in Jason's arms as she glanced at the tent.

"It'll take a while to get those pegs of his back into shape. I probably let him overdue it today," Jason said, sounding ever so much like a father. Abby thought it had a nice ring to it. She smiled up into his face.

"What?" he asked.

"You really love him, don't you?"

"Oh, Abby. I love him so much. To have the two of you to love is, well, something I could never have even dreamt of six months ago. I don't know what I've done to deserve it, but I'm sure not going to question it."

They kissed a bit more passionately than was appropriate for lovers who must soon go their separate ways. For a moment, Jason envisioned an hour or two in Abby's tent, but then thought better of it, considering the ground rules he had implied to Eric. This love, he thought, was unbelievably ... well, it was just unbelievable - enough said!

Abby was not entirely sure how to approach her "Lady's Quarters." Jason opened the front flap and showed her how she could tie it shut from the inside when the time came. He lit her kerosene lamp and turned it low, suggesting she leave it on for ... well, for heat, as the nights grew quite chilly. He helped her roll out her sleeping bag and cautioned her about bumping the support poles. He fluffed her pillow and did this and that until there was obviously no more thising or thating to be done. They kissed and he left her struggling with the tie straps. He smiled. She was some trooper.

Jason arranged several more logs on the fire, searched the area with his eyes and then turned in.

\* \* \*

Abby couldn't be certain if it had the been the scraping of a spoon against the iron skillet, or the smell of scrambled eggs that first made her aware morning had arrived. Or perhaps it had been the sunlight, blinking intermittently into her eyes between the playful shadows on the thin, tan, canvas above her head. Most likely, it had been the aroma of the freshly brewed – make that boiled - coffee. She had to wonder how something that smelled so delectable could taste

so utterly disgusting. That wouldn't keep her from drinking it, of course.

She poked her smiling head out through the flap. It was Eric who she found preparing breakfast with the enthusiasm of father at his son's first T-ball game. The spread was a match for the hardiest camper's appetite. Bacon, ham, eggs, fried potatoes, pancakes, and Eric's favorite, pan-fried toast dripping in butter.

"About time. I was beginning to think I'd have to eat all this myself," Eric said, clearly happy to see his mother. "Such sleepy heads. I guess I just can't leave you two up and unchaperoned after this."

Abby pulled her housecoat around her, slipped on her shoes and made her way outside, through the unfamiliar maze of ties, poles and flaps. Eric lifted his cheek in anticipation of his first kiss of the day. He wasn't disappointed – wet, forceful and playfully loud!

"Would you guys please hold down your smooching, out there!" Jason called from inside the big tent. A moment later he emerged, pulling on his shirt and looking every bit the part of a disheveled, unshaven lumberjack.

"I see the camp cook is sitting down on the job again, but it sure smells like he has things well in hand," Jason said, surveying the spread and gently rubbing the back of Eric's head. "How are the legs feeling today?"

"Sore and stiff and tired and great!" He looked up at Jason as if to say thanks for being concerned.

"Coffee?" Abby asked around. They nodded bravely and extended their cups. Each of them privately wondered if he were the only one who thought it was a thoroughly disgusting brew. Abby watched how the men managed the hot tin cups. They avoided the handles and cradled the cup in their hands, moving it around to avoid getting burned. It raised an interesting point. If it wasn't too hot to drink, how could it make the cup hot enough to burn one's hands? "One of the mysteries of the universe, I guess," she thought.

"What's first today, Eric," Jason asked, surveying the awakening sky and happily assuming that it would be Eric's agenda they would follow.

"Morning's the best time for fishing up here. You said

so yourself."

So, fishing it was. Unbelievable to both of the gentlemen, Abby had never fished! They would remedy that. Eric fixed her a cane pole and showed her how to adjust the line length by twirling it. Jason secured a hook and sinker. Abby insisted on baiting it herself – something that she privately regretted almost immediately. Ignoring her comrades' suggestions, she found a shade tree that was casting its shadow across a large flat rock, just calling out for her to use it as a seat. In delight and disbelief, Jason and Eric watched her out of the corners of their eyes.

First things first, she began by making herself comfortable. She adjusted her slacks. She tied her blouse in front, bringing cool relief to her midriff. She removed the large-brimmed hat that Eric had insisted she bring along, and placed it on the ground beside her. That settling-in requirement satisfied she picked up the pole, plopped the line in the water about three feet in front of her and prepared to become a patient fisherman - fisherwoman.

Her beginner's luck was envied by both of them, but through their disbelief, they took it in good humor. Thanks to Abby – and only to Abby - they would have more than enough bass and bluegill to eat come lunchtime.

Swimming followed fishing and archery followed swimming. Laughter, and smiles, and the warmth of friendship bound it all together.

"Jase, why don't you take Abby on the trail around the lake. I don't think I better try that yet, but I really want her to see the bluff and the water fall."

"Sounds good, Er," Jason agreed, hiding his concern about leaving him there alone.

"What's this Jase and Abby and Er stuff, Eric?" "I thought you called me Mom, for one thing."

Eric explained his arrangement with Jason about separating the Mom and Abby references, and that for some reason, there at the lake, it had just always been Jase and Er. "Ok, I can live with that, now that I understand," Abby said.

"We knew you'd come around, Ab," Jason said, sending Eric into immediate and lasting convulsions on the grass as Abby beat on Jason with her hat.

Eric tired far sooner than the day before. He was happy to just sit back against a tree with his sketchpad. He watched Ab and Jase, hand in hand, disappear around the bend. They looked good together he thought. It seemed just right - natural - for them to be holding hands.

He sat back and thought about Suzzy - 'Suz,' he smiled to himself and then chuckled out loud. His thoughts drifted back to their smooch sessions in the park and distracted him from his apprehension about an unwanted visitor.

Unbelievably, Eric was asleep when Jason and Abby returned.

"Tuckered out," Abby said.

"He looks so uncomfortable sitting there with his head lopped over on his shoulder. Shouldn't we do something?" Jason asked.

"Rule number one of parenting, Jason: Never under any circumstances ever disturb a sleeping child, regardless of how uncomfortable they may appear."

Jason smiled, wishing he fully understood what she meant by that. Perhaps it wasn't too late to learn.

Jason put the fish on to fry and insisted that Abby, as company, should just sit and be pampered. She did and she was. He produced a glass of lemonade, provided a foot massage, and even managed a gentle back rub. Abby decided she could grow to enjoy that role as company.

Eric woke up in time for lunch (of course!), eager to hear all about their walk. Abby carried on appropriately about all the sights, sounds and smells they had encountered. That pleased Eric. Jason rubbed Eric's aching neck - the least he could do since Abby had not allowed him to intervene earlier.

They ate lunch in relative silence, each engaging the beauties of the wilderness and quietly appreciating the time together. Finally, Eric looked up at the other two and, as was his custom, spoke his unpredictable, honest and uninhibited mind.

"I think we make a great family, don't you? I was thinking a lot about it while you guys were gone. Well, lots even before that, really, like this whole month, I suppose. This is great, isn't it! We each have something to give that the others need. That's what a family is all about, I've decided. I

really love you guys, I just wanted to tell you."

With that, and not needing or expecting any reaction to his comments, Eric mounted his crutches and made his way down to the dock. He sat alone for a long time, legs dangling into the water up to his calves. He gazed out over the lake and to points beyond. Life was good he decided, despite the terrible setbacks of the past few months. He felt pretty lucky to have his Mother and Jason - and Suzzy and Randy, too, for that matter. He thoughtfully examined his unwelcome reflection there in the still water, then dispatched it from view with a determined swing of his legs. From time to time he massaged his still tight right shoulder, and rubbed the cramps from his aching legs. His mind drifted to thoughts about his natural father, and he fretted a bit about Johnny. Life wasn't fair sometimes, but all in all, it was good.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### The Plot Thickens

The next week saw Abby busy with contractors and insurance agents. As time permitted, she sifted through the rubble, saving what she could. Eric had begun a leg-strengthening program and was walking, somewhat gingerly, without crutches. Jason was working double shifts, covering for vacations. Johnny had not been heard from.

Eric was already piddling around in the kitchen as Abby made her way in search of that first cup of morning coffee. Eric happily filled the cup he had waiting for her and then warmed up his own.

"You really are hooked on this stuff, aren't you?" his mother asked.

"Nah! Well, maybe a little. Don't tell Jason, but he makes really awful coffee."

"I know and I have already told him so!" Abby said smiling. "How do the legs feel this morning?"

"They always hurt first thing. Tight and they cramp easily, you know. That's why I just stand around and walk easy like this for a while."

"They look great. I thought they might have lost a lot of muscle mass while they were in the casts," Abby commented, giving them the once over allowed by his briefer than she'd really like cutoffs.

"That's what Suzzy says, too. I guess you women just can't take your eyes off my body, can you?"

Abby rolled up the sports section and threw it at him.

"Speaking of bodies," Eric continued, "I haven't seen

much of Jason this week. You two still okay?"

"We're just fine, and leave bodies out that kind of conversation, if you please."

"Well, you have to admit, he's really well built for an old guy, right?"

"Well, I suppose so – for an old guy."

"You suppose so? Sure, Mom!"

That train of conversation stopped.

"Thought any more about that addition to the Mill?" Eric asked, taking a seat across from her.

"Actually, I have. In fact, I have an appointment later today to see about financing it. They may turn us down but I figured I should at least try."

"Good going, Mom? My piggy bank's available, if it'll help."

"It's probably safe. By the way, don't forget we have that doctor's appointment for tomorrow. Ten AM."

"The one with Dr. Frankenstein?"

"Eric! Stop that! You have to give this thing a chance."

"Yeah. Okay. But I'm not getting my hopes up," Eric said, catching a lingering look at his image in the toaster. "Suzzy's coming by later. I think we'll go for a walk over to the park. Play Frisbee, for my legs. Maybe a little kissing for my lips."

"Sounds like a good time. Gotta keep up that lip strength," Abby smiled, happy and relieved that she was actually feeling all right about that relationship.

"You like Suzzy better now than you used to, don't you Mom?" Eric observed.

"Better?"

"Yeah. I mean you were always nice to her and all that, I didn't mean you weren't. You just seem to like her better now."

"I suppose you're right. I know her better now and that probably helps, don't you suppose. It's hard to know whether someone is likeable or not until you make the effort to get to know them."

Eric assumed that didn't call for a reply.

"She still does kiss me, you know. I thought maybe she'd quit after that first mercy visit she paid to me, but she

didn't."

Abby assumed that didn't call for a reply, either. "Jason asked me last night if I thought you were ready to start helping him open again. He knows you don't want to work with customers yet, but what do you think? Five to seven every morning?"

"I could do that, couldn't I. I hadn't thought about just trying that. I know Jason can't let me work the counter looking this way. It would just turn off too many customers. I hope he knows I understand that. I tried to tell him. I could never face customers, anyway."

"He understands. But then, who knows, after Dr. Frankenstein gets finished with you, the female customers may be screaming for your return."

"Yeah. Big fat chance! One good thing though.

"What's that?" Abby had no idea what Eric might be about to say.

"Well, since I always wanted to be a chef, I can still do that. Nobody sees you in the kitchen anyway. When the food editors come to write rave reviews about my delectable food and want my picture for their magazines, I'll just moon the photographer - that's probably going to be my best angle."

Abby didn't bite, though her heart sank at the comment. "You better contact Jason, then, and work out a schedule – for working not mooning." It was their kind of private joke; never easily concluded.

"Did you just make me the butt of your joke?"

Abby moaned. That fully satisfied Erik.

"Ok, I'll call him at nine during his break. Think I'll go out back and do some stretching exercises."

Abby immediately called Jason, partly to forewarn him about Eric's impending call and partly because she couldn't resist the excuse to hear his voice. It worked out even better than she had hoped - dinner and dancing at seven. She needed to wash her hair before she got any further into the day. She hummed and smiled her way through a wonderful fantasy as she shampooed and showered.

Promptly at nine, Eric made his arrangements with Jason. By nine-thirty, he and Suzzy were leisurely making their way to the park.

"Are you really sure you don't mind being seen with me in public, like this? I wouldn't mind just staying at home. There's the porch swing, you know," Eric said, needing to clear that up once and for all.

"Doofus! It doesn't even deserve discussion. By the way, how can we play Frisbee when you left it at home?"

"I thought maybe we could figure out something else to play."

Suzzy sensed that his legs were hurting. "Bet we can!" she said, lifting her face toward his, and kissing him on the cheek.

The sight no longer repulsed her as it had that first day but it still made her feel exceedingly sad - sad for Eric, not for herself. Suzzy had been both surprised and pleased by her own reaction to Eric's disfigurement. In some ways, it wasn't as pleasant to kiss him now, but pleasant wasn't the appropriate domain, anymore. It was now affection, caring, perhaps even loving - she wasn't sure about that one. Anyway, it had always been her habit to close her eyes when they kissed, so big deal. As they continued to walk, she slipped her arm around his shirtless waist, just above his unbelted cutoffs, and reminded herself that, regardless, the rest of this hunk was still gorgeous!

The park was a huge mound, covering about four square blocks – the closest thing there was to a hill between town and the Bear Lake area forty miles to the south. There was some speculation it was an Indian mound. Mr. Jasper, the bespectacled, bow tie sporting high school science teacher opted for the glacial deposit theory. Miss Mundane (enough said!), who taught history, pushed the burial mound position. It had become a ludicrous point of contention. The two of them seldom spoke.

Due to the foresight of some well-to-do town fathers back in the twenties, the park had been heavily planted with oak and maple trees, interspersed with enough pine and juniper to keep it green throughout the winter. There was a small pond with spraying water issuing forth from the basket of the ugliest young limestone maiden ever sculpted. The water became a haven for the occasional stray duck staying the night or, if exhausted from its cross-country flight, sometimes

as long as a week or two. As a little boy, Eric had dutifully taken them dry toast from the Mill.

The Lady's Park Auxiliary, mostly the snooty set, financed and planned the many fine flowerbeds – planned was the correct term since it was their husbands who got roped into doing the actual planting and weeding. White gloves were fine at teas, but out of place in the soil.

Suzzy and Eric avoided the tangle of carefully laid cobblestone walkways, preferring to kick off their shoes and walk barefoot through the cool grass. They arrived at their favorite secluded spot beside a clump of sprawling bushes, well shaded by a huge oak tree. They enjoyed being with one another - talking, kissing, dreaming, kissing, lying close, kissing, touching, kissing. She made him feel so whole, Eric thought as he brushed back her long blond hair. He makes me feel so cherished, Suzzy thought as she ran her finger down his torso from this neck to is navel.

Nothing further was necessary and Suzzy realized that now. She had nothing to prove. Eric worried less about the physical limits he had set, in the knowledge that Suzzy had accepted them as hers, as well. So long as they stayed away from the total seclusion afforded by the shadow of old train trestle, things should be fine.

It was a good morning together. It felt safe, and comfortable, and just as romantic as they desired it to be at fifteen. It has been called "hanging out," although to the older, casual, onlooker it appeared a whole lot more like "hanging on."

\* \* \*

The loan was approved, although not for the entire amount Abby felt she needed. She could make up the difference from the money she had put away for Eric's education, but she had promised herself she would never touch that. It was on her mind during dinner and dancing and afterwards at Jason's apartment.

"One quiet lady, this evening," Jason observed as they snuggled together on the couch, their usual cup of coffee in hand.

"Things to think about. Decisions to make," Abby replied. She outlined her dilemma to Jason, not asking for

advice. He had an idea, nonetheless.

"I've always wanted to invest in a nice little neighborhood café," he said, out of the blue.

"Oh, Jason, that's sweet but no, I couldn't do that. This is something for me to take care of. I'll find a way. I always have." His thoughtfulness, however, garnered him the tiniest nip of a kiss on the chin.

"Why not let me help? Sounds dumb not to, or are you planning to dump me for some smooth-talking gravy salesman?"

"I'd never dump you, Jason," she said although she was slightly annoyed at his insistence. "Finances are a separate issue from our relationship. You understand that, don't you?"

"Seems a shame, you know."

"What?" Abby asked, not understanding what he meant.

"Well, I've been thinking maybe we should be considering a merger – relationship as well as financial."

Abby sat upright and turned, looking him squarely in the face, a question registering on her own. "Jason Marshall, did you just propose to me?"

"Merger? Proposal? I guess I did! What about that!"

Jason surveyed Abby's face for an answer. "Those weren't the words I had intended to use when I asked you to marry me, but more than anything else, please know that I do want you to be my wife. I've known it for longer than you could possibly imagine. I'm not pressing. I know there are considerations. I just know that when two folks love each other the way we do, and are so good for each other like we are, they should be together."

He leaned over and kissed her forehead with the gentleness and significance Abby had come to expect and cherish. She cuddled herself back into his arms.

"You'd be marrying two of us, you know?"

"I wouldn't have it any other way, you know that. I love Eric as if he were my own."

About that, Abby had no reservations. And that he loved her every bit as much as he contended was also obvious and unquestioned. She loved him so much - more

than she could have imagined. But what about the practical side of all this? Where would they live? What about The Green Mill? How would they merge their life styles? Was Eric really ready for all this, considering his many other problems just then? And money? She wasn't after Jason's money. She wouldn't know what to do with it. She was perfectly capable of taking care of herself and Eric financially. Perhaps there had been times when she was a little envious of the things Jason could give Eric that she couldn't but that was certainly not the basis for marriage. No. She would just have to tell Jason she wasn't ready yet - that the time wasn't right - later, when things were more settled. She'd just say that she appreciated his offer, but ..."

"Well?" Jason asked softly, cocking his head and running his fingers through her hair.

"Of course, I will marry you, Jason." My, how those words surprised her! My, how good and right they felt deep down in her heart.

"Seal it with a kiss then?" Jason asked.

Abby kissed him on the cheek. "That's from Eric, until he can deliver one in person. This one is from me."

Although it was a gentle and tender kiss, there was nothing tentative or uncertain about it. Abby wept tears of joy. Jason carefully smoothed them away with his fingers. With nothing more than a look, he conveyed to her his unmistakable love and strength. With his arm around her, strong and nurturing, he pulled her close to him. For the moment, they were content to continue sitting there as one. Jason took her hand in his. He reached up to dim the light.

They kissed again and studied each other's faces, as if for the first time. His was strong, tanned and noble, angular more than round, rugged more than perfect. Hers was soft, though not weak, pale yet vivacious, and lovely, more than beautiful. They were a striking pair there in the dusky glow of evening.

\* \* \*

Eric knew something was in the air. He had been given rather emphatic instructions to be home by six thirty and to be showered and into clean clothes by seven. Jason was coming over for dinner. It was no problem. The deeds were done well

ahead of time.

Abby was cooking the meal of all meals in the kitchen, humming and moving lightly on her feet. Eric assumed a natural smile at the spectacle, as he did what he could to help his mother. His inspection of the pots and oven suggested that the roast beef with all the trimmings menu had been formulated more to impress him than Jason. The plot thickened, he thought.

"So, Mom, you win the lottery or expecting those guys in the van with balloons and oversized check to come knocking at the door?"

"Something like that," was her only response. "I seem to have forgotten the salad forks. Will you take care of that please, Dear?"

His birthday would be celebrated the following week, so that was out of the question. He'd already agreed to let Dr. Frankenstein work over his face, so it wasn't a bribe. He knew the loan went through so it wasn't going to be any big announcement about that. Quite uncharacteristically, Eric was baffled. It was a kind of excitement he seldom felt.

Jason arrived with a wild flower bouquet in hand. As had become his custom, he first kissed Abby on the lips - simply but with feeling - and then placed a single arm around Eric at the shoulders. Eric responded with an arm to Jason's waist. They executed a mutual manly squeeze and exchanged the "I love you, too," glance.

"Smells outstanding around here, Eric. You must have been cooking all day."

Jason is as giddy as Mom, Eric observed to himself. The meal was spread and they gathered around the table. Jason spoke:

"Before we begin, I have something of great personal importance to say here to the two people I love the most in the whole World." He looked at Eric and then at Abby.

Eric gulped as he looked at his mother. Abby smiled back nervously, taking her son's, thoughtfully offered hand.

Jason turned directly to Eric. "Eric, I have asked Abby to marry me and she has said yes. With your permission, I would like to make it official by slipping this engagement ring onto her finger."

Jason took a ring box from his pocket, opened it, and showed it to Eric.

"Oh gosh! Of course, you can! You guys!"

His eyes teared, but none flowed, as he watched Jason turn toward his mother and slip the ring in place. They kissed. Eric wanted to clap or something, but restrained himself. Before Eric could speak, Jason turned to him, again.

"Now Eric, I have something else I need to ask you. Will you consent to become my very precious son?"

The tears were no longer contained. Jason and Eric reached for each other and embraced in a new and tender way. Suddenly Eric understood the difference between the hug from a man and the hug from a father. It was tender. It was strong. It was just right.

"Of course, I will," he said into Jason's shoulder. "I'm probably the happiest kid in the world, right now, you know." Eric held the hug for a long minute, knowing that once he let go, that most special moment in his whole life would be gone – the moment he got a father.

After they separated, Jason continued. "There's one more thing, Eric," Jason added, removing a second ring case from his pocket. "It seems only fitting that I make this new relationship official with you as well. I want you to have this birthstone ring, and with it my promise to always be the best father I know how to be. That doesn't mean I'll always do things right, son, and it doesn't mean I will always be as wise and understanding as I need to be, but it does mean I will always try my best, with your mother's help, to do what I believe is best for you."

Believably, it was the first time since he had said his first word, that Eric had been speechless. He just sat looking from the ring – still in its box - to Jason, to his Mother, and back again. He beamed through his tears. Abby beamed back through her own. Even Jason was heard to snuffle. Rather than slip his ring on immediately, Eric placed the open box beside his plate where he could admire it.

It took some time for this new family to get back into the routine of eating their meal. Eventually they did, but the conversation took a decidedly "family" turn.

"So when's the big day?" Eric asked, thinking it an

easy question and an appropriate next piece of information. He buttered his roll – and most of his thumb.

Jason and Abby looked at each other in a blank stare and laughed. They hadn't even thought about a date.

"It's a good thing I'm here to take care of these little details. Will it be church or private?"

"Private," they answered in unison.

"Guests or just family?"

"Just family," again, it flowed as if it had been rehearsed.

"Okay then, let's get out the calendar and nail this thing down. My personal preference would be as soon as possible. How soon can that be, by the way?"

"A few days, I suppose. There are the blood tests and the license and that's all that's really required ahead of time," Jason said, suddenly knowledgeable on the subject.

"A few days sounds great to me," Abby said.

"You'll be moving in here, I take it," Eric said.

"We haven't even thought about that," Jason answered.

"Well, it makes sense, this house being a lot bigger than your apartment, and all. I doubt if you want me sleeping on a cot in the corner of your bedroom. You can keep your apartment for your son and his chicks to use, from time to time, if you know what I mean."

"I'm afraid I do, and I'm afraid I won't," was Jason's quick and pointed reply.

"See. You already sound like a father. You're going to be great at this dad thing, Dad."

That last word slipped out so easily, as if it had been there all along, just awaiting permission to emerge. It sounded right to Eric. It sounded right to Abby. It sounded fantastic to Jason.

\* \* \*

Later that evening, Eric was sitting alone on the porch swing, looking up into the vastness of the night sky. "What an evening this has been," he thought. His Mom would have a husband, he would have a father, and Jason would have a wife and son. It was wonderful and he wouldn't have wanted it to have turned out any other way, but it raised some issues Eric had, for years, just pushed into the quiet of his mind. It

was those issues he had been contemplating there in the dark of the day.

Would Jason want to adopt him? That would mean a new name. Eric Allen Marshall. Nothing bad about that, but Eric Allen Covington was his name. Not really, though, because his natural father hadn't allowed him his rightful last name, whatever that would have been. Still, Covington was a classy name, he thought - a good name for a chef. It was even a good name for an artist if that was the direction he decided to take his life.

When he was small, and he had embarrassed his mother by bringing in men to meet her, he had often practiced writing out his name with that man's last name attached. None had ever seemed as suitable as Covington. He wondered if Jason would be offended if he kept his present last name. If Jason adopted him, would it even be possible for him to continue using his present name? There were lots of questions with no clear answers that night.

Eric sighed, an oversized sigh.

"Deep in thought, are you Eric," Jason asked, coming out onto the porch.

"Ya, I guess. Come and sit awhile."

Jason seated himself on the swing.

"Beautiful night, isn't it?" Jason said, intentionally making small talk.

Eric wasn't used to pussy footing around about important issues.

"Is it your plan to ask me if I want you to adopt me?" Eric asked.

Not in the least surprised at the question, Jason responded:

"Abby and I have talked about it. We agreed that has to be your decision. I think you know how much I want that, Eric, but that's selfish, and I know it. I'll live happily, with whatever decision you make. There's no time pressure about it." He paused and then continued. "You have any thoughts on the subject?"

"Like usual, I have way too many thoughts, I guess."

"Your mind does work overtime, doesn't it?" Jason commented, stretching his arm out on the swing behind Eric's

shoulders. "And I didn't mean to pry where I wasn't welcome, really."

"Oh, you're quite welcome. It's probably best you know what I'm thinking about."

Ever honest and open Eric, filled him in. Jason would ask a clarifying question from time to time, but he mostly just listened. Well before he had finished his monologue about it all, Eric had scooted down a bit and had naturally leaned his head against Jason's shoulder. It was nothing new, that kind of a talk. They had shared many, such heart to hearts out at Bear Lake. Jason was always a good listener. He never waded in where Eric didn't want him. Jason was perceptive that way and it was always comfortable.

Observing things as they were between them at that moment, and examining his own feelings, Jason thought, "Who could ever need anything more official than this, anyway." It was too important a thought not to share.

"You see the two of us sitting here, Eric - close, comfortable, talking, searching together. I can't imagine how any legal paper saying you're my son could ever improve on this, can you?"

Eric stirred just a bit, and then feeling like a little boy for the moment, he snuggled even a bit closer.

"You're right I guess," Eric said at last. "But in most ways, I really would like that piece of paper, you know."

Then, as was often the case as Eric sortied forth on a thinking binge, lightning struck! Eric sat straight up. "Is there any rule about how many names I can have? I mean could I have like two middle names instead of one?"

"I've known people with more than three names, sure. What's your idea?"

"Eric Allen Covington Marshall. That has to be the-e-e classiest sounding name I've ever heard! Eric Allen Covington Marshall. There's a rhythm to it. Hear it? Eric - Allen - Covington - Marshal. Let's do it!"

Eric leaned over, somewhat off balance and kissed Jason on the cheek. "I'll never get used to that late evening stubble, Dear," he quipped. "Come on, let's go in and tell Mom. By the way, I think we can cut out that Abby instead of Mom stuff now, don't you."

"And just when I was getting so good at it?" Jason said. They smiled and walked inside, arms around each other's waists. Two prouder people had never drawn a breath.

Abby was sitting at the kitchen table, sipping coffee just poured from a freshly brewed pot, contemplating the fact that she drank far too much of it for her own good.

They joined her and Jason poured a cup for himself.

"Jason and I have this adoption thing all worked out," Eric announced, cutting to the quick, as usual. They joined Abby around the table.

Abby looked at Jason as if to say, "Nice going sport."

"Eric Allen Covington Marshall. How do you like the sound of that name? "

"I'd have to say it's very classy and very sweet," she said, nodding her head thoughtfully as she mouthed it to herself.

"That's what we thought, too. Let's get you guys married so we can get on with the really important thing, here."

Abby playfully slapped at Eric's face. Eric and Jason just sat and looked directly into each other's beaming faces.

"He's going to be my father," Eric thought.

"He's going to be my son," Jason thought. And they both knew and treasured the other one's thoughts.

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## **CHAPTER NINE**

### **It's Party Time!**

Eric was getting restless. The sun had been up for well over an hour and the clock was rapidly sneaking up on seven o'clock. By that time of the morning he was usually up, fully caffeinated and out of the house. But, he was playing the game. He waited patiently there in his bed. He had even found some P J's to put on so he'd be decent for the big moment. At last, he heard them giggling outside his door. They broke into a, hopefully, never to be repeated rendition of Happy Birthday To You, and swung open his door. Jason carried the birthday breakfast on the all too familiar large lap tray. One lighted candle graced the center (almost) of a blueberry muffin.

Hands to his cheeks, Eric simulated surprise. There were kisses all around.

"Happy birthday, Son," they said almost in unison and certainly more in the same key than had been apparent during the discordant duet just past.

"Hey, thanks, guys," Eric said.

"I'm new at this old family tradition," Jason said. "Now what?"

"Now you sit here on the bed and watch me eat, all the time making meaningless conversation which I am to assume means you have forgotten to get me a really fabulous present and then when I'm done you say, 'Surprise,' and pull out the keys to my new Lamborghini."

"Wow! If it's a Lamborghini at fifteen, what's left for sixteen?" Jason joked.

"A Lamborghini filled with voluptuous nudes, I suppose," Eric came back. "Sorry, Mom."

Abby blushed and shook her head.

"You males. Cars and women. Is that all you think of? On second thought, please don't answer that."

"By the way, Eric, those are neat-o P J's. Be sure to bring them along on our next camping trip," Jason quipped.

A pillow produced itself out of nowhere and viciously attacked Jason. The tray spilled and everyone scurried to evade the milk and juice cascading through the hills and dales of the rumpled sheets.

"Oh, Oh!" Jason said.

"Oh, no! That's just part of the ceremony," Eric explained. "It really wouldn't be a complete birthday breakfast without a spill, right Mom?"

"Unfortunately, he's right," she said, smiling at Jason.

Eric rescued the muffin from a pool of milk and licked it dry before devouring it.

"So, enough of this suspense, jazz! Where's the goodie?"

"Goodie?" Jason asked, looking at Abby. "You didn't tell me there was supposed to be a 'goodie'!"

"Gee, Jason," Abby said, "And I thought you had taken care of the 'goodie'." She threw up her hands. "Tough luck I guess, Son."

Eric knew something was up but for the first time in many years (make that the second time), he had no idea what. He'd just play along.

"Well, if that's it, I'd better get dressed and on over to The Green Mill. Jake will be wondering what happened to me."

Snickering, Jason and Abby picked up the remainder of the breakfast things and left Eric to get dressed. They were doing up the dishes in the kitchen as Eric appeared, dressed in his grubbies and ready for a day's work. Stashing the soaked sheets in the hamper, he glanced around, nonchalantly, still expecting to receive his birthday gift at any moment. Dawdling a bit, he poured himself half a cup of coffee and stood watching them. The birthday was not mentioned. Deciding that topic was a dead issue for the time

being Eric kissed them each good-bye and scooted out the door.

Home again on his lunch break, he gave the house a quick once over, but to no avail. He and his mother talked about the finishing touches going on at the Mill and how it would be ready to reopen the following week. The Green Mill had been such a major part of their lives that talking about it carried Eric's thoughts far away from birthday presents. It was good to be planning together again. It felt like the old days.

"The old days," Eric thought. Actually, that had been only a few months ago. He replayed all that had taken place since then! In many ways, it was like a brand-new life - some of it wonderful and some of it terrible. Why couldn't things just change for the better, he wondered? Why did bad things have to happen to people who tried their darndest to be good people? If he were King of the Universe, things would be different. (There would be four beautiful women for every man, for one thing, but that was not the point he was pondering at that moment.)

Randy dropped by just in time for a piece of cherry pie. The boys moved, with their dessert, into Eric's room. Abby smiled. She had noted that after their ninth birthday, young males automatically conform to the convention that whenever there are a minimum of two of them together, they immediately exit the company of adults.

Randy wasn't sure how to say it, but he felt certain he had to say it. "There's something I have to tell you because I'm your best friend," he began, setting aside his pie.

"What?" Eric asked. "What?" He realized if Randy postponed pie, it must be of uncommon importance.

"Well, it's about the party."

"The party? What party?" Eric asked.

"The surprise party your Mom and Suzzy are throwing for you at seven tonight behind the Mill."

"Oh, no!" Eric sank back against the headboard. The news was indeed grave enough to suspend the pie eating.

"They've invited everybody - all the kids, I mean. I'll bet there'll be fifty, altogether. I thought it was only right that you knew ahead of time. I was right, wasn't I?"

Oh, Yes! You were right. Now, how can we stop it?"

Eric was unhappier about their insensitivity, than he was angry at them. Why would they invite all those folks over to gawk at him and do the 'pity old Eric routine'? It seemed to prove that they still didn't understand.

"You can't stop it, you know. Once those two decide something's going to happen, it is going to happen. I mean you could march right out there this instant and throw the fit of the century and it wouldn't change the course of history one bit, you know."

"You're probably right, there, Randy. So, if we can't beat 'em, we'll have to join 'em."

Randy looked puzzled. He smelled scheming afoot. He didn't have a clue to the specifics, but was sure that whatever his friend had up his sleeve, more than likely it would work. He regained his appetite.

Eric began explaining his plan, hatching it on the fly, so to speak.

"So, why are they coming?"

He didn't wait for an answer.

"Partly because it's a party. A lot of them would go to any party, even it was being thrown by the Devil, himself. Partly because they are my friends and I really do understand that. And partly because they are curious about just how repulsive my face looks. That last one is a lock for at least ninety percent of them, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, ya, maybe, but I think you've left out the main reason most of them are coming."

"What's that?"

"Because every kid in this town, spittin' friend or not, really likes you, Eric!"

For a long moment, Eric sat silent, looking at Randy and nodding, slowly. In due time, he continued.

"Well, even if that's true, the face thing still plays a part, wouldn't you agree?"

"A little for some and maybe a lot for others. Either way, isn't it best to just get it over with? I'm sure that's what the girls had in mind – a way for you to face everybody at once and get it all behind you." The unintended pun escaped Randy, but it pierced Eric's heart. He didn't pursue it.

"You're probably right. I shouldn't be mad."

“You know I’m right. Have I ever led you astray, good buddy?”

Eric pelted him with a pillow. Randy was ready and mostly blocked it.

“No. Never! Remember the ‘do-do in the sack on Principal Lambert’s porch caper’ when we were in fifth grade!”

Smiling but refusing to otherwise acknowledge the comment, Randy continued. “And what’s so wrong with your friends wanting to see what happened to you anyway? They care about you, you know.”

“Okay. Assume I agree with everything you have said. Then, the best thing I can do is bring the face thing out into the open right from the start and get it over with.”

“That sounds cool, I think?”

Randy’s tone was not as positive as his words. Eric noted the “I think” trailed upward in pitch. Long ago Randy had learned not to agree with his friend’s schemes until he had all the facts plain and simply before him.

“So, here’s the deal. I’ll make my grand entrance wearing a brown grocery sack over my head. On one side I’ll draw a handsome face and label it ‘Coming Attraction’. On the other I’ll draw Hermann Munster and write ‘Temporarily out of Order’.”

“Not bad – not good, maybe – but not entirely bad.”

Another pillow flew in Randy’s direction.

“You got a better suggestion?”

“Well, you could just show up as you are and act surprised.”

“What fun would that be? It’s my party and I’m the one who should have the fun. Thanks for warning me. I really do appreciate that. There are some things that a best friend just understands better than Moms and girlfriends.”

Randy licked his pie plate clean (as fourteen-year-old boys will do in private - well, even in public, actually) and left as if in a hurry. Eric followed him as far as the kitchen and began rummaging through the cupboards to find just the right sack.

\* \* \*

The party was to be in the big back yard behind The Green Mill. In order to allow Suzy and Randy time to string

the lights, set up the tables and complete the other arrangements, it was necessary to keep Eric away.

“Eric, I have some errands to run – last minute things to pick out for the Mill. I’d like your advice. I know it’s getting late but it shouldn’t take more than a couple of hours. We’ll be home in time for supper.”

“Sure, Mom. I’ll be happy to come along.”

Actually, it solved a problem for Eric, too. He was wondering what excuse he could give for staying away from work that afternoon - not wanting to interfere with their party preparations. His own party preparations were, by that time, quite complete.

His mother joked more than was appropriate and Eric laughed longer and louder than was required. At six-thirty, they arrived back home. Eric went to his room and allowed his mother to rattle around in the kitchen pretending to make supper.

Promptly at six fifty-five, she called to him.

“Can’t find a thing to fix for supper, Sweetie. Let’s go over to the Mill and try out that new kitchen.”

“Fine, Mom,” came Eric’s agreeable reply. He had already stashed the mask in the car. He did have to wonder how they were going to hide fifty teenagers from view as they drove up.

Abby parked in front of the darkened restaurant, got out and started for the front door. “I’ll be along in a second,” Eric said.

“Come in the front door. They were working on the back one you know.”

Giving her time to get things ready – which he interpreted to mean flood the back yard with kids from heaven, knows where – he got out of the car and entered the building. He stashed the sack under his shirt ready to pull it out and don at exactly the moment he walked through the back door onto the lawn. He could hardly wait to hear how his mother was going to get him to go out there. He didn’t have to wait long.

“How about checking that back door to see if they got it finished, okay? It wouldn’t swing completely open the last time I tried it.”

Not bad, Mom. Not bad at all, Eric thought to himself.

“Okay, Mom.”

The moment had arrived. He slipped on the sack, arranged it so he could see through the tiny eyeholes, and opened the door. The lights came on, the kids yelled Happy Birthday, and immediately both he and they stood speechless.

Eric spoke first. “Randy, you double agent, you! Where are you?”

There, spread from one side of the lawn to the other stood fifty friends, all of whom were wearing paper sacks over their heads. Without thinking, Eric tore his off and continued his search for Randy. Everyone clapped. The laughter began. Two fingered whistles filled the air. The kids closed in, patting the birthday boy on his back and removing their sacks. A dozen spontaneous games of squashed-up-brown-paper-bag-beach-ball began immediately.

“So,” Randy said, sidling up beside Eric, “How do you think things are going so far?”

Suzzy attached her arm to Eric’s on the other side.

“You guys! What can I say?” Eric began.

“You might try, Thanks, Dear Friends, for changing Eric’s lame brained idea into one that everybody could really enjoy,” his mother suggested as she joined them.

“You are dear friends, that’s for sure,” Eric agreed, looking around. It soon became obvious that the rest of the kids were far more interested in eating and dancing than gawking at him. He would have hugged the sidelines, wallowing in his embarrassment at having misjudged his friends, had Suzzy not pulled him into the midst of the crowd and demanded a dance.

Everywhere he turned, he was met with friendly greetings. “Good to see you again, Pal.” “Great party, dude.” “Coach was asking about you the other day.” “Glad to see you’re in such great shape.”

Could it be that life really had some chance of getting back to normal? For the first time, Eric began to believe that it might.

\* \* \*

After the excitement died down and after the kids had said their good-byes, Eric and Abby returned home. Moments later Jason drove up, having sneaked away early from the

Frigate. They gathered as usual around the kitchen table. Eric was searching for just the right words to thank them for his grand present – the party. Before he could speak, his mother produced the largest fortune cookie in all of recorded history. It would have taken a shoe horn to fit it into a shoebox.

“What the...?”

“And I’ll bet you didn’t think we could fit a Lamborghini into a fortune cookie,” Jason joked.

“But I thought the party was my ...”

“Shut up and get on with it,” Abby said playfully, clearly more excited at that moment than Eric.

“Do I open it or shellac it for posterity?” Eric asked, not really kidding.

“Open it, you silly Goose,” his mother answered, glancing expectantly across the table toward Jason.

An appropriate amount of giggling took place as Eric hammed it up, trying to determine the best method of attack. It rolled. It bounced. It dented. But it wouldn’t crack. Eric secured a pair of scissors from the drawer by the sink and soon had a large oval opening cut out of one side. He reached inside and found a piece of paper. He unrolled it and began reading out loud.

“Confucius say: Since lad of the Covington Manner has been such a pain in the egg fu yung, he is hereby remanded to the custody of The Young Artists Camp at Lake Winsome from August 10th through August 23rd. Happy Birthday, Son. Mom and Dad.”

Eric was speechless. (His mother immediately entered THAT on the kitchen calendar!)

## CHAPTER TEN

### Heights and Depths

Several busy days had passed. Abby awoke feeling wonderful, and entered the kitchen to that dependable, stimulating, aroma of Eric's early morning pot of coffee. In a monotone befitting a Tibetan monk she repeated her new mantra – "I must stop drinking the nectar of the brown bean. I must stop drinking the nectar of the brown bean" – as she poured a cup and moved to the table. Eric was already gone. A note on the table read simply: "Running. Love ya! Eric."

The note lay atop the morning paper, which was strangely open to the society page rather than the usual sports page. The reason became immediately obvious. Engagements: "Eric Covington, son of Abby Covington of 212 Park Street, Springfield, proudly announces the engagement of his mother, Abigail, to his best adult friend and soon to be father, Jason Marshall of 810 Owl Creek Way... ."

"Eric, you rascal! You delightful, unpredictable, wonderful rascal," Abby said out loud. She re-read it over again and again, letting the tears drop where they would. The phone rang.

"This is Abby," she sniffled into the phone.

"This is Eric Covington's best adult friend and soon to be father," came Jason's strong and smiling voice.

"Leave it to that kid to pull something like this," Abby laughed

"It was a wonderful thing for him to do." Jason said.

"You'd think, though, that after fifteen years with the imp, I'd have stopped letting things like this surprise me," she

answered, a few tears still finding their way down her face to her chin.

"Is he there? I'd like to thank the little imp – I mean, Eric. I didn't get a clue from him while he was here with me earlier this morning."

"He's already gone. He left me a note saying he was running. I hope he's being careful with those legs."

"I'm sure he is. He's too smart to do otherwise. Those pegs are very important to him. He'll be careful," Jason reassured.

With a mutual kiss, they said good-bye and Abby finally got around to tasting that first cup of, by then, well-cooled coffee. It amused her when she found herself blowing on it.

Her mind focused on the wedding. It was just two days until Judge Watson would perform the ceremony in his chambers. The Judge was an old friend of the Covington family and when Abby's mother had passed away, he had been her main support and source of comfort. It was agreed that he should, "Tie the knot," as Eric put it.

An hour later found Abby at The Green Mill inspecting the progress on the remodeling. At Eric's insistence, she had borrowed from his education fund. They had set up a repayment schedule to be made from the increased business the addition would provide. Abby could live with that. Eric would find ways to make sure business actually increased. No one doubted that!

Quite unexpectedly, Jason drove up. His expression was deadly serious. He ushered Abby out of earshot.

"Unpleasant news, Abby."

"What? Is it Eric?"

"On no, nothing like that," Jason reassured her. "I just got a call from Johnny."

"Oh my! What was that about?"

"He was drunk, of course. He said if I went through with this marriage, he would, 'Do you in,' - his words."

"What will we do?" Abby asked.

"Until they find him, I don't think we have a choice. We postpone it!"

Abby was quiet. She took his arm and they walked in the large grassy lawn behind the cafe.

"Let's not tell Eric about this. Not right away, anyway. Not until we have had time to come up with something," Abby said.

"That means only a couple of days at the most, you know."

"Yes, I know, but somehow we have to be able to figure out a better solution than just giving up."

"Abby! The man disfigured our son for life and I have no doubt that he would do the same to you. He's a crazy man."

The phrase "our son" reached out and seized Abby, paling the rest of his words.

"Did you hear how you just referred to Eric? You said 'our son,' Jason. Isn't it obvious that in our minds we are already married - already a family?" She tightened her cinch on his arm and lay her head against his shoulder. "We can't go on denying that just because of Johnny's threat. If he's still in town, he'll soon be caught. We can't live our life according to his dictates. Neither one of us has ever buckled under to a threat and I, for one, am not about to start now."

Jason understood. He wasn't surprised at Abby's position but he was understandably fearful for her wellbeing. As they will do at times like that, a multitude of possible solutions flashed through his mind. He could just take off and disappear forever, starting a new life somewhere else so that maniac, Johnny, would never again bother Abby and Eric. He could buy and begin carrying a gun. He could marry Abby and they could immediately move to parts unknown, the three of them beginning a new life together. He could stay and put his faith in the authorities for protection.

"You're right, as usual," he said. "It doesn't mean I like the plan or even fully approve of it, but I know you're right. I'm going to go back to the store and get the recording of the conversation. I'll take it down to the police station."

"Recording?"

"Yes. Johnny called in on our delivery line – a BIG mistake. All those calls are automatically recorded so we are sure to get the orders correct. We have him dead to rights on this threat. That's two major mistakes the snake has made. He'll be put away for a long time if they - when they - finally

catch up with him."

At the Golden Frigate, Randy had accidentally found the message as he was trying to verify a call-in order. He called Eric immediately so he had known even before Jason had told Abby.

Before noon, Eric had sketched a five by seven likeness of Johnny, had taken it to the print shop down the street and had five hundred copies made. He had carefully hand printed a message under the picture. *"Johnny Battle. WANTED: Suspected in the beating of Eric Covington and threats of continued harm to his family. Please help me locate him and put him out of circulation once and for all - Eric."* It was boyish in its prose, perhaps, but manly in its intent.

By one o'clock he, Randy, and Suzzy had posted them on light poles and in store windows down town. Copies were distributed to other high school kids and a citywide junior manhunt was mounted. A two hundred and fifty-pound man surely couldn't remain hidden in the small town of Springfield for long. By three o'clock, every teen with access to a car was cruising the streets and alleys. The other youngsters were going door to door showing the circular and asking for help. Few homes were not aware of the ongoing tragedy and all offered their assistance. The blinds were up and the porch chairs occupied.

Eric arrived home a half hour late for dinner. Abby was beside herself with worry and quite unceremoniously let him know it as he walked through the door. He just stood and listened as she dressed him down. When she had finished, he walked over and put his arms around her. He didn't need to speak. The messages in both directions had been clear. He had not meant to worry her. She had not meant to mistrust his judgment.

The telephone rang, interrupting the moment. Abby answered. It was Jason.

"They found Johnny, Abby! They booked him fifteen minutes ago. You're safe. I'll be right over. By the way, it's all thanks to that imp of OURS and the hundreds of kids in this town who call him their friend."

Abby didn't understand, although she didn't question it. She gave Eric the good news and they collapsed again into

each other's arms. The tension and fear, the anger and stress finally began draining away.

\* \* \*

As weddings in a Judge's chamber go, Eric thought it was probably fine. He had no other experiences on which to base his opinion but it had seemed both official and loving. He felt an unexpected surge of excitement and finality inside him as the Judge said, "Jason, you may kiss your bride." He studied the kiss with both joy and slight embarrassment, as it continued longer than he thought proper.

The ensuing, lingering, family hug was eventually interrupted by a forced and commanding, "A-hum," from the throat of Judge Watson.

"Eric," the Judge began solemnly, looking the boy squarely in the face, "I understand that it is your desire to be adopted by Jason Marshall, is that correct?"

Eric turned and thoughtfully and sincerely looked at Jason, holding him in his gaze as he answered, "It certainly is, Sir."

"Abby, it is your desire to allow and to give your blessing to this adoption?"

"Absolutely and with no reservations, Judge."

"Jason, it is your desire to adopt Eric Covington, to care for him, provide for him, and guide him in the ways of truth and right and love?"

"Yes, Sir. More than anything I can imagine, Sir."

"Well, then, assuming the three of you will sign this document I have here before me, I now declare that from this time forth, Abby Marshall and Jason Marshall are together the legal parents of Master Eric Allen Covington Marshall. Congratulations and may life smile on your new family forever."

Jason moved first to hold his new son close. Eric met him, enthusiastically. With his patented, impish grin firmly in place, he whispered into Jason's ear:

"I suppose this gives you the authority to ground me, now, doesn't it, Dad?"

"I'm in no hurry to practice, Son."

They broke into private laughter, a special moment passing between them.

In the empty hall outside the Judge's chambers, Eric motioned his mother to go on ahead, while bringing Jason to a halt there beside him. Eric again fixed his gaze on Jason's smiling brown eyes.

"What's up, Son?" Jason asked.

"Jason, I hope you know that after my mother, there is no one in the World I love more than you."

Jason nodded. He had no doubt. Then he observed a fire flaring in Eric's bright blue eyes. It burned its way into Jason's very soul.

"I need to say this just once. I want no answer, no discussion, and I will never speak of it again."

Jason nodded, accepting the boy's conditions. Momentarily perplexed, he waited for Eric to continue.

"If you ever cause my mother harm or unnecessary heartache, I will bust your kneecaps and gouge out your eyes, and that is an absolute promise. Now, that's over with forever, so, Dad, let's catch up with Mom."

Jason had never loved the boy more than he did at that moment.

\* \* \*

Eric had arranged to spend the night at Randy's. On the surface, this was out of consideration to his parents so they could have the privacy they needed on their wedding night. More to the point, it was so he wouldn't be prompted to ponder the meaning or sources of any unfamiliar noises that might emanate from their bedroom. He would have to find ways of dealing with that later.

Of course, Eric couldn't let the whole evening merely revolve around his parent's needs and desires. SO, he had removed all the nuts and loosened all the bolts that held his mother's bed together.

Little by little, Jason had moved his personal things into the house. Although thoroughly familiar with the rooms and furnishings he still felt somewhat out of place and uneasy in the new surroundings. He was certain that would improve with time.

They finished the dishes, moved into the living room and onto the couch - their usual place for talking. Instead of immediately curling up against Jason, Abby excused herself,

reappearing in a few moments in a new, white, lace negligee and ultra-sheer pink robe.

She posed, somewhat comically, like a torch singer in the doorway, one foot back against the frame. Then in her best Mae West imitation she said:

"You gonna come up and see me sometime, big boy?"

"You are gorgeous, you know Abby, and what you're wearing isn't so bad either."

She slid into his lap, arms around his neck.

"I thought if you were going to have a chance to appreciate my exquisite taste in night wear, I'd need to model it out here."

"Out here as opposed to where?" Jason asked, kidding her as he planted a kiss on her nose.

They kissed a long and gentle, unhurried kiss, knowing that there would be ample time and opportunity for wedding-night passion later on. His words of affection and commitment offered cherished but unnecessary support for his otherwise fully affirmed devotion. It was a wonder-filled night as husband and wife.

\* \* \*

It was shortly after six thirty the next morning when Eric breezed into the kitchen from outside. As usual, he and Jason had opened the Golden Frigate together. The arrangement was working well, even though Eric wasn't getting many hours and that translated into little money for summer fun.

Jason had given him no satisfaction whatsoever, as Eric had subtly pumped for information about the collapse of the bed. It was just too good to leave alone. He made a trip down the hall for the sole purpose of peeking into his parent's room. His recognizance mission found the bed in proper condition, so he returned to the kitchen to work on his mother.

"So, you and Dad have a good evening with me out of your hair?"

"It was a fine evening, Dear. Nice and relaxed. You know."

Eric figured that he probably really didn't know how a wedding night could qualify as relaxed - for sure, he didn't plan for his to be that way - but he was also happy not to receive even the broadest hint of any more details.

"I don't think I told you how nice it was of you to arrange the privacy for us, Eric."

"You might say that gesture, floored you, huh?" Eric quipped, trying for a reaction to the obvious pun.

"Well, I wouldn't go quite that far. I expect you to be thoughtful, that's just the kind of person you are."

No success whatsoever!

"Well, I knew if he hadn't before, Jason would really fall for you if I left you two alone."

Neither would crack a smile, nor so much as acknowledge what was happening.

Eric would try one more time: "I imagine after the stress and strain of these past weeks, the two of you probably just collapsed, didn't you?"

Eric could restrain himself no longer. He burst into reels of laughter and slid to the floor holding his stomach. His mother found his ribs and worked them over the way she had done when he was younger. They ended up in each other's arms, forehead to forehead, sitting on the floor in the middle of the kitchen.

"There is a bit of the imp in you, Eric Allen Covington," then added, as a happy afterthought, "Covington Marshall."

"Imp: A small demon, I believe Webster says," Eric said, as if reciting from the dictionary.

"Nothing small about this particular Imp. What does Mr. Webster call a big imp?"

"The Devil, himself, I suppose."

"Now we're getting close," Abby laughed. It was a good time between a mother and son.

"Do I need to take a wrench to it or anything?" Eric asked, once things had calmed down.

"No Jason took care of it. You know, with two guys around here to handle all the mechanical things, I will be absolutely spoiled."

"It's about time, you know. Just think of it as your turn."

\* \* \*

Realizing what a drain he had been on his parents, Eric made plans. He arranged for Randy to come and stay the weekend. He was eager and ready now to get back to work, so he and Randy decided that the two of them could open the

store for Jason on Saturday and Sunday.

At breakfast on Thursday morning, and with the flair of the magic elixir salesman of old, Eric began:

"It's high time you two got out of here and had some time alone. Since I can't afford a cruise - though if I could, I'd probably accompany you - I have the weekend covered here and at the Frigate so you guys can honeymoon up at the lake. I want you out of here by four o'clock tomorrow afternoon, because at five, Randy and I are throwing a wild booze and sex party, and I'm sure you'd rather not witness such a display of adolescent debauchery."

They all knew, of course, that there would be no such party, even if it did play to wonderful reviews in Eric's imagination. They agreed that they could certainly use the time away. All things considered, it sounded like a winner.

Abby had never been skinny-dipping, and in her wildest imagination she had never expected to. But there she was, stark naked, walking hand in hand down toward the lake with her husband.

"You and Eric really swim this way all the time?" she asked, still not believing what she was doing.

"All the time! Hush about it now and just relax. It's just you and me. Pretend this is our gigantic bedroom and the lake is our hot tub. "

They arrived at the water's edge and Jason waded right in. Abby stopped, more reluctant. Jason turned, standing in water half way up his upper legs.

"It's cool and wet and refreshing. All it needs is you," he said, reaching back, as if to coax her in. "You are one beautiful lady standing there right now."

"You're not so bad yourself, actually," she replied, taking a few tentative steps into the water. It did feel cool and pleasant. She paused and splashed some water up on her legs and stomach. She waded on out to meet Jason.

He pulled her close and gently kissed her on the lips, saying: "See, what did I tell you. Is this great or what?"

"You sound more like Eric every day, you know?"

"It's hard not to. Since he does ninety percent of the talking around the house, he's become my main model." Jason kissed her again before sitting down and sliding

completely beneath the water. Abby felt him nibbling on her toes. Not at all bad, she thought to herself. He nibbled his way right up to the surface. When his head finally emerged, she forced it back down under the water. That wasn't the best move she could have made, considering she had hoped to keep her hair dry. A moment later, legs over head, Jason had her completely submerged. She came to the surface sputtering and laughing, and immediately jumped on Jason's back. He waded with her out into deeper water, his head finally covered before he released her.

They frolicked and swam, and laughed a lot. They held each other close and kissed as the spirit moved them.

"I must admit that skinny dipping with Eric was never like this," Jason said.

"Well, I should hope not!" Abby kidded.

That deserved another dunking and then, even another. It was such fun, just the two of them. Abby began to feel more at home there, less self-conscious and suddenly quite romantic.

Jason prepared a light meal of soup and toast.

Abby smiled. "I wonder if you really have any idea how immensely happy you have made these two, new people in your life?" she said, reaching out for Jason to move in closer.

"That's by no means a one-way street, you know," he said, happily accommodating her. "I was so lonely and so afraid that was how I'd have to spend the rest of my days. You two have given me more than I would ever be able to repay."

"Then, aren't we glad that balancing the books plays no part in all of this?" Abby said.

"Oh, I know that, Abby, but I want so much to make you the best husband God ever created, and to be the wisest, most loving father to Eric that any boy has ever known."

"Seems to me, you're off to a pretty fine start in both categories."

They sat quietly as the fire burned itself to coals. When sleep came at last, it was deep and serene.

\* \* \*

The next morning found Abby up first. She sat by the fire, which she had poked to life and rekindled from the

lingering coals. The surprise at her success, aside, she soon fashioned herself the consummate camper. The coffee was brewed and the eggs were frying when Jason crawled out of the tent. He leaned down to kiss her.

"Are you as sore as I am?" he asked, smiling and stretching.

"I think I found a few new muscle groups, if that's what you mean."

Jason sat beside her. Abby shared the blanket she had pulled around herself as shelter against the crisp, early morning air. He poured himself coffee and warmed Abby's. She snuggled closer and positioned her head against his shoulder. Words were not needed. The previous evening in the lake and later by the fire had been magnificent. They looked at each other from time to time as if to speak, but then just smiled and again put their heads together.

Eventually, Jason found some words.

"I think last night would qualify as a honeymoon, don't you?"

"A honeymoon with all the trimmings." Abby replied.

///

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

### **The Imp Meets Dr. Frankenstein**

Eric had awakened at three a.m. and couldn't get back to sleep. Clad only in a pair of cutoffs, he was in the kitchen brewing up a pot of coffee and preparing to scramble the heck out of a half dozen eggs when Abby entered the room wondering what was going on.

"Sorry if I woke you, Mom. Couldn't sleep. Felt hungry. Here I am."

"That coffee is not likely to help you sleep, my dear," she admonished.

"Habit, I guess. It's always the first thing I do in the morning. How about a cup? You're already awake, you know."

It was as if he were asking his mother to sit and talk. She was happy to oblige and took a seat at the table. "Bring on the nectar," she said.

"What?"

"Oh, that's just a little joke I enjoy with myself from time to time. Forget it."

Eric slipped the eggs from the skillet onto a plate the way he had watched his mother do it so many times at the Mill. Impatient, he popped two, almost finished, pieces of toast out of the toaster. Pouring a cup of coffee for his mother, he took a seat across the little table from his mother. He filled his own cup and set the pot aside.

"I'm still scared about this face thing, you know," he said at last.

"That's reasonable," Abby replied.

"Reasonable doesn't make it feel any better. What if I go through all of the pain and all of the waiting and then we find out it didn't help. It's my only shot at looking decent again, you know. What if it doesn't work? What if I end up looking even worse – if that's possible. My friends all say it doesn't matter but I catch them looking at me with that pity-old-Eric look in their eyes. I hate it, ya know."

"I won't pretend to know how it must be for you, Eric. But I do know this. The doctor says he thinks the procedure he plans, gives you a better than a fifty-fifty chance of regaining an almost perfect face."

"Ya, but that also means I have a fifty-fifty chance of remaining hideous."

Abby's stomach churned for her son. He was right of course. The doctor had been quite candid about that. Things could collapse and he might look even worse.

Abby tried to help once more: "Well, if you had a fifty-fifty chance of becoming a millionaire by buying a lottery ticket, would you take that chance?"

"Of course, I would. I can see where you're going with this but you set it up wrong. Say the lottery worked this way: A fifty-fifty chance I'd be a millionaire or a fifty-fifty chance I'd have to be a street person for the rest of my life. Now, that's a better example."

"I suppose it is, Eric. I don't know what to say except that if you were a street person in the first place, you'd have nothing to lose, but the price of the ticket, would you?"

Eric thought for a long time about what his mother had just said. His eyes filled with tears but managed to contain them. He nodded, slowly.

"You're good, Mom. You're really good. I see what you're saying. Since I'm already this way, I have nothing to lose by giving it a shot."

His mother forced a smile. Their hands met in the center of the table.

"So, that's that. I'll give it a try. That doesn't change the fact that I'm scared shitless - pardon my French, Mom - about what happens to my life if it doesn't work. It's like being totally helpless. It's one of those things where there's absolutely nothing I can do to change it or even influence it. I

cry myself to sleep every night, Mom. I know Randy heard me last night, but he didn't say anything, of course."

What can a mother say at a time like that? Nothing, Abby decided, so she stood up and went around the table and clasped Eric's head to her bosom. He cried. It felt so safe there against his Mother, but he knew it was only a momentary haven. Even so, he lingered there a long time and for those moments, the World went away.

"Well, enough of this self-pity, crap, huh, Mom. I need to make some money. Any ideas?"

"The paperhanger said she could use some help down at the Mill. You're around there 'snoopervising' most of the time anyway, so you might as well be getting paid. Want me to ask her?"

"I better do it myself, so she can see if it makes her nauseous to look at me. You can let her know I'll be coming by, though. That would be a help."

Abby wanted to argue the obvious point, but knew it would do no good. They returned to their rooms but neither really slept.

\* \* \*

Eric began work that very afternoon. He was primarily a gofer, but that was all right with him. It seemed nice to be doing physical work. By evening, he felt a good tired about him.

He showered and ate, and then walked to the park to meet Suzzy. In a strange yet pleasant way, they had become closer through the tragedy. Eric recognized that she was no longer just an object of sexual delight, but that she had become a friend, as well. "Who'd have thought it," he said to himself as he spotted her already sitting on the ground in their favorite, secluded spot. He had to wonder if his centerfold, Veronica, was perhaps some man's good friend, as well. That was certainly a totally new and disquieting thought. He would not want other guys looking at and fantasizing about Suzzy the way he looked at and fantasized about Veronica. Adding friendship to lust sure complicated romantic relationships!

Eric had talked himself out during the night and was more than ready for one of Suzzy's thirty minute kisses. He'd been thinking about it most of the afternoon. He wasn't

disappointed. Little that could pass as mere friendship occurred during that next sixty minutes. It was, however, just what the doctor ordered. Suzzy seemed to understand and that pleased Eric.

Afterwards, they walked to the ice cream parlor. Eric gave Suzzy three dollars and had her go in to purchase the cones. He still felt it unfair to inflict himself on anyone in a public place. Suzzy obliged, though not without a short lecture on what a Duffus he was being about it. Eric truly thought he was saving others from an upsetting experience. He was right. She was right. It was a dilemma.

He walked her home as they licked their cones and chatted about nothing of any real significance - how the Mill was coming; how her lifeguarding was going; that Randy and Mary Ann had begun dating and they made a cute couple. He kissed her good night - definitely memorable - and leisurely made his way home along the back streets, considerately melting into the shadows as he passed others.

Eric wondered if he might have passed his natural father there on those streets that night. If he had, he wondered what the man had felt when he had seen Eric's face. Had there been at least a twinge of compassion, sympathy, caring? Probably just revulsion, he decided. He wondered what the man thought about him now having another father and Abby having a husband. He hoped that he would be happy for them. At any rate, that was what he decided he would believe.

Jason and Abby were sitting on the sofa in the living room when Eric arrived home. He plopped into a comfortable big chair and retold the stories from his day - well, not all of them. Eric was tired so after a short time he got to his feet and bade them good night. He planted a big, deliberate kiss on each forehead. It seemed natural to kiss Jason in that way.

Then, blending objective deliberation with affection he said: "I love you guys, you know. I probably don't say that enough." He turned and disappeared into his room, closing the door behind him. He scrutinized Veronica in a slightly different light as he undressed and completed his nightly routine.

"I hope you really do have a good friend who loves you," he said to her out loud, as, at last, he turned off the lamp and settled into his bed for a much-needed slumber. The nightly tears weren't far behind.

He dreamed of better days and of worse days, of loves that had blossomed and of loves that had wilted. He saw the wild horror and felt the abject loneliness of life with continued disfigurement. Suzzy didn't care - or was it Veronica, or the paperhanger, or that man on the dark street? Faces clouded. An ominous mist closed in about him. He slept.

\* \* \*

Abby and Jason decided the sooner the better for Eric's operation. If they could get it scheduled within two weeks it could all be over before Art Camp. Abby would call the doctor the next day. If they waited for Eric to be ready, they'd be old and gray, and cradling grandchildren.

Once in bed, it was difficult to feel romantic, as they privately pondered Eric's pain and anguish. They just lay close, feeling perhaps guilty that at that moment they had each other's comfort and support, while Eric had no one. That night the bed would have held – nuts and bolts or not. It was time for the other face of love to emerge. They quietly enjoyed the closeness, the bond, and the knowledge of their clear and absolute devotion.

\* \* \*

The appointment was made for the following Monday. Eric would enter the hospital on Sunday evening and remain for seven days. Abby thought it was best that she and Jason were forcing the issue. That way, if anything did go wrong, Eric could blame them and not himself. Being a parent seemed like a colossal and terrible responsibility just then.

As soon as Eric entered the kitchen, he realized that he had caught his mother in a crying jag, as he so indelicately phrased it. She did what she could to disguise the fact, but Eric was not to be misled. He went to her. It was his turn to hold a weeping head to his chest, and he wouldn't have had it any other way.

"Anything I can do, Mom?" he said quietly, lovingly patting her shoulder. This was a new role for him and he felt quite unpracticed and inept. He wanted to make it all better,

whatever it was, but hadn't a clue as to what he should be doing.

"Probably not. Probably not at all, in fact."

She separated herself from him and motioned for him to sit with her at the table. He spun a chair around and mounted it between his legs.

"I have made the appointment for your surgery. Next Monday. Jason and I have decided the time has come, and that this is going to be our decision. We hope that you can accept it and cooperate, but either way, the date is set and the surgery will be done."

She dried the last few remaining moist spots on her cheeks and planted her elbows on the table, bolstering herself for a resounding reaction from Eric. He put his chin down on the back of the chair and looked at the table. He remained unexpectedly silent for a long time - unexpectedly to both his mother and to him.

Without raising his head or changing his far away expression, he mustered a monotone voice and said:

"That's your final decision? That's what the two of you really think is best for me?"

"Yes, Eric, it is – on both counts."

"Okay. I don't agree about it, but I trust you two. If that's what you really think is best, we'll do it Monday."

Abby wanted to hold him close, and to say all the right words, but neither was to be. Eric stood up, his face still expressionless, and he walked out into the back yard. That was his place to be alone and think, and Abby respected his right to that.

Eric sat on the grass his legs crossed Indian fashion. He wanted to scream. He wanted to cry. He wanted to curse the unfairness of the universe. None of those would come forth, so he just sat. Where he had been scared before, Eric was now terrified. Where he had misgivings before he now felt the onrush of impending doom. Oddly, in and about all of that, there was also relief – just why or from where or for how long he could not be certain, but there was relief. Eric lay back in the grass and gazed up into the cool-looking dark green of the Maple tree. Its huge, strong branches were gently swaying there above him. He remembered the summer it had

been struck by lightning and how, as a six-year-old, he had felt so sorry for it. He had imagined that terrible pain must have been unbearable. He had been so certain that the damage would be irreparable. But there it stood, grand and magnificent, spreading its cool shade and showing no trace of the earlier tragedy. He hoped his life would turn out as well. He closed his eyes and slept. No tears. No malevolent reveries. At last, there were a few moments of rest and peace.

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## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

### **Unexpected Terror**

It was not good news that greeted Abby as she took the first call of the day. She expected it to be Jason. It was Officer Marks.

"Mrs. Covington, oh, I guess it's Mrs. Marshall now, isn't it? Anyway, I am calling to inform you that Johnny's lawyer got him out on bail. I can't figure how it happened, but it did, and I thought you should know. If you want my advice, I'd say that none of the three of you should ever be alone - at home or outside. He may just flee jurisdiction to put the whole thing behind him, but then again, well, you know him as well as I do."

Abby thanked him and hung up. That terrible feeling returned. Eric had left an hour earlier to go to work at The Green Mill. She called the construction site phone first, to drop the bad news on Eric.

"Don't leave the Mill grounds alone. Jason or I will be by to pick you up for lunch. Let me talk to Jake."

Jake, the head carpenter, had been a longtime friend of a friend, so to speak. Abby explained the situation to him and asked that he keep a careful eye on Eric. He assured her that he would handle it there. Several questions had surfaced about the remodeling and they could make those decisions at noon.

Next, Abby called Jason. Hearing his calm and reassuring voice promptly slowed her racing heart and cleared her spinning head.

"Who can you get to come over to the house and stay

with you?" was his first question, once Abby had found her composure.

"I'll call Jenny."

"Don't leave the house and just for good measure lock the doors and windows."

Those weren't exactly comforting words, but she understood and complied. Jenny arrived. She had always been a good friend and great listener. It took two pots of French Vanilla Coffee, but they made it through the rest of the morning.

At noon, it was Abby's intention to bring Eric home and keep him there forever - or at least until Johnny's whereabouts was known. Eric would have none of it, however, saying that probably the two of them were both better off out in the open there at the Mill, than alone at home. There were things Abby needed to do anyway, so she consented.

As it turned out, the afternoon was productive. Abby felt relieved and confident as she and Eric pulled into their driveway at five fifteen. Jason had preceded them by several minutes. His expression was strained and troubled as he fondly delivered his kiss of greeting to Abby.

"What now?" she asked.

Jason pulled two Polaroid snapshots from his shirt pocket.

"These were taped to the back door," he said, looking around as if in search of something - he wasn't really sure what.

One was a picture of Eric working at the Mill earlier in the day, and the other was of Abby getting into her car at noon. On the back of each was scribbled the single word, "SQUIRM!"

Johnny was indeed sticking around, and had not given up his vendetta! The message was clear: If he could get close enough to take such pictures, he could get close enough to do other things, as well. Terror suddenly overcame them, and they moved inside. Jason began a covert search of the house. Eric was more open and to the point, as he pulled open closet doors and sank to his knees by each bed in order to peer underneath. The men explored the basement together. There was a top hung window moving in the breeze.

It had been opened. Jason moved to secure it.

"There's no way to lock up this basement and make it really secure, you know," Eric said at last.

"I can see that," Jason replied. "At least we can lock the door at the top of the stairs.

"Let's nail these windows closed. Then he'll have to break the glass to get in and we could probably hear that," Eric suggested.

That done, they returned upstairs. Abby and Jason went about the business of preparing dinner. Eric made phone calls to Randy and Suzzy to give them the bad news.

It was well after seven when they finally sat down to eat. It was a quiet meal. That was unusual, considering the usually talkative Eric was there. With the dishes done, Abby and Jason retired to the living room to read and talk, while Eric went to his room. Each was trying, in his own way, to make things appear normal, though they weren't sure why. At ten after eight there was a heavy knock at the back door. Jason flicked the switch to the porch light, but it did not come on. In the fading twilight, he couldn't make out who might be there. It came even heavier the second time.

Eric arrived, ball bat in hand. Abby stood close to the phone, just in case. With the security chain in place, and his foot firmly planted at the base of the door, Jason opened it a crack. There, sporting a broad smile stood Officer Marks.

"Just thought I'd drop by and see how things were going," he explained.

With shudders of relief, the door was opened and he was enthusiastically ushered in.

"I don't usually greet our guests with a ball bat in hand," Eric explained."

"Seems a bit jumpy around here, folks" Marks observed, as the four of them gathered around the table.

"At least jumpy," Abby said.\

"Paranoid, is more like it," Jason added, his attempt at a smile mostly unsuccessful.

Jason took the pictures from his shirt pocket and handed them to Officer Marks.

"Oh my! Well, Johnny does seem to know how to make a guy squirm, doesn't he?"

"Just a bit," Abby said.

"Let me make a call," the officer said. "I think this development may rate a squad car out front tonight."

He stayed the twenty minutes until the car arrived. Eric filled the awkward moments by bringing Mr. Marks up to date on his athletic interests since little league, and they shared some memorable moments from years past. For a little while the present predicament passed out of focus. Through it all, Officer Marks was clearly having difficulty looking at Eric's face. Eric just ignored it and rattled on. He would wonder later if he should have tried to set the man's mind at ease some way. At the time, however, it had seemed best just to let it lie. What could have been said?

"We can't do this every night, you understand, but perhaps you'll at least be able to get some sleep tonight." They all thanked him and walked him to the door. He left. They no longer felt quite so alone in their apprehension.

From time to time, Eric, all quite openly, checked through the front window to make sure the car was still there. Abby checked also - when no one was in the room. Jason, too, managed his private peeks as the situation allowed. They each pattered at this or that until they had worn the evening away to midnight.\

"We'd better turn in, guys," Jason suggested. They agreed, though Eric insisted the lights remain on throughout the house. Soon they were in bed, Abby with Jason, Eric with his ball bat.

Eric heard it first. A faint, distant thud. He sat up in bed and listened, slowly turning his head, ready to hone in on its source should it occur again. He pulled on some cutoffs and carefully opened his bedroom door. The lights had gone off in the hall and living room. He reached through the door opening into the hall, searching the wall for the light switch. He flipped it several times. Nothing happened.

Bat in hand, he felt his way along the hall to his parent's room. He hesitated, weighing the propriety of a knock against the danger of the situation, and opted to just open the door. Wouldn't you know, it squeaked. That awakened his mother who reached to turn on the bedside lamp. It, too, remained unlit.

"It's me, Eric," he whispered. "The lights are off all over the house and I heard a noise - from the basement, I think."

The conversation had awakened Jason, and Abby explained the developing circumstances to him. He got out of bed and began pulling on some pants. At that, Eric turned away from his mother, in case she needed privacy while getting out of bed. She did and she appreciated it.

"You think it came from the basement?"

"Yeah. It was like a thud or a thump, and it sounded muffled."

"I'll call the police," Abby suggested. "Then they can call the squad car and relay the message."

"Good thinking, Mom."

But the phone was dead. In angry disbelief, Eric took the headset and poked the buttons over and over but it was dead.

"Maybe the one in the kitchen still works." Eric suggested.

The three of them moved through the bedroom door and into the dark hall.

C R A S H ! That time it had definitely come from the basement.

"That door is locked, so unless he breaks it down, we are ok up here," Jason said.

"It seems to me," Eric said, "that if he is in here, we'd be better off outside."

It seemed a simple but brilliant solution. Once outside they could get to the police car. Eric peeked through the front window. The car was gone! They were alone. Perhaps they would still be better off outside. They moved as one to the kitchen door. Abby tried the phone, there. It was also dead. Jason unhooked the chain, and turned the dead bolt. In the silence, its click seemed to jar the house. He turned the knob and pulled the door to open it. It seemed stuck. He pulled harder. The door wouldn't open.

Sensing the problem, Eric joined in, but even together, they couldn't budge it.

"Somehow Johnny has fastened it from the outside," Jason said, stating the obvious.

They moved to the living room door. It, too, was stuck

in place. There was one more possibility. They felt their way back down the hall toward the rear door to the back porch. They had no more luck there.

Apparently, the person in the basement had detected their movements. From down below came a wild, rafter-shaking roar of drunken laughter.

"That's Johnny, all right, and he's definitely three sheets to the wind," Abby said, no longer attempting to hide her panic. Jason wrapped his arms around her. She was trembling - or perhaps it was he. He couldn't separate the two just then.

"We can knock out the bay window in the living room and escape that way," Jason suggested

As they made their way back toward the living room, they heard the unmistakable creak of the basement steps. Huge and powerful Johnny, would be at, and likely through, the door in just another minute. A few well-placed blows with his bat, and Eric had the glass strewn onto the front stoop. A few more clean up stokes and it was ready.

The sound of splintering wood resounded through the house. Eric made it out first, at his mother's insistence. As he and Jason helped Abby through the window, Johnny's voice bellowed from the hallway. He indeed sounded crazy!

"Hurry Jason! Hurry!" Came the frantic appeals from Eric and Abby. But Jason disappeared back into the blackness of the house. Eric, understanding more easily than Abby, instinctively hurried his mother away from the house and out under the safety of the street light.

"Hang on, Mom," Eric advised his mother. "I'll go use Mrs. Hayes' phone." He was off and running, jumping the hedge and bounding up onto her porch. Abby could hear him pounding on her door and calling to her.

"Mrs. Hayes, it's me, Eric! I need your help! Please let me in! Hurry! Hurry, please!"

Abby saw the lights go on in Mrs. Hayes house, and soon Eric was motioning his mother to join him. She hurried across the street and into the safety of their friend's house. Eric was already on the phone, so Abby tried to explain the situation to Mrs. Hayes.

Back in their own house, behind the broken window

and in front of the heavy steps slowly stumbling down the hall toward him, stood a determined Jason, ball bat in hand. With the drapes from the front window now open, faint light from the street light streamed through the living room, illuminating the arch leading to the hallway beyond.

The first blow was struck to the midsection of a seeming giant, as he emerged there from the darkness. A second quickly followed to top of the lowered head. The third landed against an outstretched hand. And the fourth found the small of his back. The house shook as the huge man dropped to the floor, quite helpless.

At the same moment, two policemen entered through the window, guns drawn and darting flashlights scanning the scene.

"We got it now, Mr. Marshall. You'd better get out there and let your family know you're okay."

He was more than willing to exit the house though couldn't let go his grip on the bat.

It was joyous reunion, complete with tears all around, and smiles above still quivering chins. The hugs would not stop. Perhaps, at last, the nightmare was over.

"You were a fool, you know, Jason Elliptin Marshall," were Abby's first words.

"No, Mom, he was just being a father and husband," Eric insisted, interceding protectively. A glow of admiration pervaded his gaze as it caught and held Jason's eye.

Later, when there would be time to contemplate and replay the events, Abby would understand and appreciate the fuller meaning of Eric's words. Just then, however, she could only feel relief and joy that they were all safe.

It seemed that someone, most likely Johnny, himself, had called the police to report that a man fitting Johnny's description had been seen breaking into a house two blocks north. The police responded and left their post. As they shared information, the pieces of the puzzle began fitting together.

Soon the ambulance arrived to transport the slowly rousing Johnny to the hospital. Abby couldn't even watch, as he was carried out of the house. Eric, on the other hand, walked right over to him, and stood, glaring down at him.

Johnny recoiled, as he saw Eric's face close up for the first time. Eric had made his point.

There would be no bail this time, but even so, there would clearly be no more sleep for the Marshals that night. Sensing that, Jason suggested that he and Eric tack a drop cloth over the broken window to keep out the insects and such. Abby put on some hot chocolate. Although emotionally drained and physically beat, Eric could not resist:

"So, Elliptin, is it?" he asked.

"It's a long, long story kid. Don't press it!" Jason responded, his initial smile breaking into full-blown laughter.

Eric would uncover the whole story later – that he promised himself. He felt a very special rush inside, as he just stood and looked at this wonderful man who had risked it all to protect him and his mother that night. Little by little, Eric was piecing together, and stowing away, just what it meant to be a father and husband. One day he would be able to put it all to good use himself. He wondered how good a father he would have become had Jason not entered his life. Happily, he didn't have to worry about that. He had his model now, and it was worthy of unqualified emulation.

## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

### **Mother, Father, Son**

Eric entered the hospital at five o'clock. The next day promised to be the biggest day of his life to date. The time had come to let Dr. Frankenstein – Dr. Robert Jackson, that is - attempt his voodoo – specialty, that is. Eric thought he had kept his hopes well in check, but as he donned the gown with the rear ventilation slit, and settled himself onto the bed, hidden hopes suddenly soared.

Jason was there with him. He and Abby had decided to split up the hospital shifts this time around. Just prior to arriving, Jason had watched Eric put away enough food to feed a football team, all in anticipation of his straw-through-the-gauze eating routine which would begin the following day. There would be no chewing for two weeks. He wondered what culinary delights they might be blending up for him. He smiled at the thought of broccoli and brussel sprout puree and liverwurst shakes. Actually, the shake idea sounded pretty good – chocolate, strawberry, avocado ... The list went on.\

Smiling was also on the no-no list. That would be the most difficult for young Eric. Some kind of shots to the face had been promised to keep it too numb to break a grin. Eric hoped it worked. Earlier in the afternoon he had one last 'kiss and be close' session with Suzzy. It would have to last for a month, so it had needed to be great. Suzzy made sure it was not a disappointment!

Once settled in, he had nothing to do but wait for morning. He urged Jason to leave and be with Abby.

"Newlyweds need to be together. You wouldn't catch

me babysitting some snot nosed kid if I had my bride waiting for me at home."

Jason just smiled and turned the conversation to topics far afield from newlyweds and operations. They talked of scraping and repainting the boat up at Bear Lake and about starting a real log cabin, complete with a stone fireplace and cedar shingles they would cut themselves. Eric, of course, had idea upon idea, to which Jason happily listened.

Millie came in to administer a sedative. "Doctor wants you to get a good night's sleep tonight. This should help."

"Is this a pill and drink sedative or one of your famous roll over and part the gown variety?"

"Guess!" she said, removing a syringe from her apron pocket.

Back to the old routine, Eric thought, as he turned away and onto his side.

"If you two have any important business to transact, you better get it done in the next sixty seconds," Millie suggested. Then, with a cheerful, "Nighty-night," she scurried on her way

When Jason stood to leave, Eric thanked him for staying.

"You can't imagine how special it's been for me to have had a Dad here with me tonight," he said, rubbing his behind and smiling one of the last, broad smiles he would be allowed for a while.

"Well, I'm sure I probably can't, Eric, but then you can't imagine how special it's been for me to be here with my son, either," Jason replied. He kissed him on the forehead, as if by second nature and left.

Lying there in the dark, Eric watched the blurring figure of his father as it made its way down the hall. As his mind began to swim toward sleep, he had some marginally meaningful thoughts about the responsibilities of a newlyfather, compared with those of a newlywed. Then, with mixed images of the great joy from the wedding and adoption, and disquieting thoughts and feelings about the days ahead, Eric slipped into a deep, if not reassuring sleep.

\* \* \*

Eric remained groggy, his thoughts still muddled, as he

was wheeled back into his room from recovery. Abby and Jason were there, waiting, as they had been throughout the five-hour ordeal – five hours that had seemed like twenty-five. The doctor breezed in and out, assuring them that he was extremely pleased with the “procedure,” but still, made no promises.

They were relieved, of course, but still downhearted, knowing the pain and anguish that lay ahead for their beloved son. From Eric’s perspective, the pain was the least of it all. It was the waiting to see the results that was tearing at his heart.

The boy opened his eyes. It was a foggy image of his mother's face that he saw first. “How nice,” he thought. It cast a reassuring, yet weary countenance. His first semi-conscious act was to reach up with both hands and examined the gauze that covered all but the tiniest slits across his eyes and nostrils. He found the small round hole at his mouth and was satisfied that he would be able to breathe and drink. That had been all the doctor had promised. It seemed he had made good on that.

"It's all over now, Eric. You're back in your room. Jason's here too, and someone else we thought you might like to have around," came his mother's first words.

"Miss America!" Eric quipped, with unexpected, labored, difficulty. As promised, the tape, gauze and shots were combining to immobilize his jaw and lips.

"I think she means me, Sport."

Eric cocked his head in thought. He knew that voice. When she took his hand, he knew for sure, even before her face came into view above him.

"Millie! We have to stop meeting like this, you know?" He mumbled more than spoke.

"Seems it's the only time you'll get together with me."

"Yeah. What some guys won't go through just to get a gal away from her husband, huh?"

"I have some rules to remind you about, now, Eric," Millie said.

"You and your nurse's rules. Ok, I know. No laughing. No smiling. No necking."

"And no more humorous comments from you or you'll blow it!" Millie said, firmly. "I mean that."

"When do I get my pureed steak and potatoes?" Eric asked. "Hey, it's ok. I've been practicing not smiling. I'll be able to keep you in stitches - pardon the expression - and never crack so much as a grin."

If he said he could, they all believed him.

"One last rule and undoubtedly the hardest for the Eric Covington I know," Millie began again.

Eric interrupted:

"It's Eric Marshall, now, Mill. Jason and I tied the knot!"

"That's really great! Congratulations to both of you. Nevertheless, you are supposed to keep your chatter to an absolute minimum for the next six days."

"You mean shut up and stay that way."

"Now I think you are getting the picture," Millie answered. "Here's a pad and pencil and you can write out things for us. Don't talk anymore, unless it's a certified emergency."

"Like?"

"Like your bleeding a gallon a minute or you've been unable to take a breath for five minutes."

Eric sighed and looked from one face to the other. He had three very special people there with him. He'd do okay. He picked up the paper and pencil and began writing. His first message was: "Thanks guys. I love you."

His second was, "Can I get up to go wee-wee all by myself or do I have to use that handy dandy overgrown lamp of knowledge?"

It is strange and sometimes amusing how circumstances can alter what becomes most important in our lives.

\* \* \*

The week passed with surprising speed to Jason and Abby. It seemed an eternity to Eric the Quiet, as Millie had come to call him. Between sheer boredom and regular hypos, Eric slept far more than he was awake. He seemed to sense that was best. As usual, he was right.

On the morning of the seventh day, the doctor arrived to change the bandages for the first time. He asked Abby and Jason to leave, saying the face would not resemble the

finished product yet, and he didn't want them to get discouraged by what they would see. He also flatly refused Eric's request for a mirror, a denial that angered Eric and sent his spirits into a tailspin. ("If he expected things to go well, he surely wouldn't deny me that request.")

New bandages in place, Eric arrived home to find both Randy and Suzy waiting. Attempting to make light of it all, Eric began walking in the stiff gate of the Mummy from the Tomb of Death. He sat with them in the living room and the young folks chatted. Abby brought in drinks - all with straws. His high jinks aside, Eric was obviously discouraged and blue.

Talking and smiling – in moderation - were no longer prohibited, but Eric didn't feel much like doing either. After a few sips on the lemonade, he said he was tired and went to his room. Randy, Suzy and Abby huddled in a strategy session. He needed his butt kicked but good and they loved him enough to deliver it - time and time again, if necessary!

Eric's protests aside, they orchestrated a steady stream of friends dropping in on him during the next two weeks. Eric knew what they were doing, of course, but not until much later would he appreciate it. On a day to day basis, he combatively stated his opposition to the, "pity parade of do-gooders."

The feelings of anger and hostility, which were coming to define him, were completely alien to Eric, and he worried about them. Mostly, however, he worried about having to confront his new image for the first time. Would he look good? Would he look great? Would he look awful? Would he even resemble the way he had looked before? He was ready to settle for a cut above ugly - just without scars, depressions and red splotches. That would be a considerable improvement over the way it had been. He'd learn to live with it.

The two weeks at home dragged on. Eric became more depressed and with the depression, a more difficult human being. He didn't respond to his friends' attempts to help. He stopped taking calls from Randy and Suzy. He even ignored Veronica. Eric had been right in the beginning – it was to be the waiting and the uncertainty, not the pain, which would be his most formidable enemy.

Then came the day and hour for the unveiling.

"Time to hit the road for the hospital, Eric," Abby called down the hall toward his room.

"I'm not going!" Came his gruff, tearful reply, and his door slammed, made all the more dramatic by the click of the lock.

Abby looked at Jason. Her expression drained and turned to one of despair. There in Jason's arms, the tensions and anxieties of the past weeks and months burst forth in uncontrolled sobbing. Jason ushered her to the couch and helped her stretch out. He sat beside her and dried her face with his handkerchief. He silently stroked her hair and forehead, and touched her cheeks with the back of his hand.

"Seems to me," he said, " it's time for Dad to put his foot down."

He kissed Abby on the lips and walked back to Eric's room. The door was still closed. Jason knocked. There was no response. He knocked again, longer, harder.

A faint and feeble, "Yeah," was the only response.

"This is your father, Eric. I want to come in. May I?"

Again, there was no answer.

Jason repeated his question more emphatically: "May I come in, Son?"

"Ya, I suppose." The lock clicked open.

Jason paused a moment, whispered to himself, "I love you, Son," and opened the door. Eric was on his bed, hands behind his head, staring off into nowhere. He didn't acknowledge Jason's presence, as he took a seat on the bed beside him.

With only moderate compassion in his voice Jason said, "Son, I know how scary this must be for you. Believe me, it's no picnic for your mother or me either."

Eric tossed him a quick, disdainful glance and then looked away again. There was no way they could understand how it had been – how it was. They weren't the ones who would have to take that first peek. They weren't the ones who going to surrender to and live with the results.

"Since you have been in such a irrational state this past week, I assume that any of the logic I could spout in your direction right now would do no good whatsoever. Therefore, Eric, I'll say this once and only once. Get your butt out of that

bed this instant. I'm sick and tired of coddling a self-centered, self-pitying, totally obnoxious brat. We are going to the hospital if I have you put you over my shoulder and carry you! And I can do that, you know."

Surprised and stunned, Eric looked Jason in the eyes. His father obviously meant what he had just said. Still demonstrating his reluctance, Eric stood up, went to the dresser and slid his wallet, change, and rabbit's foot into the appropriate pockets. Then he turned to face Jason. He just stared at him for a several moments. Jason's expression was one of determination, tempered with unmistakable affection. Surprised again, Eric's feelings of anger began to melt away. He moved to Jason and softly embraced him, laying his head briefly on his father's shoulder. There were a few quiet sobs.

"Thanks, Dad. I'm sorry."

They walked down the hall together, Jason's arm around his son's shoulders.

\* \* \*

It was a fifteen-minute drive to the hospital and a half-hour wait for the doctor.

The three of them rose in unison.

"I really need to do this by myself, folks," Eric said motioning them to stay behind.

He turned and walked into the examination room alone. Abby and Jason understood but it only added to their feelings of helplessness and inadequacy. He was their son, yet there was no way to ease his pain or quiet his anxiety. It became the longest sixteen minutes and thirty-eight seconds of their lives.

For Eric, also, it seemed like an eternity while the doctor methodically cut the bandages away – snip by snip, piece by piece, layer by layer. The wait was at the same time a good thing and a bad thing to Eric. He was terrified for the time to arrive and yet there was an impatience about it as well. The doctor talked to Eric the whole time, attempting to ease the tension. Eric heard the sounds but not the words. He felt his heart begin to pound. His breathing became heavy. It made him think of being with Suzzy. He smiled and then frowned.

The bandages were off. The doctor was looking him

over carefully, gently poking here and there on his face and neck. There was virtually no pain anymore. Seeing the comb in Eric's shirt pocket, the doctor removed it, and with the care and touch of a well-practiced father, he combed Eric's hair, patting down the wayward colic in the back as best he could.

"There. Realize now, Eric, that your face is still more red than it will be, even by this evening. Other than that, it is the face you'll be wearing into the future."

More carefully than slowly, he turned Eric around on the swivel stool to face the mirror. Eric closed his eyes.

"No tears," he said to himself. "There must be no tears regardless how it has turned out."

When the turning stopped, he knew he was finally in place. That was the moment. He took one last deep breath, and, mustering more courage than he had ever before been called upon to muster, he opened his eyes. He was stunned with what he saw. He touched his cheek and examined his eyes. He turned a bit this way and a bit that way, a bit up and bit down. There, staring back at him, was Eric Allen Covington. "Meet Eric Allen Covington Marshall," he mumbled as if introducing the old memory to the new image.

He slipped off the stool and walked close to the mirror. He touched his face again. With a finger, he traced the paths where the hideous scars had been. He patted the cheek that had returned. He swallowed. He cried. He turned and embraced the doctor. Words were meaningless so he didn't try to use them.

While Eric was regaining his composure, the doctor gave him instructions for washing and medicating with special soap and ointment. He handed him an appointment card and said he'd see him in one month. Eric nodded his silent thank you. The Doctor understood. Eric hugged him one final time before leaving the room.

For the first time in three weeks, Eric moved with the natural, confident stride that had always before, defined him. His shoulders were back and his head held high. His special grin emerged all quite unplanned as he crossed the waiting room and stood before his parents.

"Eric. You look fabulous!" Abby alternately pulled him to her for hugs, and moved him away to inspect his face. She

wept and smiled. They all laughed nervously.

Smiling and nodding, Jason placed his strong hand on Eric's shoulder. They exchanged that special father-son look - it silently spoke of love and respect, friendship and pride. It said, "Nice going, Son." It said, "Thank you, Dad."

"I really can't believe it." Eric said, shaking his head and smiling a dimple bursting smile.

"You look as good as ever, really you do," Abby said, again just standing back and drinking in the wonderful view.

"Better actually. See, I bribed Doc into removing that mole on my cheek."

Nothing would do but that before they left the hospital, Eric track down Millie and let her see the Eric she had never known. He found her. She knew him, of course. They hugged. They cried. Eric kissed her on the forehead and thanked her, knowing he would probably never see her again. But that was just the way it was between nurses and patients - even very special nurses and patients.

As they drove into the driveway, Randy was shooting baskets and Suzzy was sitting on the back steps. Both were patiently, though anxiously awaiting his return. Randy chased down a wayward ball and just stood at a distance. Suzzy stood, checked her collar and straightening her shorts. Eric was out of the car first and approached Suzzy with his hands in the air, as if he were a triumphant trapeze artist, taking his well-deserved bow after a quadruple summersault.

He held her close and looked into her face. "Well, is it me or is it me?"

"Oh, it certainly is you. You look fantastic, except..."

"Except what?" Eric said, momentary dismay flashing across his face.

"Except you lost that darling little mole by your left ear. I loved that little guy," she said, some kidding and some sorry.

Then, it was obviously the moment to kiss her, but he was for some reason hesitant. Randy came up. "Kiss the lady or I'll do it for you," he said.

Eric kissed her, briefly, but it was deep and full, and its message was, thank you for your love, understanding and patience. Eric released Suzzy and turned toward Randy, giving him a hard fist to the shoulder and a one two to the gut,

intended to send exactly that same message to his best friend. It did! The three of them went around to the back yard - Eric talking a mile a minute. Unobserved by Eric, Randy turned and gave Abby the thumbs up. Eric was back in appearance, but more importantly, he was back in spirit.

\* \* \*

Randy soon left, sensing Eric and Suzzy needed - well, at least wanted - some time alone. Best friends knew.

They moved to the porch swing.

"According to Jason I guess I've been a real SOB around here lately," Eric said.

"Worse than that, probably. Jason's a kind man," came Suzzy's candid reply.

"I don't know what to say. I really don't. It's like at the hospital, I told them thanks but it wasn't enough. To say I'm sorry to you now feels the same way - empty, I guess is what I mean."

"So, don't you suppose all of us who know and love you, understand all of that, you Duffus? It's over. We knew what was going on. It was no picnic for any of us."

"That's just exactly what Dad said. I guess I was ...."

"Are you ever going to shut up and finish that kiss you started in the drive way?" Suzzy interrupted, trying to put the past to rest.

Tenderly, Eric took her in his arms and gently pressed his lips to hers.

It was again a handsome face she was kissing, but Suzzy realized that now seemed all quite meaningless. The way he looked a month ago, or the way he looked today, it was the boy inside she cared about.

Eric was having a similar realization, although admittedly, his fantasies tended to interfere. The feeling probably wasn't love, but one of deep fondness and passion and momentary possession. But far into their futures, when following their individual roads with their final true loves, that experience, that feeling, that moment, would remain forever. For the time being, it was, without a doubt, the most meaningful kiss either could remember!

\* \* \*

Before Eric was ready to close the door on the events

of the summer and embark on the life that lay ahead, there was one final thing he needed to do.

“Mom. Dad. I have something for our new family. He produced a two-foot by three foot, cloth-draped picture frame. I’ve been working on it for a long time. I made it to hang over the couch. I hope you like it.”

He carefully removed the cloth. There, meticulously and lovingly presented were their three faces. “I think of it as a picture that transforms us from Jason, Abby and Eric, into Father, Mother and Son.”

Father nodded. Mother wept. Eric knew he had succeeded. It was a beautiful picture. It was their first, *family portrait*.