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A wonderful story of
teenage adventure
...and romance

Lucky In Life

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**An exciting story of
Teenage Adventure and Romance**

**By
John Hammond**

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CHAPTER ONE: Lucky

That night Justin would have rather been anywhere else. Since early in the school year Friday evenings had become his time to spend with his girlfriend, Meagan, also a sophomore at Blackstone High. He thought about her long blond hair and soft blue eyes. He missed just being with her and holding her hand as they talked about whatever seemed important at the moment. That Friday evening, he'd have settled for a boring game of catch with Billy, his best friend since first grade. Even taking the trash out, or cleaning his room, or visiting the dentist, would have been better than sitting there in the Vet's waiting room, wondering if Lucky was going to live or die.

Lucky wasn't the most beautiful dog Justin had ever seen. He wasn't even the smartest or the fastest, but he was the most loyal and trustworthy companion the boy had ever known. Justin loved him and he couldn't bear the idea that some walnut-size tumor on his heart might take him away forever. Doctor Adams said that without the operation, Lucky could not live another month; even with it, the chances were not good. It had been a huge decision. It had been Justin's decision.

So, Friday evening found Justin waiting helplessly for news from inside the operating room. His parents had both offered to be there with him - Meagan and Billy, too - but it was something Justin felt he had to take care of by himself.

It had been Justin who had rescued Lucky as a homeless pup, tangled hopelessly in the barbed wire of a long

broken down fence beside the old cabin down the hill from his house above the river. It had been Justin who swabbed the wounds, and set and wrapped the broken leg. It had been Justin who had nursed the puppy back to health. It was lucky for Lucky, that Justin was such a kind and caring young man. It was lucky for Justin that Lucky had become a part of his life. So, it was Justin who needed to be there - and that was where he was.

He tried to think of other things: the biggest game of the season that was coming up against the Springfield Pioneers; the batting slump he just couldn't seem to shake; the nine week exams for which he should have been studying that night. But nothing distracted him for long.

At last the nurse opened the door and spoke to him without entering the waiting room.

"The doctor will be out to talk with you in just a few minutes."

'That can't be good,' he thought to himself. 'If things had gone well she'd have said so. When it's the doctor who delivers the news, it's always bad. I've seen enough hospital shows on TV to know that.'

He stood and began to pace.

'I'm not going to cry if he tells me Lucky didn't make it. I'm going to be strong. God, help me be strong!'

His lower lip quivered but his eyes remained dry.

It seemed those few minutes dragged on for hours. Finally, Doc Adams came through the door shaking his head.

"That dog of yours has more determination to stay alive than any I've ever seen. There's no way he should have survived but I'm here to tell you, he did."

Justin's cheeks flowed with tears. It seemed okay to cry when they were tears of happiness.

"Can I be with him?"

"Can I keep you from him?" the doctor joked, pointing to the door.

Lucky was still asleep. His body, bound in gauze, seemed to struggle for every breath. Justin winced, realizing how painful it would be when he finally awoke.

"You gave him something strong enough to kill the pain, right, Doc?" Justin said, delivering it more as an order than a

question.

“He’ll be in la la land for the next twenty-four hours, Son. It won’t be until after that, that he’ll begin to be uncomfortable. It shouldn’t really be too bad by then. Dogs are tough through pain. A darn sight better than us humans. I’ll give you some pain pills to take along.”

“Should I keep him quiet?”

The doctor chuckled.

“Dogs are smarter than us, too. He won’t move any more than is good for him. Just let him do it his way. He’s going to do fine.”

Justin sighed, deeply.

“I just don’t know how to thank you enough, Dr. Adams. You’re a miracle worker.”

“Miracles are somebody else’s department, Son. I just do what the books tell me to do.”

Justin nodded.

“You got some way to get him home?” the doctor asked.

“The pickup. I get to drive it out here in the country.”

“Let me help you get him outside, then. Best to get him home before he’s fully awake. Put him where he’s used to being. You can transport him right on this recovery board. It’ll be easier that way. You can drop it back here sometime next week.”

Fifteen minutes later, Lucky - still on his side - was sniffing at his familiar blanket on the foot of Justin’s bed. He opened one eye and looked up at his good friend. Clearly satisfied that things were going to be okay, he went back to sleep and let the healing begin.

* * *

It was the first dawn in several years that Justin had not been awakened by the gentle nudging of Lucky’s soft, wet, nose. As the boy’s eyes snapped open it all rushed back at him - Lucky, the surgery, the worry. Justin switched himself head for foot on his bed and began gently scratching Lucky between his ears. Lucky whimpered quietly as he tried to reach his paw out toward his friend. Justin took it in his hand and eased it back into place.

He spoke in soft, quiet, reassuring, tones.

“You’re doing just fine, boy. Doc Adams says you’ve got more fight in you than any he’s ever seen. I’m sorry it has to hurt so much, but sometimes we have to go through a little pain to make things better in the long run. I wish I could do the hurting for you; I would if I could, you know.”

Justin knew Lucky was awake even though his eyes remained closed. He wondered if his petting really felt good or if Lucky was just allowing it because he understood how helpless his young master felt.

Justin didn’t like feeling helpless. He had always been able to take care of things, fix things, set things right. Of course, those past few weeks he hadn’t been doing so great at fixing his batting slump but he was working at it. Billy had offered to pitch to him later in the day and help him figure out what was going wrong.

Billy wasn’t the greatest pitcher the Blackstone Vultures had, but he did well under pressure so coach usually used him as a reliever - especially in close games. Billy wasn’t the greatest at anything - well, that really wasn’t true; he was the greatest friend Justin had ever had. He’d be along any moment to check on Lucky. It hadn’t been said, but Justin knew Billy.

Everybody loved Billy. He was a clown - always trying to make people laugh. He couldn’t resist going for the obvious joke and his regular trips out of class to the principal’s office indicated that although the kids loved it, not all of the teachers seemed to agree (or at least they wouldn’t admit it in front of the students!). His goal at school was just to pass and stay eligible for sports - which he always managed to do without breaking a sweat. Some would call Billy happy-go-lucky. Others would call him lazy. Justin and Meagan thought of him as comfortable.

The tip of Lucky’s tail stopped making its occasional, weak, flicks, and Justin knew he was back asleep. It was time for his shower so he eased himself off the bed and went into his bathroom. He pulled off the Vulture sweatshirt he slept in and quickly checked his chest on the chance a hair or two might have popped up during the night. None had. He examined his face in the mirror wondering if the patch of new fuzz on his upper lip required a quick shave - he decided

against it. Then, he just looked at the face there staring back at him. It seemed pretty average to him, though several days earlier he had overheard a friend of his mothers tell her she thought he was a doll. Justin hoped that meant hunk, but doll or hunk, he really couldn't see it.

Meagan often told him she thought he was the cutest boy in school. Justin wasn't sure if by cute she meant handsome or something less. It really didn't matter because he had a good outlook on such things. He was what he was. He'd do the best he could with what he had. That was one of the traits Meagan liked best about him - that, and his thoughtfulness, and his kindness, and his gentleness, and his strength, and his . . . well, her list seemed to grow every time she thought about him.

It was her first year at Blackstone High. The move from the city had not been easy for her - leaving her life-long friends behind and adjusting to a much smaller, rural school. The fact that she came from Springfield - Blackstone's arch rival in everything - had not helped her gain easy acceptance. Justin and Billy were her first, and still her best friends there.

As Justin stepped out of the shower and wrapped a big, blue towel around his waist, Billy pounded on his bedroom door and immediately barged right in - the way he'd been doing for the past nine years.

"Hey, Knucklehead! How's it goin'?"

Before Justin could answer - and it really didn't require an answer - Billy was kneeling by the bed beside Lucky, examining him with his eyes.

"He looks pretty good, considering everything," he said, looking up as Justin entered the room toweling his hair dry.

"Ya. Pretty good, considering," he agreed.

Billy rocked back and plopped into an old recliner by the window.

"Your Ma just told me that Doc Adams called earlier and said to come and pick up some pain pills he forgot to give you last night. Why don't you let me go get 'em for you?"

Justin nodded.

"Yeah. That'll help a lot. Thanks, man. I figure Meagan will be here in a little while. Some days I get the idea Lucky's really the love of her life and she just puts up with me so she

can be with him.”

Billy threw a pillow at him, barely missing Lucky.

“Dimwit! Cut it out,” Justin said more upset than playful.

Billy covered his head with his arms as if to admit that it had been a pretty dumb move.

“Are you gonna be able to squeeze out’a here and take some pitches later on this morning?” Billy asked.

“Ya. Doc says Lucky won’t do anything to hurt himself. He’ll be okay alone for a few hours. See you about nine, then?”

Billy looked at his watch.

“It’s seven fifteen now. Yeah, that’ll be good. Where? I figured maybe you’d do better stayin’ away from the ball field for a while.”

“You’re probably right. Lots of bad memories about that place right now. How about here, then?”

“That’s cool. Okay if I bring my little brother along to field for us?”

“Brian? Sure. You actually being nice to him or just saving your own legs?”

“Me? When have I ever not been nice to my dear, demanding, selfish, obnoxious younger, sibling?”

“Only about always, I’d say,” Justin said, only half joking.

“You’re an only child. You wouldn’t understand.”

“And since I wouldn’t, let’s not try to discuss it.”

After Justin dressed, they continued to talk about the usual things that teenage boys talk about: cars, girls, sports, girls, music, girls, movies, girls . . .

“Justy,” his mother called up the stairs. “There’s a beautiful blond down here to see you. You decent?”

“Unfortunately,” Billy called out, joking.

“Shut up, Billy,” Justin whispered loud enough to be heard in town. “Sure. Have her come up.”

He checked his hair and nodded his approval back into the mirror.

His mother had one more comment (of course!).

“Keep the door open, up there.”

“M o t h e r ! !”

Justin's delivery had been clearly designed to demonstrate both his embarrassment and his displeasure.

He went into the hall to meet his ever-smiling Meagan, delivering a quick, gentle kiss as he ushered her into his room.

"You never greet me like that, Knucklehead," Billy joked to Justin.

"Ignore it and maybe it'll go away," Justin said, referring to Billy, and turning back toward Meagan.

Spotting Lucky on the bed, Meagan moved toward him.

"Oh, you poor little darling."

"See, even the dog gets a better greeting than I do," Billy continued, working the crowd for one more laugh.

"Go away! Now, Dimwit," Justin said, playfully taking his friend by the arm and pushing him through the open door. "I'll see you and Brian back here about ten," he called after him. "And don't forget the pills."

Billy left grinning, satisfied that once again he had left his happy mark on the two of them.

Meagan sat down on the bed beside Lucky. Not wanting to crowd him, Justin took a seat on the floor.

"Poor baby," she said, brushing back the hair from Lucky's eyes.

"Doc says he's gonna make it, yeah know."

"I was pretty sure he would. He's always been a scrapper."

Justin liked her positive outlook. It helped keep things in perspective for him. He had noticed that where his moods went up and down a lot, hers were more dependable and didn't seem to vary as much. His Dad had said that was normal for a guy his age - to be up one minute and down the next. Justin would take his word for it since his advice and take on things had always been pretty good. He was blessed to have parents he could talk with about almost anything. Billy, on the other hand, seemed to go out of his way to avoid speaking with his for any reason. Families were different. Justin was thankful that he had lucked into his.

As he sat there watching Meagan directing all her attention toward Lucky, he felt the slightest twinge of jealousy. That soon passed, and he smiled, thinking to himself that Lucky was no real competition. He couldn't afford to date!

“What you grinning about?” Meagan said, at last.

“Just that I’m pretty fortunate to have both of you in my life.”

It really hadn’t been what he was thinking, but since it was true, that made it seem okay to say.

Meagan continued making over Lucky. Justin began wondering how he was going to earn the money to pay Doc Adams. It was his bill to pay and he wouldn’t accept help from his parents - not that they had any to spare. Money was always tight in his home. He would try to pick up a few more lawns to mow. Maybe Doc would take part of it out in lawn mowing. He’d talk to him about it when he took the board back on Monday.

“Had breakfast?” Justin asked at last.

“Juice and toast, my usual,” Meagan said reaching her hand out toward him.

“Well, I haven’t and I’m starved. Let’s go down and see what’s cooking. Usually pancakes on Saturdays.”

She helped him up - always nice but never necessary, Justin told himself. Standing there face to face it was too good an opportunity to let pass. Justin pulled her close and they kissed - long and gentle, warm and wonderful.

It was pancakes. Justin’s mom made wonderful pancakes. The thing was, you just never knew what was going to be in them. That morning it was kiwi. He’d eat anything, of course - he was fifteen - but they were always delicious and the supply was never-ending.

* * *

“I’ll be back in twenty minutes, Mom,” Justin called into the living room. “I’m going to walk Meagan home.”

“That’s fine,” came her reply. “Behave yourself. Have fun!”

Some kids might consider that an oxymoron - behave and have fun. Not Justin, however, even though he did roll his eyes and shake his head. Meagan took his hand and patted it as they walked across the lawn toward the gravel road.

“She’s a mother, Sweetie, and that’s what mothers say. I can only imagine what you’ll have to say to your daughter twenty years from now.”

“Twenty years from now when I’m a mother?”

She slapped playfully at his shoulder.

“No, you moron! You know what I meant.”

Justin smiled. She’d done it again. He felt better.

Meagan lived halfway down the road between Justin’s house and town - thirteen minutes poking along, hand in hand; four and a half minutes jogging; and two minutes, twelve seconds at a full-out run. He still had sixteen minutes for the round trip as they approached the second, of the four, gentle bends along the road.

It’ll seem strange not having Lucky at the next few games,” Justin said, thinking out loud.

“He’s always there, isn’t he? Everybody just expects him to be sitting in his special spot on the sideline.”

“Yeah. I took him to his first game the same week I found him.”

“Or, the week he found you!” she joked. “Sometimes I think he’s the one who takes care of you.”

“Jealous?” Justin asked, squeezing her hand to let her know it had been said in fun.

“Sometimes, a little, I suppose.”

She smiled up into his face.

“Actually, I think it’s cute the way he always barks when you walk out to the plate to bat.”

“Cute?”

Justin faked a serious tone as he began spinning a yarn.

“Didn’t ya know? He’s actually giving me signals. See, he scouts the other team’s pitchers ahead of time, and then, just before each pitch, he tells me what he thinks the mound will be sending my way - one bark a slider; two barks a fast ball, three barks a curve ball. Hey, maybe my slump is really Lucky’s fault!”

“You are a moron!” she said, pulling away in a tease.

He stopped, stomping the gravel and folding his arms, putting on a pretend pout. Meagan started running on ahead, looking back, knowing he’d soon follow and catch her. He did! They stood close, arms around each other’s waists, looking into each other’s eyes - still giggling.

“Well?” Meagan said as if a question.

“Well, what?” Justin’s brow furrowed.

“Well, if you’re going to kiss me, you better get on with it before we reach my front yard where my whole family can gawk at us.”

“Kiss? You seem to think all I ever have on my mind is kissing you. I’m really a deep sort of guy.”

“Shut up and pucker, Deep Guy,” she said, pulling herself up on tip toes to meet him part way.

* * *

It had been a great, long, kiss! Apparently just a little too long as Justin noticed he was twenty-seven seconds late getting home. No one seemed to notice or care, of course. He sat down on the front steps to catch his breath. It was hard to get Meagan out of his mind. She was so special to him. He knew they probably wouldn’t be together forever, but at that moment it felt right - both exciting and comfortable. She was a great kisser but then he really hadn’t had much experience kissing other girls so had no good basis for comparison. He figured that was probably a good thing.

“Lucky!” he said out loud, suddenly remembering his pup. He jumped to his feet, and was soon taking the steps two at a time up to his room. His sick, little dog’s eyes were drooping, but open. He struggled to lift his head as Justin entered the room. The effort was just too much and it was soon back on his blanket. Justin took a seat beside him, scratching his head with one hand and stroking his front legs with the other.

“When you get better, I think we need to find you a girlfriend, Lucky. You’re bound to be old enough for one - in dog years. Girl friends are wonderful - sometimes confusing and headstrong, and always time-consuming, but basically wonderful. I guess dogs don’t kiss. Too bad! You’ll never know what you’re missing.”

He leaned over, kissed Lucky on the nose, and then stood up.

“It’s really hot out there, pal. Seldom see May mornings reach into the eighties like this.”

He went on speaking as if Lucky understood.

“I’ll open all these windows and get a cross-breeze going for you. If it stays too hot up here, I’ll have Billy help me take you down to the back porch.”

“I think I’ll change into some shorts. Billy’ll be back with his beloved little brother in a few minutes. I sure hope we can figure out what’s gone wrong with my swing. I can’t afford to keep messing up at the plate and letting the team down. Every game I expect coach to pull me. So far, he hasn’t. Some days I wish he would. Probably be less embarrassing, you know. Going four for four in the wrong column really sucks.”

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CHAPTER TWO: Brotherly Love?

“Hey! Is the Fox home?” Billy called up from the side yard. Lucky raised an ear at hearing the familiar voice.

Justin stuck his head out the window and waved.

“Be right down. Hey, Brian. Glad you could come.”

Justin rubbed Lucky’s ears and smoothed out the folded blanket on which he lay.

“See you in a few, boy. Gotta go work on my swing. Dad may have hit on something last night. He said I’ve grown three inches in the past four months and maybe that changed something in my arms or shoulders. For sure, it put me three inches higher off the plate.”

He put the pan of water on the bed and raised Lucky’s head so he could drink.

“I’ll see that you get a pain pill in a couple of hours. That’ll be about when Doc said you might start needing something. Maybe you’ll feel like eating then.”

Justin slapped on his ball cap, shoved four balls into his pockets and put the bat over his shoulder. He slid down the banister, side-saddle, and cleared the post at the bottom with a perfect, two-point landing on the throw rug by the front door. It called for a short victory celebration.

“You didn’t slide down that banister again, did you, Justy?” came his mother’s good natured question as she entered from the kitchen, drying her hands on her apron.

‘How does she always know that?’ he wondered to himself for probably the millionth time in his life.

Justin gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

“Me? The banister? Slide it like a little kid? Mother! Really!”

She didn't buy it, though privately she admired her son's performance.

You're just too heavy now. One of these days it's going to give way, and we'll be sweeping you up off the hallway floor. Probably never get the blood out of the rug.”

It had been a good-hearted, if graphic, exchange. She returned his kiss and administered a motherly swat to his behind, sending him on his way out the door. It was clear they had a good relationship - considering she was a normal mother and he was a normal fifteen-year old.

Justin often remembered something his wise pastor had told him on his thirteenth birthday. ‘Just remember, son, there are no two more incompatible species on the face of this earth than a teen-age boy and his mother. Since you can't do without her, do your best to just hold your tongue. She'll never change your mind about anything and you'll never change hers, so save the both of you a lot of heartaches and just play it cool. Mom's always win. That's the rule. They hold the power. I guarantee that once you have this adolescent thing behind you, the two of you will be good friends again.’

Usually Justin remembered that. It didn't always make him happy and it seldom made ‘fair’ out of what he thought was ‘unfair’, but it did help them survive as most-of-the-time-friends there under the same roof.

A beaming Brian ran up to Justin and took his arm. He liked Justin. He was one of the only big guys who ever took the time to talk with him. Next to Billy, Brian admired Justin more than anybody else.

A big brother is always special to a ten-year-old, even if he does seem to spend lots of time and effort trying to make his little brother's life miserable.

Brian spoke first.

“Hey, Justin! Billy says were here to try and salvage something out of your stinkin' swing.”

Billy threw his glove at the kid and gave him the ‘shut your face look,’ as only a big brother can.

Justin tried to smooth it over.

“Well, he's right. It sure does stink and I hope you can

help.”

“Do I ever get to bat?” Brian pressed, just wanting to get the ground rules for the morning straight right up front.

“You can have the last dozen swings of the morning, okay?”

“Great?”

It was twelve more than he figured he'd be getting, so things were suddenly looking up in the little kid department.

They headed for the field that stretched south from the old, unpainted shed. Years earlier, the two of them had measured off and built a first-class pitcher's mound. A board for home plate had been dug into the ground about ten feet out from the shed. That way the shed became the backstop when they were batting and it left plenty of room when Justin worked on his catching. Coach said he showed a lot of potential at that position and Justin worked hard at it. Fortunately, his efforts behind the plate continued to get better with every game.

Justin added his four to the sack of balls Billy had brought.

“This way your concentration won't get broke between pitches.”

“So,” Justin said, thinking out loud. “If I'm three inches taller and my arms are longer and my shoulders wider, what does that tell us?”

“That even with all that you're still never gonna be Mr. America?” Billy teased, phrasing the friendly put-down as a question.

“I'm serious!” Justin said, his tone showing that he was more than a little irritated.

“That's the biggest part of your problem, man. You're always too serious. Don't sweat things so much. Baseball's just a game. You're supposed to be having fun. I'd never throw another pitch if it wasn't fun, you know.”

“Yeah, I know, but we're different. Mom says it's probably why we've always got along so good. If I'm going to go to college, it'll have to be on a baseball scholarship. My grades aren't good enough to get me one, and my parents will never be able to afford it. So, it's more than just a game for me, see!”

“Yeah, I know all that. Just don’t get your shorts in a knot. I still think you should lighten up. You can’t possibly put that bat where you want it if you’re all tense and worried. Swing away and have some fun.”

“That makes sense, I guess, sort of, maybe. Let me take some swings and see if you see anything.”

Brian had moved into center field - waiting. It seemed to him that he spent a large portion of his life waiting on his big brother - especially when they were supposedly doing things together. Billy threw a couple dozen pitches. Justin hit seven - mostly they just dribbled off his bat down toward first.

Justin took another round. The results were about the same. He shed his T-shirt and took some more. Nothing changed. He threw the bat toward first base and plopped down on the ground. Billy walked up to him and Brian ran in from center field.

Justin’s mother called from the house.

“Got lemonade here if somebody will come get it.”

At the same instant, the older boys both turned and looked at Brian. He smiled and was soon back with drinks and cookies.

They moved into the shadows and sat on the ground - backs against the shed.

“You know you’re swinging over the top of ‘em,” Brian offered, stuffing a third cookie into his mouth.

“Really?” Justin asked, looking at Billy for confirmation.

“Good eye, little buddy,” Billy said repeatedly rubbing his knuckle across his brother’s head.

Brian grinned through the obvious pain.

“So, throw them higher,” Justin joked.

“See. That’s the spirit. Make light of it, man,” Billy said, throwing a full out punch into Justin’s shoulder.

“Cartilage damage isn’t going to help my situation, Dimwit!” Justin said, gripping his arm.

“There’s one other thing, I see,” Billy said ignoring Justin’s protest and holding out his cup for Brian to refill.

“What’s that?”

“Your swing’s just a little too late - even on the ones you’re hitting. Too late means no control and when you do hit one it’ll probably foul off the first base line.”

"In most games, recently, I'd settle for that," Justin said nodding his head as he tried to take in what the other two had said.

"I'd say . . ." Brian began, as Billy responded by clapping one hand over his mouth and forcing his face into the grass with the other.

"Let him have his say," Justin insisted. "I'm desperate here!"

Billy let him up and Brian scooted closer to him. Apparently, he had translated that tussle into, "I love you little bro."

"Well, I was just thinking that your body must have grown taller than your arms grew long."

"What kind of gibberish is that, short stuff?" Billy asked.

That time Brian ducked - smiling - and avoided his brother's big hand.

"No. Wait. I think I see what he means," Justin said, again directing it to Billy.

"I'm three inches taller off the ground but if my arms aren't also three inches longer I think I'm taking a cut at the same old spot but I'm really swinging higher."

Billy rolled his eyes. When you two physicists get done comparing scientific formulas, I'll be out on the mound waiting to pitch. He stood and walked away. It wasn't that he really hadn't understood, but to have admitted that would have undermined his reputation as the happy dimwit everybody loved and enjoyed.

Justin took pitches for the next forty-five minutes. Perhaps he connected with a few more than before, but it suddenly felt like he had no idea where to put the bat.

"Swing lower."

"Swing quicker."

"Put your body into it."

"Power from your back leg."

"You're thinking too much - just do it!"

Just once Justin wished he'd hear, "Good job," "Nice try," "You'll get it next time."

But it was Billy on the mound and he didn't seem to know about positive strokes. In all the time Justin had spent at his friend's house through the years, Justin had never heard

either of Billy's parents give anybody a compliment. If you don't get them, you don't think about giving them.

"I'm done for the day. Thanks guys," Justin announced at last.

Brian got his promised dozen, and then - a big surprise to both him and Justin - two dozen more. During pitch after pitch Billy offered a barrage of suggestions.

"Do this! Do that! Not that way! Aw jeez, twirp!"

Brian took in everything Billy said and smiled back, just pleased to have his brother's full attention if only for a little while.

As Justin watched the two of them, he felt left out. They had something between them he'd never be able to have with anybody - unless his parents got busy and . . . That thought made him thoroughly uncomfortable so he decided to drop it. There was Lucky to think about.

"Beat ya to the house!" Brian announced, once Billy called it a day. He took off on a run.

"Get Lucky's medicine out of the bag on my bike," Billy called after him.

Brian nodded himself into a head-over-heels tumble.

"Clumsy!" Billy taunted.

"Guess I take after you," Brian yelled back bravely, though perhaps stupidly, through a big smile.

Billy and Justin gathered up the balls and made their way to the back porch.

"Thanks for the help," Justin said. "Not convinced that anything's really gonna help."

"De nada," Billy said.

"Remember that from Spanish one?" Justin asked, smiling.

"It's all I remember from Spanish one," Billy said, laughing out loud at his little joke.

"You and Brian are staying for lunch, aren't you?" Justin's mother asked.

"Our arms might be twisted," he said. Billy liked her and felt comfortable around her. Truth be known, he was jealous of Justin's family. But it was Billy so that Truth would probably never be told.

"Call your folks and make sure it's okay with them."

“Aw, Mrs. Fox. They’ll just be happy if I don’t show up.”

“Hush your prattle, young man. You’re not so big that I can’t put the soap to your mouth.”

They both knew it was in fun, yet she had made her point. He called.

“Half an hour. Get cleaned up,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Brian answered coming through the door with the bottle from Doc Adams.

“Thanks, guys,” Justin said, taking it. He began to read the directions out loud as if they should all be interested.

“One pill every six hours for every ten pounds of weight. That means two for Lucky - he weighs a little over twenty. Pulverize and work into food or pop into pet’s mouth before eating or drinking.”

“Give me a sandwich and I’ll medicate him,” Billy said.

“A sandwich?” Justin asked, furrows crossing his forehead. That seemed bizarre even for Billy.

“Yeah. It said you pop the pill in his mouth before you eat something.”

Outside that would have called for a physical attack and a roll on the ground. Indoors it merely got a roll of the eyes and a turned back as Justin started climbing the stairs, Brian at his heels. Billy accepted Mrs. Fox’s smile as full payment for his attempt at humor, and he followed the other two up to Justin’s room.

The room still felt pleasant as the breeze blew from corner to corner. Lucky whimpered as they entered the room.

“So, how do you want it, boy? With or without?”

He shook two pills out into the palm of his hand and put them up to Lucky’s mouth. Lucky reached out with his tongue and they were soon gone. He knew his master wouldn’t give him something if he weren’t supposed to take it. He had another drink and laid his head back on the blanket.

Brian - also known as the mouth in his family - had a secret that was just too good to keep.

“Billy made Grandma mad and she’s gonna move out.”

“Did not!”

“Did too!”

“Did not!”

“Did too. I heard you with my own ears.”

Billy stormed out of the room, down the stairs, and took off on his bike. Justin watched him from the window. He was headed for their swimming hole down at the river.

"I didn't mean to make him mad," Brian said, clearly not understanding what he had done or why Billy had reacted that way.

"Will you stay here and take care of Lucky for me? I need to go talk to your brother."

"Sure. What do I do?"

Having no idea himself, Justin looked around the room.

"Lucky loves the radio. Turn it on and then every five minutes or so change the station so he won't get bored."

"I can do that."

Brian puffed up with as sense of importance.

"Wash up, too, so you'll be ready when Mom calls. If we're not back, start without us."

Justin climbed out the window onto the porch roof and jumped to the ground (almost as if it weren't the first time he had used that route to leave the house!).

It was only a five-minute run down to the river, so he didn't bother with his bike. As he neared the spot where he was sure he'd find Billy, he slowed to a walk, and then stopped once he spotted him through the trees thirty feet away sitting on a log beside the water.

Billy looked up and saw him. He turned on the log and faced away, out toward the stand of trees along the opposite shore. Justin walked over and took a seat, straddling the opposite end of the log.

"So!" Justin said, really meaning, 'I'm here for you, man.'

"So?" Billy answered, really meaning, 'I know but I'm not sure where to begin.'

"Your Grandma, huh?" Justin said, hoping to get something started.

"Yeah. Grandma."

They sat in silence for some time. Occasionally Billy would reach down and pick up a stone and fling it out into the river. Justin would do the same, waiting patiently the way one friend does for another at times like that.

"I really messed up, you know?" Billy offered at last.

Justin sat quietly.

“She’s had it pretty rough since Grampa died last year. When she came to stay with us we gave her my room because it’s the biggest bedroom and I moved in with Brian. Bad enough to give up my room but I got no privacy and Brian’s always after me; ‘Do this! Do that.’ And she thinks she’s my boss. She’s always telling what I should and shouldn’t do - when to be home. She wants to know where I’ll be and who I’ll be with. A monumental pain.

“Yesterday, I’d had all I could take. I blew my stack. I told her she wasn’t my boss and that I wasn’t going to tell her where I was going or when I’d be back. Then I said the dumbest thing I’ve ever said - and I’ve said some really dumb things. I told her she was just hiding out from life at our house and that she needed to get a place of her own and face the fact that Grampa was dead and he’d never be back.”

“W o w !” It was all Justin could think to say.

“Yeah. WOW!” meaning, ‘What do I do now?’

“Your dad and mom know?”

“I don’t think so. Far as I know Brian’s the only one who overheard it. Mom and dad were out on the porch. I threatened to skin him alive and use his skin for a lampshade if he breathed a word of it to anybody.”

“Justin laughed out loud.”

“What?” Billy said, almost smiling.

“Skin him alive?”

“Yeah. . . . Need a used lamp shade?”

They both laughed.

As will happen between teenage boys at points like that - where words fail them and feelings can’t be expressed - an all-out brawl began. Justin stood up on the log and flung himself the six feet through the air at Billy, careening them both into the water. Five minutes later, exhausted and looking the parts of drowned river rats, Billy pulled Justin up onto the sand. They lay there on their backs panting and laughing. They weren’t sure what they were laughing about, but it just felt so good neither one cared.

Finally, Justin turned on his side toward Billy.

“You have to apologize, you know.”

“Yeah. I know. I’m no good at that.”

“Tell me about it!” Justin agreed, referring to the many times he felt he’d been due one from Billy but never received one.

“You look terrible,” Billy said.

“You’re not your usual ugly self either,” Justin said. He got to his feet and extended a hand to Billy.

“Suppose lunch is still waiting?” Billy asked.

“What is it with you and food? You eat when you’re happy. You eat when you’re upset. You eat before a date. You eat during a date. You eat after a date. Your excuse for not going to church with me is that they won’t let you take a sack lunch to nibble on during the sermon. And look at you - skinny as a rail.”

“I got the family’s thin genes - woops - don’t tell anybody I actually know about genes. Got my image to protect.”

It was worth another laugh.

They both cleaned up remarkably well. Dry clothes and combed hair soon made them presentable enough for the Fox kitchen, where they put away a stack of sloppy Joes large enough to feed a family of six.

Justin’s mother didn’t ask. She understood some things were just between boys. (Anyway, she planned to bribe Brian with ice cream a bit later. She knew he’d spill his guts without even being asked!)

CHAPTER THREE: Love or Money

By Sunday morning three things seemed very clear to Justin. Lucky wasn't making the kind of progress Doc had led him to believe he would; he wouldn't have enough money to take Meagan to the Spring Dance, now that he had Lucky's medical bill to pay; and, all the thought and work in the batter's box the day before only seemed to make his swing worse.

The game coming up on Monday was a must win if they were going to cinch the Conference championship. It had become a really tight race that year. They had to either knock off Paxton on Monday or Springfield later in the week in the final game of the season. They'd already beaten Paxton twice. They'd split one and one with Springfield.

So, that morning, things weren't looking good for the young man he saw there in the mirror. He'd have lots of things to work on at church. Maybe he would be able to corner Pastor for a few minutes before or after and see what he had to say.

Justin had set his alarm for five a.m. so he could get his own lawn done before church and before it got hot. His dream of using some of his earnings to buy a riding mower seemed to have gone out the window, too. He could walk the lawns - that didn't bother him as much as deciding out how he should break the news to Meagan about the Spring Dance. He wondered how she'd react. He didn't want her to think that Lucky was more important to him than she was, so he figured he'd just not give her any reason at all - he wouldn't concoct a lie. That wasn't his style.

The plan for the day was church in the morning with

their families and then Meagan was going to fix a picnic lunch for them - just the two of them. They liked picnics and had their own special, private, spot under a huge Oak tree down by the river. He'd wait and spring the bad news on her toward the end of their time together.

The sermon was about the problems of materialism - thinking that having lots of stuff is more important in your life than helping people. Justin had a hard time concentrating. He sat with his mother and father in their usual pew. Meagan sat with her family - mother, father, and three, squirming, younger brothers - to the right and several rows forward. He could only see her shoulders and her beautiful, golden hair but that was more than enough to distract him from Pastor's message.

Justin wondered if he loved her - well he loved her as a human being and as a close friend, but he wondered if his feelings were like those between men and women who loved each other. The term, love, seemed to be pretty confusing. He smiled, thinking, 'Eskimos have a dozen different words meaning snow - wet snow, dry snow, blowing snow, and so on. We need to invent a dozen words to indicate which kind of love we're talking about.'

It seemed like a good idea but didn't really help. He'd missed Pastor Shull before church and he had a funeral to conduct at one o'clock so, Justin figured he'd have to do without his input until later in the week. That reminded him that he needed to mow the church lawn. It had been a dry spring so far, and it hadn't needed care every week. Justin didn't have money to contribute, so he helped out by donating his time doing the mowing and shoveling snow.

Church was soon over. His mind had mostly been on the picnic. The final hymn had been, 'Shall We Gather at the River!' He giggled out loud when it was announced. His father elbowed him and frowned.

It was almost one o'clock when Meagan's father dropped her off at the Fox place. Justin met them in the drive and talked briefly with her dad - a necessary requirement for a daughter's boyfriend in that situation.

As her father and Mr. Fox began to talk, Justin took the basket from the back seat and took Meagan's hand. She

carried a blanket. They headed across the meadow toward the stand of trees that bordered the river.

“Did you notice?” Meagan asked.

“Notice what?”

“Neither your dad or mom told us to behave.”

“I guess that means either they trust us or they realize that we’ll do whatever we want to anyway regardless of what they say.”

“I think they trust us.” Meagan said, nodding her head as if to emphasize the point.

“I hope so. Nothing’s worse than having parents who don’t.”

They walked on in silence for a few minutes.

“You sure looked pretty at church, today,” Justin said at last.

“Thanks.”

She reached her face up toward his and kissed his cheek.

“You were your usual handsome self, too.”

There! At last, she had said it - handsome. Justin wondered if she really meant it or if that was just some generic, polite term that girls used at times like that.

“Good sermon,” she went on, not knowing what he’d been thinking.

“I guess. I had too much on my mind to listen very well.”

“Lucky?” she asked.

“Yeah. Partly. He’s not comin’ around very fast. I need to talk with Doc tomorrow.”

“What else?”

It was not the question he wanted to deal with at that moment.

“Oh, just stuff. Let’s leave that alone and just have a good time.”

“Would, have a good time, come before or after we eat?” Meagan teased.

Justin smiled for the first time all day.

“Before, during, after - you know.”

They soon had the blanket spread on the grass.

“Make a little fire,” Meagan said.

Justin pulled her close and planted a big kiss on her lips.

Meagan pulled away.

“Not that kind of fire, Silly. Over there in the fire circle. Just a little one so we can smell the smoke and watch it dance in the wind.”

“Well, if my dancing in the wind isn’t good enough,” Justin kidded, twirling around and striking a disco pose.

By the time Meagan had the plates and food arranged, and the lemonade poured, Justin had a fine fire going - bigger than Meagan had requested of course, but guys were like that. She just smiled.

Justin sprawled out on his side, along the length of the blanket and sniffed at the ham salad sandwich.

“Stop sniffing your food. You’ve been around Lucky too much.”

“It smells great - just like a hamburger should.”

Meagan threw a potato chip at him.

“OOOOO! The dreaded Flying Kung Fu Potato Chip. SCAREY!!”

“There’s cheese cake for dessert - at least for those of us who behave ourselves.”

“I’ll be good. No more sniffing. How about some kissing though? That’s still okay, isn’t it?”

“Of course, silly. I love to kiss you.”

“Maybe we should practice a little before we eat.”

“Practice is good!” she said, moving to where Justin was. He extended his arm out across the blanket and she lay down beside him. He pulled her close. They ‘practiced’ for the next ten minutes.

At last, Justin spoke.

“Probably time now to see if your cookin’ is as good as your kissin’.”

Apparently, it was, since the food was soon gone. After things were cleaned up and back in the basket they sat together feeding each other the remaining potato chips - each one paid for with a peck on the lips.

“Thank you.” Meagan said after a while.

“For what? Salty kisses?” Justin asked, genuinely perplexed, but smiling as he waited for her answer.

“For that talk we had when you asked me go steady.”

“The big s-e-x talk?”

“The big no s-e-x talk, really.”

“Yeah. It’s more comfortable agreeing on the ground rules ahead of time. Then we - well I - won’t be wondering if you’ll be okay with not going any further than I believe we should.”

“Hey, it seems simple to me. Kissing and being close is for now. Sex is for after marriage.”

“Almost everybody these days probably thinks we’re weird, thinking that way

“Not everybody. Lots of my girlfriends say they’d give anything to have a guy like you.”

“Really! You’ve told them?”

“It sort of slipped out, one afternoon. I’m sorry if that embarrasses you.”

“I suppose it shouldn’t. That’s what I believe. No. That’s okay. A guy has to be able to live with what he believes. I have to admit I’ve thought about how it would be with you. It’s pretty impossible for a guy not to think about stuff like that - dad told me that when he and I had our big sex talk when I was thirteen - which, by the way, was way too late.”

“I’ve had thoughts like that, too. I never thought I’d admit that to you. See! You’re just a lot more comfortable than all the other guys I’ve dated.”

“All the other guys,” Justin said pretending to be bothered.

Meagan slapped at his chest.

“You know I’ve dated other guys. I told you that.”

“Just kidding. Actually, I appreciate how they let you practice on them so you’d be ready for Justin the Great!”

“You conceited . . .” She couldn’t think of an appropriate term to complete her thought.

Justin tried to help. “. . . wonderful, dreamy, handsome, romantic, boyfriend?” He said, filling in the blank as though it had been a question.

“Too many words and not enough kissing,” she said.

During the next several hours there was lots of kissing and lots of talking. They waded along the bank and Justin

threw stones across the river. That seemed to amaze Meagan. It always made Justin feel great when she was impressed by something he did.

“I hope you don’t hate me for this,” Justin said at last.

Meagan just looked at him, thinking it was an odd way to end such a wonderful afternoon.

He continued.

“I’m not going to be able to take you to the Spring Dance and I’m really sorry.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I can’t explain.”

“I can’t accept that.” Her tone remained calm - kind even.

“You’ll have to.”

Meagan stood up, hand on her hips.

“I think I deserve some kind of explanation. It’s just the most important night of the whole year.”

Justin chose not to speak; more because he had no idea what to say than that he didn’t want to.

Meagan began to cry.

“You can drop the basket and blanket off at my place later. I’m going to leave now.”

She ran back to the road carrying her sandals. Justin decided not to go after her. He had no idea what to do. Girls were hard enough to talk with when everything was okay. He certainly didn’t want to try when she was upset. He felt terrible.

He pulled off his shirt, removed everything from the pockets of his cutoffs, and dove into the water. A few laps back and forth across the river should help. They seemed to. Again, he arrived home sopping wet. His mother began wondering what was up (and that time there was no young snitch to bribe).

He went right up to his room and changed. Lucky was asleep so he didn’t bother him. It was past time for pills, but as long as he was sleeping, Justin figured he must be feeling okay.

It was almost four thirty. He crawled out the window to sit on the roof and think. It had been his best thinking place since he had been a little boy. It was the one place Lucky

didn't follow him, so he could be completely alone.

'I ate her great lunch. I took her great kisses. And then I sent her off crying. What a jerk?'

He hadn't been out there five minutes when Billy drove up in his Mustang convertible. Seeing his friend perched on the porch, Billy knew something was wrong. He got out and walked across the yard.

"Go away, please," Justin called down to him.

Billy ignored it and began climbing the tree next to the porch. He'd sit there facing his friend until he either talked or went inside. It was a thing they did for each other. Billy found his familiar perch and made himself comfortable. He took out a pack of gum and unwrapped a piece for himself, throwing another over onto the porch roof. It lit within easy reach of Justin.

Justin glowered at Billy, but remained silent. He picked up the gun and unwrapped it, holding it in his hand for a long time before putting it into his mouth.

"The Spring Dance thing?" Billy stated more than asked.

Justin sighed and nodded.

"I got a solution if you want to hear it."

Justin said nothing, figuring it was going to be another one of Billy's offers to loan him the money - if not give it to him outright. Billy was generous, but Justin didn't take money from anybody. Either he earned it or he did without. Billy knew that, but he certainly didn't understand it. Billy regularly begged for money from his parents knowing that in the end they'd fork it over just to shut him up. He had it down to a science. When it took more than three minutes to squeeze them for fifty bucks, he felt he was losing his touch.

Billy spoke again.

"The guy who mowed the yard at Dad's plant kicked the bucket and they're looking for a new yard guy. Be about fifteen hours of work a week. I can probably haggle them up to nine bucks an hour - the plant will furnish the mower and gas."

Justin looked up. Some quick calculations made that a \$135 a week. After deductions that would still come to about one-ten take home. He'd picked up two new lawns that

morning at church. Add that 110 to the 150 he already had going and he was looking at almost four thousand bucks over the fifteen-week lawn mowing season. His fortunes had just improved - almost doubled. He still didn't have Doc's bill but figured it wouldn't be more than two thousand. That would leave him money for books and school clothes for next year. He suddenly felt downright wealthy.

"Get your lazy butt over here. I need details. Who, where, when?" Justin said, his mood suddenly improved.

Billy scooted out on the limb and jumped the three feet down to the roof.

"There is one possible hitch," he said, taking a seat, his back against the wall.

"Now you tell me, after I let you cross the moat. Nothing's ever just straight out with you."

"It's one of my more loveable and mysterious traits, I suppose."

Trying to control it, Justin couldn't help snorting a single laugh. He shook his head. There was certainly only one Billy. The World probably couldn't survive more than that.

"Okay. Give. What's the bottom line?"

"The brother of the dead guy told dad he'd like to take over. But I think I have that covered. He lives over in Paxton and I know this girl whose uncle owns a dry-cleaning place over there and he's looking for help so I told him about Jake - the dead guy's brother - and I think he'll hire him - not the dead guy, his brother - so the job'll be yours - mowing not burying the dead guy. Just a little technicality I need to sew up first, see. Nothing to worry about. Billy takes care of things."

"If you'd work one tenth that hard in your classes you'd make the honor roll."

"If you'd just let me slip you a fifty now and then, I wouldn't have to work this hard and we could both goof the summer away."

"You'll never change, I guess."

"You better believe that!"

"Don't you have any long term goals - any dreams about what you want to do with your life? You only get one life to make good in, you know."

“Oh, I got that covered. I keep encouraging my dad to make lots of money so I can retire at 21. It takes lots of strength to do all that encouraging, you know. I’m sapped practically every night.”

“That’s a terrible way to think about the future! You just don’t get it. Life is about doing good stuff for the people around you.”

“I thought I did that.”

“Well, I suppose you do, come to think of it.”

“So?”

“So, you always confuse me when we start talking about this.”

“Okay, then. Presto Change-o. How’s Lucky doing today?”

“Not much better, I’m afraid. If he’s not showing some improvement by morning I’m going to talk with Doc after school tomorrow.”

“We can take him over in my car if he needs to go back.”

Justin nodded. Billy was a very generous person. Maybe inheriting his dad’s money would be a good thing. He’d probably end up giving most of it away to folks who really needed it.

They went back inside through the window. Lucky was whimpering so Justin gave him two more pills.

“He hasn’t eaten a thing since the operation,” Justin said, smoothing the hair on the back of Lucky’s neck.

“Well, Doc said he’d take care of himself, right?” Billy said, hoping to comfort his friend about it.

“Yeah. Probably right. He’s not expending any energy on physical activity so he probably doesn’t need to eat yet.”

Even after he said it Justin wasn’t sure that he entirely believed that, but it made some sense and helped him feel better.

“So, you and your Grandma? What’s up?”

“She’s looking for a little house of her own. We haven’t said a word to each other since I blew my top at her.”

“You’re telling me you still haven’t apologized to her?”

“Not exactly.”

“What does that mean?”

“I got her a card and wrote, ‘Sorry,’ on it.”

“Chicken!”

Billy admitted Justin’s accusation by tucking his hands under his armpits, making a chicken noise, and flapping his arms.

“You can’t understand how bad I feel,” Billy said leaning back in the recliner. “In your whole life I’ll bet you never made anybody feel bad.”

“Exhibit one: Meagan. This very moment.”

“Yeah, but you weren’t mean to her. You couldn’t ever be cruel to somebody on purpose.”

“So, the thing between you and your Grandma, happened. Deal with it. Fix it. You’re the master fixer of all time. Look how you’re fixing the lawn deal for me.”

“Easier to fix things when it’s for others than when it’s for me.”

Justin shrugged his shoulders realizing further conversation about it wouldn’t help at that point.

“Let’s go into town and get a burger. I’m buying,” Billy suggested.

“You still don’t get it.”

“Oh, the money thing, well this is how it is, see. It’s like a celebration. I get to solve the big lawn problem for my dad by getting you to agree to take over. That makes Dad happy with me and he’ll be an easier touch the next couple of weeks. So, I’m just asking you to help me celebrate my good fortune.”

“You gotta end up in Congress.” Justin said. “Just wait and see.”

They were soon in Billy’s car heading for town.

“I’d rather not go by Meagan’s place,” Justin said.

“Just a little chicken in your bones, too,” Billy said kidding him in reference to Justin’s earlier comment.

“Got me, I guess. Let’s change the subject.”

“I heard some stuff about Paxton,” Billy offered.

“Like what?”

“Like they keep somebody in center field with binoculars steeling the catcher’s pitch signs. Seems they already got ours from the last game. They have some walkie-talkie set up from the guy in the stands to one of the players. I doubt if their coach knows about it. The kid in the dugout

signals the batter and he's ready for the pitch before it's thrown."

"So, I just need to switch things up with the pitchers."

"Yeah. I figured maybe a different set for every batter."

"Sounds confusing," Justin said.

"Maybe not. We got five signals. What if we number them one through five?"

"That's how we do it now."

"Just listen. Let me finish. Say, your first show of fingers tells me where to begin down the list of those five, like say you show four. Four is my fast ball. Then your second signal tells me how many to add to that first number, like you show one. Then I start counting at four and add one. That's five, and five is my curve so that's the one I throw."

"Great, but the guy in the stands may catch on after while. How about we agree on a different order for every inning? Like it could go backwards from five to one in the second inning and figure out some different order for the rest of them."

"I think we may have something. Are you sure I'm smart enough to actually remember all that?" Billy joked.

"Only about as sure as that the sun'll come up in the morning."

It got a grin from Billy, but no other response. Justin had been thinking and not paying attention to where they were.

"You idiot! You've got us right in front of Meagan's house. You trying to kill me?"

He unbuckled his seat belt and slid down so he couldn't be seen.

"Naughty! Naughty!" Billy teased. "Against the law not to wear the belt."

"You just drive careful so we don't get in a wreck, and it'll all be okay. I can't believe you did this to me."

"Just trying to help."

"Just trying to fry the chicken, is more like it."

"Whatever. You can get up now. She wasn't outside anyway."

He continued as if none of that had happened.

"We'll need to get with Randy and Kurt - one of them

will probably start tomorrow.”

“I think we have a good plan. Do we tell Coach?” Justin asked.

“Why? Coach would just have to report it to the league and Paxton would be disqualified so we’ll never know who’s really the best team.”

“Better - not best; the better team - there are only two.”

“Better. Best. In their case both words mean dirty, underhanded, low-down, scumbags.”

“And once again he changes the subject so he won’t have to improve himself. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you enjoyed being dumb.”

Billy smiled a broad, self-satisfied, smile. They were soon inside Bob’s Burger Barn enjoying triple cheeseburgers, fries and shakes. Billy had comments to make about each girl who walked by - and they had nothing to do with the size of her intelligence.

Talk like that always posed a problem for Justin. It wasn’t that he wasn’t interested in the female form. He WAS! He just thought that since he had a special girl, he should somehow keep from thinking about others.

“I’d rather talk about something else,” Justin said.

“No, you wouldn’t,” Billy came back. “Look, just because you’ve already ordered - if you get my drift - it doesn’t mean you still can’t enjoy looking at the menu.”

“You have a warped mind and an answer for everything, don’t you? You’re the greatest rationalizer of all time - that means convincing yourself that something that’s not right is okay just because you want to do it.”

“I know what it means, Knucklehead. I’m lazy not stupid.”

All things considered, they both felt it had been a great evening together. Good friends tell it like it was - no hard feelings, no damaged egos - just happy to have been together.

CHAPTER FOUR: The Blackstone Vultures

Lucky had a bad night so Justin had one, too. Between Lucky's whimpering and Justin's worrying, he hadn't got much sleep. The alarm went off way too soon. Justin's first reaction was to pull the sheet up over his head. A few moments later, however, he was sitting on the edge of his bed stretching his reluctant muscles and yawning himself fully conscious. It was going to be a full day and he needed to get going.

"Now, you sleep!" He said quietly looking over at Lucky. "I suppose this is how it is when you have a sick child. Glad I'm not going to be in that situation for quite a few years."

As he showered he planned his day. Go to Docs before school and ask him about Lucky, get the bill, and see about working out a lawn mowing trade for part of it. Then he'd walk to school rather than taking the bus because he still couldn't face Meagan. Fortunately, they didn't have any classes together - well, study hall second hour, but Justin planned to get a pass to coach's office and sleep. He could probably extend that into a two-period nap, since he had PE third hour with coach and he'd want him to be rested for the game after school.

Billy would work out the pitching strategy with the other guys. Meagan would be at the game - she was always at the games. Justin felt really bad about what had happened between them. As soon as he heard for sure about the job out at the plant, he'd talk with her and explain. Maybe he could still work something out. Life had been much easier when there were just guys in his life. Girls complicated things. He'd never want to go back to his pre-hormone days, but still, girls

did complicate things.

Dried and dressed he gave Lucky another dose of pain pills and a long drink of water. He set out some fresh food, which was sniffed and then passed over in favor of a nap. Justin was worried.

It seemed like everything that popped into his mind that morning was a worry; Lucky, the lawn deals at Doc's and the plant, the vet's bill, Meagan feeling bad, the game, and being so tired. On top of all that, his favorite shirt wasn't washed and ready for him to wear. Although disgusted with himself, he still had to smile as he said, "That tends to happen when you hang it on the back of your closet door instead of putting it in the laundry hamper!"

He slid down the banister waiting for his mother's usual reprimand. It didn't occur. He shrugged his shoulders and entered the kitchen.

"Waffles keeping warm in the oven," she said, greeting him with her usual morning kiss. "Couldn't find your red shirt in the dirty clothes. Get it down here and I'll wash it out by hand and stick it in the dryer. I assume you want to wear it. You always wear it on game days."

It was times like that, that helped Justin understand about a parent's love. He hugged her around the waist, lifted her into a triple twirl around the kitchen and bounded back up to his room, soon back with the garment in question. It was delivered into her hands with another short kiss to her cheek.

He outlined his day for her - omitting the parts about Meagan - and explained that he wanted to go over to Doc Adam's place early. He'd be back for his books and shirt.

Five waffles later, he was out the door on a trot headed for Doc's place. Justin liked to run early in the morning, though usually did it before his shower for obvious reasons.

As Justin stood there bent over, hands on knees, and breathing hard, Doc pulled up in his bright red pickup.

"Out and about bright and early," Doc said, walking up the sidewalk toward the office door. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"I got three things on my mind - well, more than that, but only three to drop off here."

They exchanged smiles.

“If it’s about the bill for Lucky, you can take all the time you need to pay it off. I won’t starve in the meantime.”

“How much is it?”

They entered the reception room. Doc moved behind the desk, opening a file cabinet and removed a folder.

“Seven hundred and fifty dollars. Sounds outrageous, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, no, Sir. If my plans work out I should have you paid off before the end of summer. About that, I wondered if maybe you’d be interested in trading some lawn mowing for part of the bill.”

“Sounds like a good deal to me. Your mower and gas. Every Sunday morning, early, whether it needs it or not. Fifty bucks for the job. That be okay?”

“That sounds fine - very generous in fact. Ours is three times this size and I do it for waffles!”

It was worth a chuckle between them.

“About Lucky. He doesn’t seem to be doing all that well. Still won’t eat. Sleeps all the time. Whined all night. I’ve been giving him the pills.”

“His nose still damp?”

“Yes, Sir. I must check that about a hundred times a day.”

“His breathing okay?”

“Yeah. Actually, that seems quite a bit easier for him than when he first came home.”

“Are his eyes clear?”

“Not really. That bad?”

“Let’s give him until this time tomorrow. If he isn’t moving around and eating by then, bring him back and I’ll take a look. I’ll give you an antibiotic. Sounds like there may be more infection than I anticipated.”

With the new pills in hand, Justin thanked the old gentleman and jogged his way home. He should have felt better but he didn’t. It was the expression on Doc’s face when they were talking about Lucky’s eyes. He hoped the pills would take care of everything.

Justin just had time to brush his teeth, change his shirt and give Lucky his first dose of antibiotic before he needed to be on his way. He’d cut across several fields and stay away

from the bus route. That would take a bit longer but seemed worth it at that moment in his life. He followed the river trail for a while wishing there was time for a swim. He stopped to chat with the Miller's cow - Molly - a close personal friend since Justin had been a small boy.

School began at eight and he plopped himself down in a desk at the rear of Mrs. Barker's English room, just as the bell rang. Second period and a nap couldn't come too soon. It was a struggle to keep his eyes open as the teacher droned on from Hamlet in her usual, slow, emotionless, monotone.

* * *

A two-period nap helped a lot. At noon, he called his mother to make sure she had given Lucky his mid-day doses of medicine, and to check on his condition. Unchanged. He and Billy opted for the sack lunches and took them to a secluded spot behind the bus garage. Justin didn't want to run into Meagan. Billy made occasional chicken noises as they ate. Justin threw occasional punches in response. Billy was the big loser - sore shoulder, sore throat.

At last, three thirty arrived, and Justin entered the locker room. He congratulated himself on having evaded Meagan for the entire day. The voices of his teammates seemed louder and more excited than usual as they dressed out for the game. Coach had very little to say - just the usual, "I know you can do it. We're not here to give up. Just hang loose. Concentrate and do your best."

It could have just as well been a recording of his past pre-game talks, but seemed to energize the boys, regardless. They ran the two blocks to the ball field as an untamed pack, screaming, grunting and whooping as only high school guys do.

The Paxton buses were just arriving as the Vultures ran onto the field.

"Tweedy birds! Tweedy birds!" came the course of taunts from the open windows of the buses - an intended put down of the Vultures' team name.

Coach didn't allow his players to respond to the jeers and gestures from opposing team members, so they continued on to their dugout. Coach walked to meet the Paxton coach and they shook hands. The two of them had

been good friends for years and understood - more than their players could - that regardless of who won or lost, the world really would not come to an end.

Kirt was the starting pitcher - pretty much the way Billy had figured it would be. Justin spotted the kid with the binoculars right away. He'd make sure he kept his legs open wide enough so his signals could be seen.

Kirt fanned the first three batters. Their swings were awkward - ugly even. The Paxton coach looked puzzled. So did the Vulture's coach for that matter, but at least he seemed pleased.

Justin always led off the batting order. Back in his more consistent days, he batted 350 and could be counted on for two or three singles a game with an occasional two or three-bagger. He was a consistently good two-strike hitter. His speed was an asset when it came to base running; he was the fastest player on the team.

Unlike the mild-mannered Justin off field - the one who wouldn't hurt a fly - he played like a maniac once he became a base runner. He threw himself fearlessly at the opponents and enjoyed placing an occasional cleat where it probably shouldn't have been placed. When the run was on, he put everything he had into it and seldom stopped until both he and the baseman were rolling in the dust. Meagan couldn't understand that about him. It was one of those things where you just had to be a guy.

Justin's batting slump continued, although in the first inning he got a solid long ball that traveled some 400 feet eventually going foul off first.

'Too late. I'm swinging too late just like Billy said,' Justin thought to himself.

Over the next five innings the Vultures had six hits and three runs. They led three/zero.

In the top of the seventh, Kirt gave up a homer. His arm was tired and Coach pulled him. It was time for Billy to do what he did so well.

The score was three/one, Vultures. Justin hadn't seen the guy with the binoculars since the end of the fifth inning, so figured they had given up on that front. Now it would come down to the real skill of one team against the real skill of the

other. That's how it should be.

Billy was pumped; his fast ball was faster and his slider more pronounced. The curve he was throwing waited 'til the very last second to veer off course. It was one, two, three down in a row. Things were looking good.

Justin connected once but overcompensated and fouled it off third. 'Okay, that was too soon. I'll get it. It's coming back.'

The overall result was the same. He struck out.

Billy, not known for his hitting, slid a powerful ground ball between second and the right fielder for a double. It was as if he felt he had to play for both himself and his best friend. By the end of the eighth it was tied at five. The second Paxton batter hit a fly ball to deep center field. It was dropped for an error, but brought in a run. Six/five, Paxton. Billy put down the next three in a row.

In the bottom of the ninth, Paxton put in their best reliever. He couldn't work long, but his fast ball was nearly untouchable for thirty pitches or so. Billy struck out. So did the second batter. The next Vulture got the crowd to its feet by driving one to the center field wall for three bags. The crowd stayed up, chanting, "Vul-tures, Vul-tures, Vul-tures!"

It had come around to the top of the batting order. The tying run was on third. Justin walked out to the plate. 'Halfway in between those two fouls and I'll have him home,' he said to himself, trying to pump up some confidence.

The Paxton catcher had a well-practiced selection of snappy put-downs and pulled no punches with Justin. "Had any hits at all this year, Bat Boy?" "I hear they got your mama waiting to pinch hit for you, little guy." "The idea is to hit that little thing the pitcher throws at you - just in case your coach failed to mention it."

Justin was pretty good with the chatter himself, so he didn't let it bother him. It was part of the game. His concentration was good. He kept his eye on the ball.

"Strike one," the announcer called over the sound system.

Justin shrugged it off. 'Plenty of swings left,' he told himself.

"Foul back into the stands, makes that strike two - 0

and 2 the count.”

‘Okay, so there aren’t plenty of swings left, but all I need is one.’

“Ball one, high and away.”

“Ball two, inside just below the knees. Two and two’s the count.”

Justin stepped back and out of habit looked toward the sidelines where Lucky usually sat. There would be no Lucky that day. He adjusted his hat and stepped back into the box. ‘This guy won’t waste another pitch - it’ll be right down the pike. I’ll swing away,’ Justin decided.

The announcer called the play.

“The windup. The pitch. A blazing fastball. The Fox swings and misses high. The Paxton Pirates pull this one out on the great relief pitching of Mickey Martin. I know the Vultures would have liked to have clinched the conference here this afternoon. It’ll have to wait for Friday and the showdown with Springfield who’s been really tough on the home team this year. It sets up a huge game on Friday. Four p.m. - right back here, folks.”

Most of his teammates swatted Justin on the butt and told him not to worry about it. A few of the meaner spirited guys, suggested he hang up his cleats for the season so somebody who knew how to hit could have a chance. Those comments hurt, but he understood how they must have felt. His hitting stunk; that was no secret.

Billy, of course, put a good spin on it.

“You’re just bound and determined to keep the championship excitement going ‘til final game, aren’t you, man?”

They both knew it was bogus but they also knew it was what a best friend would say. Coach, always positive with the boys, put his arm around Justin.

“I know you feel pretty low right now, son, but I really liked the power you showed on those foul’s you hit today. Something good is happening. Hang in there.”

Justin nodded, appreciative of Coach’s words and the clear confidence he showed in him. The reality was, Justin was the best catcher in Vulture history and Coach wasn’t about to do without him behind the plate whether he ever hit

another ball or not. Coach also knew it was the boy's only ticket to college and that was certainly more important than a conference championship.

Justin didn't look into the stands for Meagan after the game. He hurried back to the locker room. Billy invited him to go for a drive, but Justin needed to be alone. He stood in the shower for a long time, waiting for the others to clear out. He'd had all the pity and put-downs he could handle in one day.

He was quiet through supper and picked at his food. His parents understood - as well as parents could - what he was feeling and they didn't press. He asked to be excused before dessert and went out to sit on the porch. He saw the birds circling high above the black stone cliffs that overlooked the river. He liked it up there. It was his second-best thinking place.

"I'm going to the cliffs for a while," he called inside.

"See you back here before dark," his father called, agreeing to it, but setting a reasonable limit.

"Do be careful," his mother added, wishing he'd just stay away from such dangerous places. Sitting way up on the roof was bad enough in her judgment, but the cliffs were seventy feet above raging rapids.

The danger that lurked in such situations seldom entered into his thoughts - he was fifteen and felt invincible - safe from all possible hazards. It was a dangerous way to view life, but seemed to be universal among teenage males.

The little town of Blackstone had taken its name from those cliffs. They bordered the east edge of the river, setting a rugged skyline for several miles. The school teams had taken their name from the big, black birds that made their home high up in the cliffs - the vultures.

Justin had never liked the team name. He thought of vultures as being dirty scavengers that waited impatiently for maimed animals to die so they could selfishly fight among themselves over the carcasses. It just wasn't the image that kind, considerate, Justin felt was appropriate for boys his age to hold up as their standard. Now, a nine-foot-tall grizzly bear that could kill its victim with one swipe of a paw - that would have been cool. You have to be a guy.

Justin had been climbing the cliffs since he'd been a little boy. He knew many different routes to the top. Some were easier and less dangerous than others. That evening he didn't need the rush that risk and peril provided, so he chose an easy route and was soon sitting in a broad, recessed area near the top, his back against a small, oddly shaped, tree. He wondered how that tree had survived for so long up there, springing as it did from a crack in solid rock. He missed Lucky, who somehow always managed to beat him to the top.

The view back into the late afternoon sky was beautiful - even a young grizzly lover could appreciate that. He became fascinated with the birds. There was a nest, less than thirty feet from where he sat. It was tucked into a small crevasse in the rock face of the cliff. Several of the ugliest little heads he'd ever seen appeared above the sticks and mud as the mother made her awkward landing on a nearby stone. She carried revolting looking animal parts in her beak and patiently held the meal out so her hungry offspring could take them from her. Once emptied, she spread her huge wings and made the return trip in search of more nourishment. Five minutes later she was back. Again, the babies squawked and fought each other for the newest morsels.

As he watched, two things came to mind. One was the tremendous amount of time and effort a mother vulture - he assumed it was the mother, though he had no way of knowing - expended in the constant care of her young. It was a trait that seemed built into to most all creatures by Mother Nature - or whatever name you might want to give her/him. So many animal babies were completely helpless in the beginning. Without the tireless efforts of parents, they and their species would soon perish.

He wondered how it had been when he was a baby - all the care his parents had given him. The way they had kept him safe, clean, and well fed - warm in the winter and cool in the summer. He wondered how many kids ever thought about saying thanks for all that. Maybe, generation after generation, that debt got repaid as kids grew into young adults and did the same for their own children. He'd make a point of somehow letting his own mom and dad know he appreciated what they had done for him - even though he realized he couldn't truly

understand all that was involved until he had the chance to be a parent himself.

The second thing had to do with beauty. It was harder to put into words. But there she was, the ugliest creature he'd ever seen, acting in a caring, tender, patient - maybe even loving - way to her kids. Looks had nothing to do with the value of the being. He had known that for a long time, of course, but not until that moment did it really make sense. If he was a good person, who tried to make his part of the World a better place every day, it didn't matter one stitch whether he was handsome, average looking, or down-right ugly. He had the idea most kids his age didn't get that. It was a pity. So much sorrow and worry and grief could be avoided during the teen years, if just that one thing were understood.

Suddenly, being a Vulture, seemed fine - exceptional, even!

And, what he had always thought of as a boring name for a town - Blackstone - also took on a new meaning; it was a strong safe place that protected the young from harm. That seemed to accurately sum up just what a home town should be.

It had been great getting his mind off his problems. It couldn't last forever, but it had provided him the rest he required. The sun was touching the horizon and he needed to get home. He stood and looked down into the river. It would be such a rush to jump off the cliff and into the water. It would kill him, of course, so he wouldn't do it, but what a rush he thought that would be on the way down.

He had noticed that some guys his age seemed to need that kind of feeling a whole lot more often than he did. Some acted like they were starving if they didn't find some way to put themselves in danger every day. He didn't know if that was just built into some guys' genes, and not into others, or if it was somehow learned. Either way, he was glad that he wasn't driven to do such dumb things - well, not on a regular basis, anyway.

Out of habit he looked around for Lucky, then made his way back down the rocky path to the meadow. Again, a swim would have been nice, but he'd told his father he'd be home by dark so he needed to hurry on.

As he approached his house, he saw Billy's car in the driveway.

"What can that dimwit have up his sleeve at this hour?" he asked himself, shaking his head, as he rolled under the fence across the road from his yard.

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CHAPTER FIVE: It's What Friends Do!

"Well, you done moping around and feeling sorry for yourself yet, knucklehead?" Billy said leaning against the trunk of his car, greeting his friend.

"Until I saw you standing there, and remembered what a worthless loser I've got for a friend."

It was a smiling, high five greeting - as close to a hug as guys ever seemed to come, off the playing field. That in itself seemed strange to Meagan. Guys would hug each other openly out on the field in full view of hundreds of people, but they wouldn't be caught dead doing the same thing in private.

"What you up to this late in the day?" Justin asked, urging him toward the house with a twist of his head.

"I figure that I know better than anybody else in the World what you really need tonight - like I usually do when it comes to you - so, since tomorrow's a parent/teacher conference day, and we don't have practice 'til two, I decided that you need a all-night campout down at the hut we built when we were ten."

"Actually, that sounds great, but I can't leave Lucky alone. Nights seem to be his worst time."

"Not to worry. Got it covered. I called Doc Adams and he said it would be good for Lucky to see some new territory and to get moved around some - so your dad says we can load him into the back of the pickup and take him along. I'll leave my keys up here in case they need a car."

"Got it all covered, huh?"

"I'm the fixer, remember. By the way the lawn job's

yours. The dead guy's brother took the job at the laundry."

"You're so crude - dead guy's brother? You show no respect at all."

"You're right. 'The brother of the poor, unfortunate, dead guy'."

It required a head lock from Justin and rib tickling from Billy - his traditional means for escaping any hold Justin tried. A truce was soon called and they entered the kitchen together all smiles.

"I figured you'd need food," his mother said, clearly having discussed the plan with Billy. "Got a box here with sandwiches, chips, apples, grapes - which are for eating and not throwing at each other - and a six pack of root beer. There's popcorn in a foil skillet to pop over the fire. What else?"

Justin gave his mother a peck on the cheek as Billy answered her question.

"How about a set of easy blonds?"

"Watch your mouth or I just may not let my little boy play with you anymore, William Shakespeare Potter."

"How in blazes did you find out my middle name? That's always been my closest guarded secret!"

"Brian is the most easily bribed human being I've ever encountered," she answered, kidding. "Your secret's safe with me so as long as you don't lead my little Justy baby down the wrong path."

She patted Justin's face.

"Okay. I understand and respect blackmail. That works. No blonds."

He mumbled something into his hand.

"I heard that," she said. "There will be no brunettes or redheads either."

"How's Lucky been the past hour?" Justin asked changing the subject.

"He's been sleeping. I gave him both kinds of pills at six."

Justin nodded as if to say thanks. Worry showed on his face.

Before long, the three of them were in the truck headed back across the meadow toward the river. They hadn't used

the hut since the previous summer. They called it a hut but it more closely resembled a teepee made of saplings laid side-by-side, open on one side and covered with straw. Within a few minutes the missing hay had been replaced and fresh hay spread across the floor. Billy started a fire in the rustic, rock, fireplace they had built just outside in front. Justin moved Lucky from the truck onto his own special, well-padded spot near the opening from where he could watch what was going on. He managed to keep his tail wagging in a slow but steady way and seemed happy to be there with them. His overall condition, however, remained about the same.

“Eat first or swim first?” Justin asked.

“How about a sandwich now - your mom made a dozen - I already counted them - then swim?”

“Sounds good.”

Justin dug through the box and came up with two, foil-wrapped, sandwiches. He had something on his mind.

“Did ya run into Meagan after the game?” he asked handing one to Billy.

“Yeah. She asked me if you were okay.”

“And you said?”

“I said no you weren’t okay. You thought you lost the game for us, which is nuts, of course, and that you were worried about Lucky and you were kicking yourself from one end of the county to the other over the Dance thing.”

“You really said all that?”

“I’m the fixer, remember.”

“How could any of that possibly fix anything?”

“Look at it this way. It made her put her self-centered hurt feelings about the dance on hold while she worried about you and Lucky. Then, tomorrow you find her and tell her the truth about the dance and ask her to go now that you have some money and let her see that you are feeling better about yourself and everything will be hunky-dory again.”

“Hunky-dory?”

“It’s a saying grandma uses a lot - means ‘alls well that ends well’, I think.”

“I got that from context. I guess you did okay. One thing though.”

“What?”

“Last one into the water is road kill.”

Justin leaped to his feet, stripped to his shorts, and ran to the water, arriving long before Billy, who would never put down a sandwich just to win some silly contest. He wasn't above drowning the winner of such a challenge, however, once he arrived. At first, they tussled together in the water. Eventually it quieted down to treading water and talking.

“Who you taking to the dance?” Justin asked, realizing he had been too tied up in his own problems to have ever asked.

“Kayla,” Billy said.

“It figures. I've known you liked her for months. Wondered why you never asked her out.”

“Her father hates my father and I figured that wouldn't be such a great beginning for a relationship.”

“But she could care less about the fathers' problems, right?”

“Right. You knew that all along, but decided to keep it to yourself?”

“I didn't know about the problem. I just know about girls - this it Justin the Great, remember.”

“If you know so much about girls then why did you break Meagan's heart the way you did?”

Justin remained quiet for a long time and swam out toward the center of the river. Billy followed, feeling sorry that he'd made his friend feel bad.

“I never meant to break her heart,” Justin said. “It's just a dance. I had no idea it meant that much to her.”

“And you say you know girls! There is no such thing as JUST A DANCE, knucklehead. Every dance is the biggest event of their life. They get to do their hair. They get to do their face. They get to buy a dress. They get to brag about who's taking them and lie about all the guys they turned down.”

“I guess I missed all that somewhere along the line. I hate dances. I'll know better from now on. It's too bad girls can't think about things like guys do. Life would sure be simpler.”

Billy laughed out loud, nearly drowning himself.

“If that was the case we'd all probably still be living in

caves and dragging our women around by the hair - not such a bad idea, really.”

“Your way of saying the female’s point of view on things tends to civilize those of us driven primarily by testosterone?”

“Well, not my original saying. I overheard it somewhere - Lifetime or Oprah or some such place, I suppose. But it’s probably true. When somebody crosses a guy, our first response is to want to pound his face into mush. A girl merely wants to ruin his life forever. Guys have it out and it’s over. That’s it. Done. Finished. Girls draw the punishment out for as long as they possibly can. And that’s the essence of civilization: cease the fighting and replace it with slow, painful, forms of revenge.”

“I think you’re full of it. Civilization is based on mutual respect and peaceful problem solving, not revenge. Read the history books.”

“Sure. All of the major corporations have set up departments named, Mutual Respect and The Division of PPS - peaceful, prob . . .”

“. . . I got the picture. Let’s talk about something else. Civilization seems too depressing.”

“Girls?”

“Yes. Why don’t you carry on about girls for the next eight hours! I might as well give you my permission. You will anyway.”

Justin pressed Billy’s head beneath the water and swam back toward shore. Billy followed and they were soon stumbling and laughing their way back toward the fire. Standing wet - there in the evening breeze - was chilling. Justin broke out the towels. Billy poked up the fire while Justin sat with Lucky, scratching his ears and stroking the back of his neck.

“He’s really no better. We’ll need to take him to Doc’s first thing in the morning.”

“That should cost you another arm and leg - leaving him at a Vet’s to be cared for. It’s as bad as a people hospital.”

“Whatever it takes. Lucky doesn’t have parents like the vultures. All he’s got is me.”

It hadn’t made sense to Billy, but sometimes he actually

sensed when he should just keep his mouth shut. He soon had a blazing fire going that warmed the entire area and kept the mosquitoes at bay. Lucky always seemed to like watching a fire. Between the warmth and the hypnotic, dancing flames, he was soon asleep. Justin moved back closer to Billy who had, by then, found two huge slabs of chocolate cake in the bottom of the goodie box.

“Dessert first then the main course,” he said handing Justin a piece.

It pretty well summed up Billy’s philosophy of life. Get right to the good stuff. Only work through the accepted channels if there is no faster way. Always avoid the work involved in achieving a goal if there is any less effort-filled way to do it. Sometimes Justin had to wonder why he liked the kid so much. Maybe his mom was right - opposites attract.

Billy was a natural pitcher. If he hadn’t been, he certainly would never have taken the time to develop the skill. He was a natural athlete all the way around - a strong swimmer, fast in track, and had a killer three point shot in basketball. If he had decided to work at it, he could have been the most outstanding athlete Blackstone had seen in the past fifty years - maybe ever. But, that was not his style and in a way Justin admired him for it. Billy had fun with sports. If it wasn’t fun, Billy didn’t do it.

Justin agreed that if there was a way to make things enjoyable you should do that. But he also understood there were some things you just had to do: things you did because you were a member of a family; things you did because you agreed to go steady; things you did because you were a student or worked at a job. If they could be made into fun, great, but it was still your responsibility to do them even when they were boring or otherwise distasteful. In his view, civilization would fall apart if each person didn’t take the responsibilities that were his to take. Like the mother vultures. Like his own mother and father. Like the great dad he hoped he would be able to be for his own children someday. He was proud that he saw and took his responsibilities seriously.

“Great cake. Wanna trade families?” Billy asked, trying to be funny.

“You’d trade families over cake?”

“That and you’d have to take Brian off my hands.”

“Like you’d ever let that happen. You love him more than anybody in the world. I know you too well to fall for that.”

“I doubt if I really know what love is,” Billy said, suddenly more serious than Justin remembered he could be. He wasn’t sure how to follow up, but felt he should. Like most adolescents, Billy was a master of making a bold statement and then waiting to hear the response, rather than actually asking the question that was on his mind.

“I’ve been thinking about love a lot lately,” Justin said, hoping that would keep the topic alive.

“Your folks are always telling you they love you.” It was another statement from Billy. Maybe he really didn’t know what question he needed to be asking.

“Yeah. They tell me. I tell them. We love each other. I guess we’re lucky that we can say what we feel.”

“We don’t do that in my home.”

“I know. I’ve always thought that was too bad. You do show it though.”

“How’s that?” There it was. Billy’s first real question.

“Oh, the way you do stuff to Brian. You call him a little twirp, but he knows you’re really saying that you love him.”

“Got that figured out, do you?”

“Yeah.”

“And with my parents?”

“I have to admit I’ve never really seen it between them and you. I don’t know what to say.”

“Your family is always kissing and hugging. It’s enough to make a guy sick.”

“I’ve never seen you resist one of Mom’s hugs - and you always get one, coming and going.”

“A guy’s gotta be polite.”

He looked sheepish and shrugged his shoulders.

“You like it. You hug back. I get a big kick out of seeing you do that. It’s like the greatest thing.”

“Glad I’m good for a big kick. Yeah, I hug back. I like it. Grandma’s a hugger, or would be if I let her. Brian works her for like a hundred hugs a day.”

“You sound jealous.”

“Of that little twerp?”

“Translation: ‘Of that little kid I love so much?’”

“I need a sandwich. You?” Billy said, putting the discussion on momentary hold.

“Sure. What did she fix?”

“Ham and cheese. Peanut butter and jelly. And something that’s probably roast beef smothered in barbeque sauce.”

“Peanut butter sounds good,” Justin said after hearing the choices. He took out two root beers and exchanged one for a sandwich.

“So, what you been thinkin’ about - about the love thing, I mean?” Billy asked apparently on a roll with questions and suddenly brave enough to pursue the topic.

“That it’s complicated. That the one word means way too many different things. Like, I love mom and dad in one way. I love Lucky in another. Maybe I love Megan in some other way. Heck, I even suppose I love you.”

“Watch it, there.”

He cupped his hands, imitating a police blow horn.

“Keep your hands on the sandwich.”

“Cut it out. You know what I mean.”

“Unfortunately, I probably don’t. That’s pathetic, I know.”

“I found a tape in the book shelf in my folk’s room. It’s called something like, *The Many Faces of Love**. I’ve listened to it a couple of times. It’s all about sorting out the different kinds of love. It also talks about the differences between like and love, and between love and friendship.”

“All on one tape? Sounds compact. Any good?”

“I suppose that would be up to the one listening to it,” Justin said. “I’m sure my folks would let you borrow it if you want to.”

“I’d rather get the brief and to-the-point version from you. You know me; expend no more effort than is absolutely necessary.”

“If you’re serious I’ll give it a try. It’s weird talking with you about love, you know.”

“Oh, YES! I know weird when I feel it and this is definitely weird. We can just keep all this between the two of us, right.”

Lucky whined and they broke up with laughter. Nervous energy often comes out in laughter.

“Okay, the three of us then,” Billy said at last, leaning over and petting Lucky. He was in a dead serious conversation for the first time he could remember. It was strange. It was great. It was scary.

“Well, let’s start with friendship. You and I are friends. That means we enjoy being together, hangin’ out, playing sports, talking - doing things together. We both have entered into this relationship. It takes two for a friendship. I can’t really be your friend if you aren’t also mine. Friendship is a two-way thing.

“Then there’s like and love. Where friendship is based on mutual interests - behaviors, he calls them on the tape - love and like take place within our emotions. Like isn’t a behavior or an interest it’s an emotion. Love isn’t a behavior or an interest it’s an emotion. Since they both come from inside somebody, they aren’t automatically a two-way thing like friendship. I can have the emotion, the feeling, of love toward somebody who doesn’t have that same feeling toward me. When I say I love you, it tells something about me and not about you or our relationship. When the person you love, also loves you it becomes very special, but love doesn’t require the other one to love you back. It’s not loveship, like friendship which means a back and forth thing. We fall in love toward someone. One person has a feeling about someone else. We don’t say we fall in friend because friendship isn’t an emotion, it’s a relationship.

“Then there’s, like. Like has to do with one person’s reaction to a behavior or belief of somebody. I may not like the way somebody behaves. Or I may really like how nice somebody always is. For instance, I really like how you always try to make me laugh.

“You can love somebody but still not like what they do or how they think about something - like, is a person’s judgment - feeling - about a behavior or belief.

“Here’s a real example about you and me, if you’re strong enough to hear it.”

“Shoot. I’ve come this far and it’s been a pretty good trip.”

“Okay. Well, like I said, at some level I know that I love you. I’d be torn apart if anything bad happened to you. I’d do anything I could to help you - like you are doing for me tonight, by the way. I believe that we are friends - it’s like an unspoken agreement that we have between us. We enjoy doing things together. We enjoy each other’s company, you could say. I like the way you can always cheer me up. I like the way you’ve been trying to help me get out of my batting slump. I don’t like your attitude about girls as things to use for your own, self-centered, sexual pleasure. That’s your choice, but I don’t like it. You know that, of course. But, just because I don’t like that about you, doesn’t change the fact that I love you. It could, I suppose, put a strain on our friendship if either of us let it. I guess if you stop thinking you love somebody because of something they do, then you couldn’t have really loved them in the first place, you see. It was a matter of like all along - not love.

“I probably didn’t do the tape justice. You should really listen to it yourself. I think it’s also available as a little book**.”

Billy sat quietly. He even stopped eating. He reached over and brushed back the hair from Lucky’s face. He sighed.

“Thanks.” It was sincere. It was short and to the point - like one would expect from Billy. “I’ll borrow that tape if it’s okay with your folks.”

“Sure. Just say when. Wow. I can’t believe I told you I loved you. I mean, I really did mean it. It’s just not the kind of thing guys talk about.”

“Best friend do, I guess. At least we just did.” Billy said, looking Justin in the eyes for the first time in a long time. “You know what I don’t like about you the most, Justin?”

Justin hadn’t seen that coming, though he supposed he was his turn.

“That I lost the game for us today?”

“You didn’t lose the game for us today and I’ll prove that to you in a minute. No. It’s the way your family is dirt poor, the way you guys don’t have anything. You drive that beat up old truck. You live in an old house that needs painting and a new roof. You can’t have more than a half dozen shirts to your name - and what - three pair of jeans? You wear the same shoes every single day. But you guys are the happiest,

most helpful, loving people I've ever known. My family has all this money and cars and boats and clothes and stereos and computers and we're miserable. That's probably the dumbest thing anybody ever disliked about somebody else in the history of time."

"It sounds to me like it isn't me you dislike."

Billy nodded and sat in silence for a moment. "It's a whole lot easier to dislike you for being what you are, then to dislike me for being what I am."

There was some humor in his delivery but the message was clear and serious.

"So, back to me and the way my striking out at last bats didn't lose the game - if you please?"

"Yeah. Okay. Let's see. How many other outs did guys make on our team today?"

"I don't know."

"Twenty-six. Twenty-six other outs. If any one of them had been a hit or a homer, what you did or didn't do at last bats wouldn't have amounted to a hill of beans. In reality, any one of those twenty-six outs - two of them mine, by the way - was just as responsible for our losing as yours. So, stop beating yourself up about it. It's dumb, D-U-M, dumb!?"

Billy knew how it was spelled, of course, but he had to go for the laugh. He got it. He also got Justin flying through space at him from eight feet away. They tussled in the grass for a few minutes then parted, laughing. Justin spoke.

"It's a shame, you know?"

"What's a shame?"

"That we've just had the best talk of our lives and nobody else is ever going to know about it."

"The only important people in all this do know about it, and as one of those important people I will, under any and all circumstances deny to any outsider that it ever took place."

He shook his finger at Lucky who raised his head and wagged his tail.

* Loves Several Faces, by G. F. Hutchison, Published by the Family of Man Press.

**Life As Your Precious Gift, by G. F. Hutchison,

Published by the Family of Man Press (see Book Section at the end of this book).

CHAPTER SIX: Playing Second Fiddle

The boys had talked into the early hours of the morning. Justin woke first. It was almost seven. He couldn't believe he had slept in that late. He tried to wake his friend, but Billy slept on.

Lucky was awake but hadn't tried to move.

"It must be so scary for you, boy - feeling so bad and not understanding why."

He felt the dog's nose and shook his head.

"We're going to get you back to Doc's place. He'll know what to do to get you back on your feet."

Justin dug through his backpack and found the pills. He took a cup to the river and got some water. The medicine was soon down and Lucky managed a few licks to his master's hands, before settling back down onto the blanket. Justin was worried.

He packed things up and put them into the back of the truck. All that was left for breakfast was the popcorn and a can of root beer each so he sat cross-legged on the ground, holding the container out over the dieing fire. Ever since he had been a little boy he had played a game when corn popped. He'd see how many single kernels he could count popping before there were just too many popping at once to count. His all-time record was sixty-three. That morning he got no further than twenty-three. The fire must have been too hot.

If anything would wake Billy it would be the smell of food. It did and ten minutes later the popcorn was gone, the

fire was drenched and stirred, and they were on their way back toward the house.

“I need to get Lucky over to Doc’s,” Justin said. “I’ll let my folks know what I’m up to and then take him. It’s Tuesday, right?”

“All day, I’m told. I think I’ll go on home, then. I need to shower and work things out with Grandma. I’m not sure if I’m really happy about that talk last night. I suddenly feel uncomfortably responsible for my actions. That’s not my style!”

He shivered, dramatically.

Justin smiled, sensing it was as much truth as humor. He nodded that he understood, saying:

“Maybe later, then. After lunch?”

“Sure. I’ll give you a ring.”

“A ring! For me? Why Billy, I understand you love me, but I didn’t know you cared that much!”

It required a pounding, followed by ten active fingers tickling Justin’s ribs. He lay face up on the ground kicking his feet in the air and laughing himself to tears as Billy continued to sit on him.

“I give or Uncle or whatever I’m supposed to do. Just stop! I’m helpless here.”

Billy got up and offered a hand to help Justin to his feet. As Justin brushed himself off he just had to add, “I guess you know this means the engagement is off.”

He ran toward the house, laughing himself silly. Once Justin got two strides on any kid in school, he’d never be caught. Billy didn’t even try. Justin stood at the kitchen door and waved as Billy pulled out of the driveway. Their relationship had changed that night - perhaps, grown, would be a better term.

Justin entered the kitchen and accepted his mother’s kiss.

“I’m going to take Lucky to Doc’s place. We gotta try something else. He should have been up and walking by this time.”

“You’re filthy, you know,” his mother said, taking a step backward and fanning the air to dramatize her point.

“Thank you, mother dearest. I love you, too.”

He was soon back in the truck, headed for the Vet's office with his precious cargo on the seat beside him. Doc's truck was the only vehicle parked there. It was still early. Justin picked up Lucky and carried him up the walk to the low, red brick, building. He noticed that the grass really needed mowing. By Sunday it would be six inches high - no fun for a guy with a push mower.

"Doc! You here?" he called as he entered the waiting room.

"Back here," came Doc's familiar voice. "I saw you drive up. Bring Lucky on back and I'll take a look at him."

They were soon in the examining room.

Doc looked at his eyes, felt his neck and nose, and pressed gently against the dog's still gauze-wrapped mid-section.

"Let's cut this bandage away, boy, and see what's really going on down there."

Lucky looked up at Justin who reached down and scratched his ears. It seemed to be all the reassurance Lucky needed. He didn't struggle or whine.

"Hmmm. Ummm. So. Goodness."

None of that helped Justin understand what doc was finding.

"So?" he asked at last, impatiently.

"Massive infection, I imagine. There may be some internal bleeding from that artery on the heart that was feeding the tumor. I'll set him up with a more powerful anti-biotic in an I-V. He'll need to stay here for several days so we can monitor his reaction."

"Won't an I-V hurt him when he moves?"

"No. I'll make it into a fanny pack - tape the I-V sack just above his tail and run the tube into the upper part of his leg. He'll hardly know it's there."

"So? Is he going to be okay?"

"I can't promise that, Son. He's a very sick little animal. You've known that from the start. This will give him the best chance I know of."

"Okay, then. Do it. By the way, your grass needs cutting really bad. How about I come early in the morning? I know you don't want me making noise around here while you

have people in the office. But if I start at five thirty, I can be done before they come.”

“Sounds fine to me. I probably won’t be here by the time you leave. I keep a key to the back door under the air conditioner. Feel free to let yourself in and see Lucky. I trust you not to talk about the key.”

“Oh, no, Sir. Never. Thank you. I’ll be back after lunch to see him, Okay.”

“You come as often as you want to.”

Justin stayed to watch Doc fix the I-V. Once he was satisfied that Lucky would be comfortable, he gave him a kiss between the ears and left.

The drive home was punctuated by numerous heavy sighs and a stray tear or two. Doc really hadn’t given him much hope. He couldn’t imagine life without Lucky. He needed to keep busy. Practice was at two. He had six hours. First a shower; then he’d have to do some serious figuring about his financial situation.

Feeling refreshed at last, he sat back against the headboard on his bed and took a pad and pencil from his night stand. After ten minutes of adding, subtracting, crossing out and starting over, he put the pad down and spoke out loud.

“If I don’t rent a tux I can swing it. Twenty-five bucks for flowers, another twenty-five for diner, force a few dollars on Billy for gas - I suppose we’ll be doubling - he’ll never let me take her to the dance in the pickup. Ten more for pictures. That’s around sixty bucks. About two yards.”

He took a pint jar from the drawer in his night stand and shook the money onto the bed between his legs. After the counting was over he announced to himself:

“Three hundred and twelve dollars and 91 cents. If I use sixty for the dance, and start paying Doc two hundred a month that’ll leave about fifty. I’ll need ten for lunch today if I can coax Meagan to meet me. Then I need to fill-up the truck. Ouch! I’ll be flat busted. But then, I’ll do four lawns on Saturday and once the ball season’s over I suppose I’ll be out at the plant after school every day. It’ll be tight the rest of this week, but I’m used to tight.”

He felt better. He stuffed the money back into the jar and put on his shoes and sox (well, sox then shoes!).

“Your sweet, darling, thoughtful, helpful son is starved, mother dearest,” he said entering the kitchen.

“You know how to scramble or open cereal boxes I believe.”

It was what he had expected to hear, but thought it was worth a shot. It was time for her to leave for work. A honking horn in the drive signaled her ride had arrived. A hug, a kiss, and the every-morning dose of, “Remember who you are, today, honey,” and she was out the door.

He understood her words and he could smile to himself about them. She was just reminding him to remember to live that day the way he knew he should go about living it - with love and kindness and good humor. Just why she felt she had to remind him every single morning he didn’t understand.

(It’s a mother thing!)

He settled for Toasted Oats, O J, and four slices of toast and jelly. He put his dishes in the sink and went into the living room, sitting down beside the phone. Until that moment he hadn’t thought about what he’d say to her when he called. Should he just say, ‘Hi,’ and go on from there pretending nothing had happened? Should he begin by apologizing for being such an inconsiderate scumbag? Maybe some middle road would be better. He dialed.

“Hey, Meagan. This is the love of your life who’s really sorry he acted like such a jerk Sunday afternoon.”

“Hey, yourself. Good to hear from you. Thought you’d fallen off the face of the Earth. How’s Lucky?”

“Not very well. I had to take him back to Doc’s. He’s keeping him there for a few days - I-V and all.”

“Poor little guy,” she said.

“Poor little Lucky or poor little Justin?” he came back, trying to lighten things.

“Both, I suppose. So, is this an apology call, a Lucky update call, or something else?”

“All three I guess. We okay?”

“Of course, moron. We’ve always been okay. I just wish you’d have told me about the money problem.”

“Billy and his big mouth!!! That wasn’t for him to tell you.”

“It sounds like you’ve never met the boy. Come now. If

Billy knows it, Billy tells it.”

“Yeah. I guess. But, I got good news about all that - at least I hope it’s good news.”

“Oh?”

“How about meeting me for lunch and I’ll lay it all out for you?”

“Does it have to wait ‘til lunch?”

“Yeah. I want to do this right, for once.”

“You’re confusing me.”

“So. What’s new?”

“You can say that again! Okay. Where? When?”

“How about eleven at the Burger Barn?”

“Okay. Formal or informal?” she teased.

“Just wear shoes and you’ll be fine.”

“Just shoes? Now you sound like Billy.”

“You know what I mean,” he said.

“I’ll see you then. Kisses,” Meagan added.

“Yeah. See you then.”

Justin wouldn’t lower himself to say, “Kisses,” but he did end it all with a clear, unmistakable, simple, kiss. He dialed Billy’s cell. There was no answer. He dialed his house. Brian answered.

“Hey, Justin. Need me to help you work on your stickin’ swing some more?”

“Not today. Billy there?”

“You always ask for him?”

“D’ya think that might be because he’s my best friend and we talk sometimes?”

“I’ll be your best friend. I’m a lot more fun than he is and I don’t waste any of my time hanging around girls. I’ll always be here for you.”

“You make a tempting offer, but that’s just not how things are. You’re a good friend and I’m glad I know you.”

“That’s cool. Good Friend! I can handle that.”

“Back to Billy?”

“He’s helping grandma clean the house that she’s gonna move into this weekend. He never cleans our house. Heck, he never even cleans his room. I don’t know what’s wrong with him.”

“Maybe it’s what’s right with him, little buddy.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Some night, real late, you go into his room and tell him you want to talk about love. Tell him Justin sent you.”

Justin smiled.

“Barf City, man. I’m not going to talk about that stuff. Gotta go. Gilligan’s starting.”

Justin smiled as he hung up. Brian’s report made it appear that Billy was doing okay. He and Megan were doing okay. Lucky was getting the best help available, and he had just sealed a ‘good’ friendship pact with his little buddy, Brian. A mere two hours earlier, life had been a disaster. Suddenly it was good. Moods! Like Pastor had said: “Enjoy the good ones and know that the bad ones are just signals that better times lay ahead.” A wise old guy, that Pastor.

It was barely nine o’clock and he had the big things either off his list or arranged for. Justin loved to read. He picked up a book that he had been reading off and on, and paged through it ‘til he found the spot where he’d left off. He could identify with the main character - a minor league ball player in a slump and in danger of being cut. He read for a half hour and suddenly jumped up, letting the book fall where it would.

“Maybe that’ll work for me.”

Out the door he flew, on the run to school. Ten minutes later he was at the batting cage, loading the automatic pitcher. In the book, a retired player had given the main character some advice that had once worked for him in his years as a young batter.

“You’re a right-handed batter. Take your next thousand pitches batting left. Then try it your usual way again. Worked the kinks out for me.”

Two short phrases were burned into his brain. ‘A thousand pitches. Worked for me.’

It felt terribly awkward. He had to think how to do it every time he swung. Eventually he began hitting a few. That hadn’t seemed to be an important part of things in the book, but it tickled him that he could do it.

“Two hundred eleven,” he called out as if he had an audience.

Swish!

“Two hundred twelve.”

Swish!

* * *

“Four hundred ninety-seven.”

Clunk!

Four hundred ninety-eight.”

Clunk!

Four hundred ninety-nine.”

Swish.

“Five hundred.”

Swish.

Justin sat down on the grass in the shade and wiped the sweat from his face with his hat. He'd removed his shirt before he started swinging so it would stay dry. His jeans, however, were soaked.

“Am I going to stink like a locker room when I meet Meagan or what?” he said out loud but to himself. “I'll take another five hundred this afternoon. The cage will be shaded by the gym then. I don't know what I'm doing but it sure feels good. Hard to explain.”

He walked over to the water fountain and put his finger over the hole, squirting himself from the top of his head to his waist. He tried the locker room door but it was locked. He'd hoped to pick up a towel. Fifteen 'til eleven. He figured the breeze and sun would dry him off by the time he got downtown. He found a window that made a pretty good mirror. He combed his hair.

As he neared the Burger Barn he removed his T-shirt from his belt loop and put it on. He had forgotten to check his wallet - what if he'd come off without any money! A huge sigh of relief followed the sight of two fives and a one. He went inside. He'd managed to arrive a few minutes early. Meagan wasn't there yet. He slipped into a booth that he knew she liked, and waited.

She was ten minutes late. That was unlike punctual Meagan. She wore the smile of all smiles as she entered the restaurant. Justin stood and they traded short pecks to the lips. She slid in first and then Justin. Meagan liked for them to sit beside each other rather than across the table.

“You go first,” she said, giggling.

“First? I thought I was the only one going.”

“Right. Go ahead, sweetie.”

For some reason, it deserved a kiss on the cheek. He didn't know why, but didn't resist.

“I don't know what tale Billy told you so I want to start from the beginning.”

Meagan nodded, smiling far more than seemed necessary.

“You're more special to me than any girl's ever been. I hope you know that. Lucky's special to me, too. When I knew I'd have a huge vet's bill for him, I knew I didn't have money to spend on anything else - the dance was only one of lots of things. I was afraid it would seem like I cared more for Lucky than for you so I just didn't give you any explanation at all. Now, I see that was really dumb. I didn't mean to hurt you, but I figured you'd be hurt either way, see.”

“That is so sweet,” Meagan said, laying her head against his shoulder.

Justin had no idea why being such a jerk could possibly be sweet, but he would accept it. Sweet was better than scumbag any day! He continued.

“Now for the good news - well if that's enough of the explanation.”

He was serious. Meagan thought his concern was cute.

“Yes. Explanation noted and accepted.”

“Okay, then. The good news is that I suddenly have a gazillion new lawns so I'll have enough money for the dance - well, mostly.”

“Mostly?” she asked plainly puzzled, her face becoming serious.

“I got the money for everything but a tux. I got a suit, though - you know - church in winter.”

“That's so sweet.”

Two 'so sweets' in one morning seemed very good to Justin. Anticipating another kiss he turned his head and replaced his cheek with his lips. Good timing. It worked out fine.

“Now, me?” Meagan asked making sure he was finished.

“Okay. What?”

“My uncle - I just talked to him; it’s why I was late -has a tux rented for a wedding the day after the dance. You’re identical in size. He says you can borrow it if you’ll get it cleaned before the wedding - about ten dollars, I imagine. We can skip the pictures.”

“You knew exactly what I was going to say before you even got here, didn’t you?”

“Of course. I’m Meagan the Magnificent, didn’t you know?”

“Magnificent kisser. Magnificent girlfriend. Just didn’t know the Magnificent Mind Reader part, I guess,” Justin said, pretending to be put off.

“SO?” Meagan asked.

“So, what?”

“So, will you swallow your Fox family pride and use the tux or what?”

“There’s a Fox family pride, is there?”

“Your family won’t let anybody do anything for them. Self-reliant. Self-sufficient. Never take any help from anybody. Yes! Fox family pride.”

“That’s a bad thing to want to take care of yourself?”

“No. Of course, not. It’s just that you’re so stubborn about it. Like the world will come to an end if you let somebody do something for you. I bet you even plan to make Billy take gas money from you.”

“You and Kayla seem to have made some arrangements - double date arrangements, perhaps? You made them even before I had a chance to tell you we could go?”

“I guess so. Just trying to make it easier for you - your worrying about Lucky, and all.”

“You are pathetic! But thanks. Sure. I’ll swallow the Fox pride and wear that darn tuxedo if that’s what you want.”

He pushed himself back, sitting up straight. He ran his finger up and down his Adam’s apple, and then gulped.

“There! The Fox pride has been swallowed.”

“I don’t need a fancy corsage. Just a rose or something simple will be wonderful,” Meagan said squeezing his hand.

“Got it covered, but thanks,” Justin said. “So. Food!

How about some food?"

"No time, now, silly. I got to run. I have to arrange to get my hair done, my nails, I'll need a facial, and a dress. Just way too much to think about. You enjoy a burger, Sweetie."

She pushed her hip against his. It clearly meant, "Move please."

He pretended not to understand. Having her hip pressed repeatedly against his was way too good a thing to just give up without a fight.

"The payment to cross this draw bridge is ten kisses, ma'am," he said at last, hoping to continue his good fortune. He pointed to his lips.

"Sounds fair."

The toll was paid. He walked her to the door and watched her disappear around the corner. 'Hair, nails, facial, dress? Billy had been exactly right. He was suddenly playing second fiddle to some make-up mogul.'

It was an interesting thing that had just taken place and as he enjoyed his burger and shake he smiled about it.

'I just agreed to spend sixty bucks that I really don't have to spend and beg somebody else for a tux, in order to go to a dance that I'll hate, and, between now then my girl will be too busy to pay me the time of day. And WHY is it guys do these things? Dad seemed to leave that out of our Birds and Bees talk. He probably doesn't know either.'

He laughed out loud. Other diners looked his way. He could have cared less. Meagan was happy and that was what was important. It was a lot like feeding a baby vulture - well, maybe not. He wiped that image from his mind immediately.

The geography of his day had not gone as planned. He had hoped to get back and see Lucky before practice, but that was five miles in the wrong direction. He'd call Doc before practice and get an update. Probably too soon to tell anything anyway. He knew Lucky would feel better if they could see each other, but it really couldn't be helped. He wouldn't feel guilty about it. Lucky was in good hands.

He smiled at his good fortune. He had spent hip-pressing, lip kissing time with his girlfriend; downed a burger and shake; and he still had seven fifty left in his wallet. Life was good! He ordered another shake!!

* * *

He enjoyed it on his way back to the school grounds. First, he made a call to Doc's. Lucky was no worse. Justin took that as good news. Doc said he seemed to feel comfortable there and that he appeared to really like one of the attendants - Natale - but then what male in his right mind wouldn't? She was gorgeous.

At the batting cage, he reloaded the pitcher and began the second five hundred. It was far easier to begin that time. Less awkward. Less tension in his shoulders. He still wasn't hitting many, but he didn't let that bother him. It was all about undoing a hidden bad habit. He began feeling at ease there in the batters' box for the first time in six weeks. It didn't matter if he hit or not. No worries. Just swing away. Whatever happened was fine. He smiled thinking that was pretty much Billy's attitude about everything. He'd need to think more about that later.

CHAPTER SEVEN: A Compassionate Grizzly?

“Nine hundred ninety-seven.”

Swish

“Nine hundred ninety-eight.”

Clunk

“Nine hundred ninety-nine.”

Clunk!

Then, from behind him came Billy’s familiar voice.

“One thousand!”

Clunk

“What in the Sam Hill are you doing?” his friend asked.

“Lose your mind or something? Bating like a lefty. What gives?”

“Long story. I’m finished now anyway. I’m just supposed to forget all about it. I understand we are doubling to the dance.”

That effectively changed the topic.

“That’s what I’ve been told, too.”

“Isn’t it interesting how the girls just take charge of things?”

“He who gives his heart to a girl also gives up his freedom,” Billy said. “I think I read that somewhere.”

“On a fortune cookie, maybe.”

Billy smiled. “Maybe. Time to dress out. Let’s go.”

* * *

Practice was going to be light - shorts and cleats.

Justin had been taking pitches from Kirt in the bull pen when the coach called him to the plate.

"I'd like you to hit some balls for infield practice. Mix 'em up. Call the base runners to keep the guys on their toes. I have to make a phone call. Be back in a few minutes."

Without thinking much about it he traded his mitt for a bat and a bucket of balls and began slamming out ball after ball into the infield - grounders when he wanted grounders, pop ups when he wanted pop ups, to third, to short to second to first - all exactly where and what he wanted. No pressure there; just throw it up and hit it.

It hadn't even entered his head that he'd hit over a hundred in a row by the time Coach returned.

"Thanks, Justin," Coach said, making no comment about his hitting. "Go catch fifty from Billy. Work him on his sinker."

The rest of practice went well, for Justin. Coach didn't have him take batting practice. It may have had something to do with the quiet words he saw passing between Billy and Coach early on.

After practice Billy drove Justin to the Vet's Clinic and they both went inside to see Lucky - well, Justin went in to see Lucky. Billy seemed more interested in Natalie.

Lucky was clearly happy to see Justin. His master had returned just as he always did. Lucky trusted that would happen and he had been waiting patiently.

That was the good news. He still hadn't improved one bit as far as Justin could tell.

"Isn't there something else you can do, Doc?" Justin asked helplessly.

"Let's see, he's been here a little less than nine hours and you think he should be cured?"

"I'm too impatient, is that what you're saying?"

"You're fifteen and male. You have no choice but to be impatient. Just realize that, and give me a couple of days."

Justin nodded and told Lucky good-bye. The boys were soon back in Justin's driveway, talking in the car.

"Stay for supper?" Justin asked.

"No. Promised Grandma I'd help her finish packing."

"Things seem to be worked out between the two of

you.”

“I think so, but then she’s a grandma and a grandma’s only mission in life seems to be to hug, love and enjoy her grandkids. I hope I can be that way when I get to be her age.”

“You want to be a grandma when you turn sixty-five?”

Justin opened the door and escaped just before Billy’s fist could find its mark. It had been funny and they both laughed. Billy backed out and sped off - too fast - in a cloud of dust.

“I hope he doesn’t kill himself in that car,” Justin said aloud, fully serious a sad, frightened look flashing across his face.

At supper, he reported to his parents about his day and Lucky. They were one of the few families he knew that still sat around a table together for meals. He told them about his new job at the plant and about his plans for the dance. They were always interested in whatever he had to say. His mother tended to offer a few more suggestions than he liked, but he’d just exchange a knowing smile across the table with his father and let her finish her say. She’d do it anyway so why make a scene? Sometimes what she said actually made sense.

He remembered back to one evening when he was thirteen after he had blown his stack at her over something - he couldn’t remember what it was. His dad had taken him aside and given him a very good piece of advice. ‘Just remember, she’s never been a thirteen-year-old boy so there are lots of things she just can’t possibly understand about you. Also, remember, that you have never been a mother, so there are lots of things you just can’t understand.’

* * *

It had been great advice and often helped him turn his first impulse to argue into a broad, knowing, smile. He always felt he’d won without firing a shot.

He spent the rest of the evening finishing homework. He had promised Doc an early a.m. lawn trim so he was in bed by nine. Although it was strange not feeling Lucky there at his feet, he was soon asleep

* * *

4:30 came way too soon but when you’re fifteen anything before noon often seems way too soon. He’d shower

when he got back from Doc's. He dressed and fixed himself breakfast, trying to be quiet so he wouldn't wake up his parents. A quite fifteen-year-old boy? An oxymoron, perhaps?

First, Justin let himself into the clinic and visited Lucky. He refilled his bowl with fresh water. He examined the I-V. It was right where it should have been. Lucky's nose felt damp again. When Justin placed him back in the cage - a sad thing to have to do - Lucky even struggled to his feet for a few moments. Things appeared to be looking up. Justin felt much better as he got to work. By seven he had finished mowing and by seven ten the grass had been swept off the walk and parking area. Justin didn't do his jobs half-way - it had always been all or nothing with him.

He took the bus to school. As usual, Meagan had a seat saved beside her. She talked the whole way - mostly about things related to the dance. She was clearly very happy about it. Justin really didn't understand, but he smiled and nodded and held her hand. It was just nice sitting close to her.

Eventually there was a break in her monologue and Justin spoke.

"Got time in your busy schedule for a hike up to the black stones after school? I got something I want to show you up there."

"Sure. Great! We'll ride the late bus together after practice. You can get off at my place. I'll change and we can walk to your place."

"It's a date, then."

He gave her a short, sweet, peck on her lips.

School was school. Practice was practice. By five, they were headed off across the meadow to the old wooden bridge that spanned the river at its narrowest point. They stopped halfway across and watched the water rush by beneath them. Justin chose one of the gentle paths to the top of the cliff. It wasn't that Meagan couldn't have handled a more rugged route, but he liked holding her hand and if they were climbing rocks, that wouldn't have been possible.

Near the top, Justin led her along a narrow ledge - the one on which he had sat the day before. He put his finger to his lips, then pointed to the nest. He whispered.

“Baby vultures. They are just about the cutest, ugly little creatures you’ll ever see.”

He pointed to a spot where they could sit and watch. He moved close to her and put his arm around her waist. Within minutes the mother appeared and the screeching little heads stretched up out of the nest for their supper. They squawked and fell backwards into the nest when they tried to stretch too far. Meagan squeezed Justin’s hand and gave him a long, ‘going steady’ size kiss.

“This is so wonderful. How did you find them?”

“I come up here a lot to think. I guess it’s a new nest. I found them yesterday afternoon. They made me think of you.”

Her voice remained sweet but she had to ask.

“Vultures reminded you of me?”

“Oh. No. Not the vultures - not the way they look. It was the way the mother takes such good care of her babies - just the kind of mother I know you’re going to be some day.”

She put her head on his shoulder and cuddled close.

“I probably could fall in love with you, Justin Fox.”

“Me too, maybe, with you I mean.”

Justin wasn’t ready to declare a state of love between the two of them. He hadn’t seen it coming. His less than definite response didn’t seem to move Meagan either way.

“You want kids?” she asked.

“Sure. I figure I’m way too young to give it much serious thought, though.”

“I want three,” she said, as if ignoring his comment.

Justin gulped. The vulture flew away. The babies fell silent. The kiss was long and wonderful. The mother returned.

“My brother said he’d heard a grizzly and her cub had been spotted in the county,” she said, as they returned their attention to the birds.

“Haven’t been grizzlies around here since I was seven,” Justin said, interested but not really believing the story. “Who saw it? Where?”

“Don’t know for sure, but it was sometime over the weekend.”

Not believing it, didn’t mean he wouldn’t consider it.

“Maybe we shouldn’t be up here, then. Dad says the

meadow above the cliffs was one of their favorite spot when he was a boy.”

Meagan cuddled close again.

“My big strong sweetie will protect me,” she said.

“Your big strong sweetie would last about thirty seconds against a mother grizzly protecting her cub. I think we should go. Well, maybe just ten more minutes of kissing, then we should go.”

Twenty minutes later they started back across the ledge to the trail and were soon back down at the river’s edge. The very average day suddenly became anything but!!

“What’s that floating out there?” Megan asked, pointing to a brown object the size of a large duffle bag approaching the rapids.”

“My gosh, Meagan! It’s a tiny bear cub caught in the current. You were right. It’ll be killed if it hits those rocky rapids.”

Without another thought he handed Megan his wallet and removed his shoes. Go get help! NOW! He dove into the water.

“You idiot!!!” she called after him. It really wasn’t helpful, but was probably more the truth than not.

He reached the cub. It was limp in the water. With his left hand, he grabbed it by the long hair on the back of its neck and began swimming his way to the opposite shore. The current swept them closer and closer to the jagged rocks of the rapids. Justin was half way across the river. Though the cub probably weighed less than a hundred pounds, its bulky body made it feel like five hundred.

Justin’s legs and right arm ached from the strain. He had no alternative but to keep swimming. It was at that point he first began wondering if, maybe, it hadn’t been one of the sharpest moves in his life. He kept moving. He could see the shore.

“Twenty more feet, body,” he said to himself as if encouraging his muscles to hang in there just a bit longer.

“Ten more feet.”

There was an area of smooth rock jutting out into the water. He headed just upstream of it.

SMASH! The powerful force of the water sent them

crashing into it. It stopped their journey just short of the rapids where hundreds of sharp rocks would have cut them to pieces. No boat had ever passed through them.

Unknown to Justin, though seen by Meagan, the mother grizzly had been running along on that side of the river, keeping up with their progress. She was quickly into the water and snatched her baby from Justin's grip. With a large gash across his forehead and barely conscious, Justin looked up at her huge body standing over him. He expected to die right there in that river. He lapsed into unconsciousness.

There are no eyes that witnessed what actually took place there at the edge of that angry river during the next few minutes, but the story will be told for generations to come.

Meagan had run to the house. Justin's father had driven to the scene. When he arrived, his son, bloody and unconscious, was lying on his back ten feet up on the bank of the river. The marks in the mud indicated he had been dragged - not crawled - from the water.

His father knelt down beside the boy. He was breathing. Most of the blood seemed to have come from a gash on his head. He remained unconscious. Mr. Fox felt for broken bones. He found none. He gently moved Justin's head back and forth. There seemed to be no problem. He took a raincoat from the truck and covered him. He removed his own shirt and made a pillow for the boy's head.

Before long the sounds of sirens filled the air. Meagan had reached the rescue squad. In another five minutes the EMT's had taken over. Their assessment was the same as Justin's dad's had been. No broken bones and no damage to his neck. As a precaution, a neck brace was applied and a back board was slid in place under him.

It was only then that Mr. Fox realized one of the squad members had been standing there holding a .3030 rifle.

"What?" he asked.

The man pointed to the top of a rise some hundred yards away. There stood a grizzly, her cub frolicking in circles around her.

"Just taking no chances," he said. "Looks like she has no interest in us, however. She's a magnificent animal, isn't she?"

“Magnificent, maybe, but she may have just tried to kill my son.”

Justin was taken to the hospital and released two hours later, with a bald spot shaved across the back of his head and a bandage in place. The verdict was a very mild concussion. He was a very lucky lad.

Justin shook the doctor’s hand.

“Thanks.”

“Keep this kid quiet for the next twenty-four hours. I see no reason he won’t be fine. It’s a strange one though isn’t it.’

Justin had to inquire.

“Stay quiet? Like sitting on the porch swing kissing my girl - that kind of quiet?”

The doctor looked at Mr. Fox and shook his head.

“Some things just don’t change from generation to generation, do they?”

He turned back to Justin.

“Kissing is well within the bounds of keeping quiet - provided that’s allowed in your porch swing.”

There wasn’t a tooth mark anywhere on his body. The only prints in the mud belonged to one huge grizzly bear and a very young cub. There seemed to be just one conclusion: the mother bear sensed what Justin was doing and once she had retrieved her baby and found it to be safe, she went back and pulled the boy to safety. At least that was the story that would be told and retold.

Justin could just hear the teasing he’d get in the locker room.

“I hear that big old grizzly gal has a thing for you Justin. How was she?”

“I hear when you and Meagan were at the river you went swimming, bear, so to speak.”

There would be other more vulgar comments he knew, but he would accept them in good humor. He never let words hurt him. He read once that Eleanor Roosevelt had said you could never be put down if you would just never accept what was said as being true. Having been the poor kid in school all his life, Justin had needed to fall back on that a lot. Kids had a way of being mean. Instead of getting mad he just felt sorry

for them.

His mother insisted that Justin stay home from school the next day - Wednesday - so he did. Billy insisted that he cut school so he could be with his best friend - so he did!

Although it wasn't probably as quiet an activity as the doctor had in mind, Justin talked Billy into taking him back down to where he had been found beside the river. They could drive to the spot so felt safe in the car in case the bear showed up feeling less charitable than she had the day before.

The coast seemed clear. Justin had brought along a small sack of patching plaster and a large plastic salad bowl. He searched for the bear's prints, hoping the hubbub of the rescue hadn't ruined all of them. He wanted to make a cast of one as a keepsake. Not everybody he knew had been rescued by a grizzly.

"Hey! Here," he called to Billy who had taken the bowl to the river and filled it with water.

Billy was soon by his friend's side.

"Is this perfect or what!" Justin said.

"If I agree that it's perfect can we get on with it so we can get out of here?"

Justin ignored Billy's protest. He had found a clean print of the mother bear and inside it the print of the cub. The plaster was mixed and poured into the print.

"So how do you know about making print casts?" Billy asked, eventually entering into the activity with some enthusiasm.

"4-H. You remember. I did a project on wild animals of this county and I made molds of their prints. It's in a display case in the science lab at school if you ever really care to look at it. Forty-one little creatures from mice to Otter and even fox - an appropriate centerpiece for my collection, I thought. The Director of the County Museum says it's the only collection like that in the World."

Billy nodded. He knew where it was. He had really never finished any project that was worthwhile in his entire life. He felt jealous of Justin's accomplishment, but hid it well, offering an attempt at humor.

"This is so big it will bearly fit into that case at school."

Justin rolled his eyes and tested the plaster with his finger.

“Needs a couple more minutes to set then we can pick it up and get out of here.”

He walked to the edge of the river.

“If it hadn’t been for that huge chunk of rock that juts out here, I might have died, you know.”

“That and the all-time friendliest grizzly that ever lived. I’m still not sure I believe she pulled you out.”

“It does seem strange. You just don’t think of grizzlies as being appreciative of good deeds, do you?” Justin said, wondering along with his friend. “I’ll show you my T-shirt when we get back to my room. It’s enough to convince me.”

The cast was raised and placed upside down in the trunk of the car. Billy turned the key. Justin rolled down his window.

“In a way, I’m sorry we didn’t see them, today,” he said. “I didn’t ever get to see her, you know. At least I don’t remember.”

Back in his room he brought out the now dry but blood stained T-shirt. He spread it out on his bed. There were four slits up the back.

“Looks like grizzly claws made those to me.”

Billy nodded.

“Pretty convincing, I must say.”

Justin turned around and lifted his shirt to his shoulders. There they were. Four thin scratches up his back, each fifteen inches long.

“I want you take pictures of my back,” Justin said. “Seems like it should be preserved so when my kid goes to school and tells about his Dad’s encounter with a grizzly and the others don’t believe him, he’ll have the proof.”

“Wow! You’re planning how it will be when you have kids, and I don’t even know what time I’ll be getting up in the morning. How can two guys who are so completely opposite in almost every way, be such good friends?”

It was a serious question. Justin didn’t have a good answer, but he tried.

“Maybe as little kids we were more alike and as we grew up we didn’t notice how different we had become?”

"I don't buy that. We were never alike, really, except for liking sports and camping out and stuff like that."

"I guess that's been enough, then. Whatever it is, it seems to have worked, right?"

"Seems to."

Justin got the camera and Billy took the shots.

"Okay. Now we need to get over and see Lucky," Billy suggested. "Don't worry; I'll drive like a civilized person so you won't get that concussed head of yours jiggled."

"Concussed? Pretty big word, there."

"I'll deny I ever said it. Let's go and don't even think of sliding the banister today."

"My, aren't you suddenly the little nurse maid."

"I can't let anything happen to the biggest knucklehead of all time. Jumping into a raging river to save a grizzly has to rank up there with the biggest bonehead acts of all time. Stupid! Dumb! Idiotic! Moronic! Foolhardy! Foolish! Irresponsible! . . .?"

"Okay. You've made your point. Tonight, Dad and Mom will make the same one with me. Then, tomorrow at school, Meagan will take her shot. Then there will be Coach and Pastor and probably even Doc - though he usually has sense enough to keep his nose out of other people's business."

"Isn't it nice so many people love you?"

At first Justin thought it had been delivered as a joke. It hadn't. He was touched by his friend's compassion and insight. It put things in perspective.

"Yes. It's nice."

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CHAPTER EIGHT: Recovery

The phone rang. Justin answered. It was Billy's mother.

"Have you seen Billy this morning?" she asked. "The school just called and said he wasn't there. I'm always so afraid he's going to hurt himself in that car."

Justin mouthed to Billy that it was his mom. Billy shrugged his shoulders. He knew better than to ask his friend to lie for him. He was busted. He took the phone from Justin.

"Mother dear, how are you this fine day? I'm doing well though my patient here is having a pretty bad morning. I'm so glad I decided to come over and check on him - comfort him - you understand."

"Baloney! Get yourself to school or I'll have your father come over and drag you!"

"You seem just a bit upset, Mother dear. That's not good for the blood pressure, especially in someone of your advanced years."

"NOW! I mean it! I'll call the school in fifteen minutes and if you haven't checked in by then I'll . . ."

Billy always liked it when she got to the place she couldn't think of anything else to say. He just waited, silently, making it as painful and embarrassing for her as possible.

Click. She hung up. So did Billy, a broad smile crossed his face.

"How can you speak to your mother like that? That's terrible."

"It's how we do things at my place. They yell. I keep

calm as I repeatedly put them down. They yell some more which makes them look like four year olds. Pretty soon they run out of anything to say. At that point they usually stomp the floor and leave in a huff. Then, I go back to doing whatever I was doing. It works for me.”

“Your family life is based on revenge. You get back at them, and then they get back at you. It never ends. Human beings can’t live like that. If we did, we’d kill each other off and the world would go back to the cockroaches and ants.”

“You don’t understand. You can’t understand. Nobody ever yells at your house and everybody gets along fine.”

“Daaaaaa! Is there, maybe, some connection there you can figure out?”

“Too late for us. Three more years and I’m outta there.”

“Yeah, but you could make them three good years, you know. Get your butt back to school like she asked. It’ll surprise the heck out of her, for one thing. It was really nice of you being here to help me this morning but you shouldn’t have come. I should have locked you out when I saw you drive up, I guess.”

“Hey! My mess-ups aren’t your fault. I’m responsible for me - you’re not.”

“Go! Scat! Here’s a note for you to give to Meagan. I’d tell you not to read it but I know you will anyway so I didn’t seal it. That way I can at least pretend it’s private between her and me.”

For the shortest moment, Billy looked hurt, but he plastered on his smiley face and left. Suddenly, something became clear to Justin. His jolly friend was really a sad person underneath. He’d have to work on that - even though Billy would say it wasn’t Justin’s problem to work on. Friends help friends. Billy certainly understood that.

Fifteen minutes after her first call, Billy’s mother called again.

“I suppose he’s still there, isn’t he?” she began.

“No, ma’am. He left for school almost immediately after he spoke with you.”

“Oh. My! I didn’t expect that. Well, then, sorry I bothered you.”

Click.

Apparently, they didn't say, 'good-bye' at Billy's house. The phone rang again; it was Justin's mother.

"How things going, Justy?"

"Good. I'm feeling fine. No dizziness. My eyes focus fine. None of the symptoms the doctor said for me to look for. I think I'm up to practice this afternoon. I just need a way to get there."

"If you really think so. I'll tell you what; I'll work straight through without a lunch break. That way I can get off in time to come home and take you. This is your Father's day to work 'til eight."

"That'll be great if it won't cause problems for you at work."

"I'm indispensable here. Haven't I told you that? They'll let me do whatever I ask."

"Love you, Mom."

"Love you, Son. See you at three thirty. Rest now, okay?"

"Okay. Bye."

Justin hadn't mentioned his headache. It had been throbbing all morning. It seemed reasonable to him that he'd have a headache considering he'd been knocked around against a wall of rock. He took two more aspirin and lay down on his bed.

Apparently, he had fallen asleep because at 12:30 the phone woke him up.

"Hey. Fox residence," he said still clearing the fog.

"Hey, Foxie Fox," came Meagan's voice. "How you doin'?"

"Okay. A little headache, but I'm fine. I'm coming to practice after school."

"Billy gave me your note. You are the sweetest boy on Earth. All I did was run for help - that's hardly saving your life. Billy said your back looks awful. Are you taking care of it?"

"Had to sleep on my side last night. The doctor said it would look worse than it was because he had to open up each of the scratches and clean them out. I guess they were filled with mud and sand and who knows what else. It felt like he was driving a bulldozer through each one while he worked on

them.”

“My poor sweetie.”

“I didn’t mean it that way. It wasn’t really all that bad. Will I see you at practice?”

“Of course, you will. Do I ever miss one?”

“Well, no. I just thought with the dance and all you might be too busy.”

“If you aren’t feeling up to it we don’t have to go you know,” she said.

“Oh, I’ll be up to it. What are the kids saying about me at school?”

“They ask me how you are and if it really happened with a grizzly. Then they just shake their heads and walk away. They’re all happy you’re okay. Hey, I gotta go. Second bells about to ring. Love you. Bye.”

“Bye.”

It bothered Justin that Meagan had started saying she loved him. It was her right to feel how she felt and to express it, but he wasn’t sure he felt that way toward her, and he wouldn’t use the term until he was sure. She hadn’t questioned him about it so maybe she understood. He supposed they needed to talk it out. Would it be better if he brought it up or waited for her? Life with girls was very complicated! But then, there was nothing as wonderful as a girl. He certainly didn’t want to live without them, so he would do whatever it took. Some days, however, it seemed like the cavemen had the right idea.

* * *

Justin wasn’t hungry. He slept the early afternoon away. When he woke, he called to check on Lucky. He was about the same. By the time he arrived at practice, he was feeling pretty good. As he entered the locker room he was greeted by a low register chorus of, “Grrr, Grrr, Grrr, izzly!”

Clearly, they had practiced their little joke ahead of time. The teasing stopped immediately when Jason removed his T-shirt to dress, and they caught sight of his back. As boys will do, they gathered around and requested all the morbid details.

“Hey. I ended up with my head bashed against the

rocks. I really don't remember anything until I woke up in the emergency room. I do remember grabbing the cub by the hair on the back of his neck. The shape of his fat little body made him really hard to pull through the water. I remember thinking my legs were going to bust - they hurt so bad. Then I saw a huge rock jutting out and I felt better - I was sure it would stop us short of the rapids if I could just pull him another ten feet toward shore. I saw a branch hanging down and decided I would reach for it with my right hand to hold us there. Then I guess I hit the rocks and that's all I got for you."

Billy tried to fill in some of the missing information.

"From the tracks in the mud it looks like the mother grizzly pulled the two of them up onto the bank. There are like rut marks where Justin had been dragged a good eight feet away from the water. She must have grabbed the back of his shirt. It has four holes in it. They correspond to where she scratched him on his back."

Coach entered the room.

"No time for a sideshow. Take a good long drink and then get out there and run your laps. We have lots of adjustments to make today so let's get at it."

As the others left, he delayed Justin and Billy, addressing Justin.

"Take it easy, today. Not sure you should even be here. It's hot out there. Forget the laps. Begin by catching twenty-five from Billy. Kirt will probably start against Springfield, so I want you two to sharpen up your act as soon as he's done his laps. If he can stay sharp through five, we'll have the option of using Randy for a couple and then finishing with Billy. We're better than them in the pitching/catching department. We just need to generate a few more hits."

"Then he looked at Billy."

"I understand you ditched school this morning, is that right?"

Billy looked at Justin who he knew wouldn't defend him.

"Yes, Sir. I did. Sometimes the adolescent male behaves in strange ways - you know - when he's under pressure - like when his best friend's life is hanging in the balance."

"Cut the crap. When you've thrown those twenty-five,

take double laps. That should provide plenty of time for you to forget that terrible burden you're carrying."

Billy smiled. It was no more than he expected, but he'd given it his best shot. If he hadn't, Coach would have probably thought he was sick and sent him to the nurse. (An exam he most certainly would have enjoyed!)

It was a good practice. Justin felt better than he expected. He spent a few minutes with Meagan before returning to the locker room. Coach had him sit in the whirlpool for forty minutes afterwards hoping to alleviate the stiffness and pain he expected would develop over the next twelve hours.

Billy waited with him. They talked strategy, mostly. Well, strategies, actually. Part about the big game. Part about the big dance - or AFTER the big dance to be specific. They wanted to make sure there would be plenty of kissing time between when the dance ended at eleven and when the girl's curfew was at one. If they were going to spend all that money and three hours being miserable in monkey suits at a dance, they figured an hour of kissing was a reasonable request.

It was after six when Billy dropped Justin off. His mother was waiting on the porch.

"I should have called. Sorry. Didn't think about it 'til I saw you standing there. Coach had me sit in the whirlpool after practice - that's why I'm late."

"How are you feeling? Ever since I agreed to let you go to practice I've been worrying. Let me look at your back?"

Justin pulled off his T-shirt and turned around.

"Oh, my! That must hurt something awful!"

"Not really. Coach says to keep stretching my back so the scab gets spread wide and won't restrict my movement."

"Boys and scabs," she said. "If I had a dollar for every inch of scab you two have had, I'd be rich."

The boys smiled taking it as a sign of masculinity about which they were perversely proud.

"You're going to have scars, you know," she said shaking her head and clearly feeling bad about it.

"Yeah, I know. Won't that be great!" he said, plainly having a very different take on the matter of scars as well as

scabs.

His mother shook her head again. Billy spoke.

“I gotta go. See you later.”

“Thanks for the lift.”

Justin turned back toward his mother as she began to speak.

“I fixed a ham with green beans and yams,” she said opening the screen door and going inside.

Justin followed.

“See, there are some advantages to tangling with a grizzly. My all-time favorite meal.”

“The Miller’s called and said not to worry about their lawn this weekend if you weren’t up to it. Dad called and said to tell you he’d do them for you. Looks like you’re covered.”

“Billy offered, too. I can’t see Billy lasting through the first hour but at least it’s really humorous to think about.”

“And nice of him!” his mother added, putting a positive spin on it.

“Yes, it was. I think he really meant it. For some reason, he’s been acting a whole lot more human the past few days. It’s eerie. Maybe even scary.”

“I heard some good news,” she said as they sat down to eat.

“What’s that?”

“The County Agent up in Adair County said that Grizzly and her cub were sighted heading north along the river. I guess she decided it’s too hot down here.”

“I guess that’s good news.”

“You guess?”

“Yeah. I know it is, but I really wanted to thank her - throw her a honey comb or something, you know?”

“I imagine saving her baby was all the thanks she’d ever need.”

Justin sat quietly and began eating.

* * *

At seven, Meagan arrived, with a brown grocery bag under her arm.

“Goodies, for my Sweetie,” she said, holding it up.

“Let’s start with a kiss goodie and work our way down to the bag. That didn’t come out the way I intended it. Sorry.”

“I knew what you meant, silly.”

She ignored his request and opened the bag as they sat on the porch steps. Through it all he managed to steal one fairly satisfactory kiss. He really liked to kiss. He wondered if girls enjoyed it as much as guys. He realized there was really no way to answer that. He figured that since girls seemed to like to talk more than boys - when boys and girls were alone together - that it was probably the boys who liked kissing the most.

The contents of the bag were soon dumped onto the porch. There were Ho-Ho's, fried pies, candy bars, and a half dozen small bags of chips. He appreciated all that and it took a half dozen kisses to express it to her. There was also a poster. It had the word, love, written in one hundred different languages and dialects.

“Interesting,” was the only response he could muster for that. It made him very uneasy.

“Hey, Mom,” he called into the kitchen. “Since the bear's left the county, can I take Meagan down and show her the prints and all?”

“I guess so. Be careful. There could be more than one.”

Mother's had a way of always preparing for the worse. Justin figured it must be their basic protective instinct. If they could think of all the possible bad stuff that might ever happen they could be prepared for it. It was probably a good thing in terms of preserving the species. It was often a real pain when it came to having fun, however.

Justin got the blanket from the hall closet, rolled his shirt into it (in case it turned cool) and they were off, hand in hand toward the river.

“It's sort of scary to go back down there,” Meagan said, holding his hand harder than usual.

“It'll be good for you - er, for us - to get that out of our systems once and for all.”

“I got so scared when I saw that big grizzly running along the bank beside you.”

“You saw her? I didn't know that?”

“Yeah. Loping along on all fours and drooling. I was afraid she had rabies or something.”

“Then that’s why she was right there when we hit the rocks. Good going, Grizzly Mama! Maybe we can see her footprints along the river,” Justin said excited at the prospect.

They were easily spotted. A half ton of Grizzly left deep indentations in the soft mud of the bank. Eventually they arrived at the spot where Justin had been found. He showed her the print he had cast and explained how he wanted to fix it so he could hang it on his wall.

“Isn’t that a bit gruesome?” Meagan asked as they spread out the blanket on a grassy spot near the edge of the river.

“I don’t think so. It’s like for that few minutes she and I had some kind of a connection. I want to remember that always. If a grizzly and I can connect, then I have no excuse not to be able to connect to other human beings. That should be a cinch?”

“This was a really big deal in your life, wasn’t it? I guess I didn’t understand.”

“About the biggest! If it hadn’t been for her, I’d most likely be dead, you know.”

“And that’s something I wanted to talk to you about!” she said sitting down beside him.

‘Here it comes,’ he said to himself. ‘The big, you were really a big dummy, speech.’

“You were really a big dummy, you know.”

Justin broke into hysterical laughter, having predicted her exact words. It probably wasn’t the best way to respond to a girlfriend’s serious concern, but it had been too perfect. He explained and then she could smile about it, too. That didn’t keep her from reaming him out for the next five minutes.

Justin sat quietly right up to the phrase, “If you’d have died out there we’d never have been able to have kids.”

“Whoa, there, Meagan. As I recall we’ve never talked about marriage. I’m not thinking marriage. I’m thinking fifteen and dating a wonderful girl who I like a lot and really enjoy being with. I can’t give you a commitment about marriage at my age.”

“Yes, I really know that. I let my imagination run away sometimes. I guess that’s what girls my age do. It just came out. But regardless, it’s true. If you had died, we wouldn’t

have the possible option of having babies.”

“Okay. I can accept that, but there’s this thing about you saying that you love me. I’m not sure I love you and I won’t say it back unless I am sure. I just want you to understand that. I’m not trying to evade anything; I’m just trying to be honest.”

“Well, I believe that I do love you in the romantic sense of the word. I’m willing to wait and see how things develop for you. But I wouldn’t be being honest with you if I didn’t let you know that, right?”

Justin nodded. He couldn’t argue with it. After all, it had been his own logic turned against him. However, having reached the point where it seemed there was way too much talking and not nearly enough kissing, he lay back on the blanket and pulled her close beside him. Apparently, she had finished talking because no more words were spoken for the next half hour. The birds chirped. The Otters splashed. Even the leaves rustled in the breeze, but conversation ceased.

Eventually Justin sat up and crossed his legs.

“It sure is special being with you like this.”

Meagan sat up, facing him.

“Yeah, I know. Now, how about I start feeding you Ho-Ho’s?”

“Kisses, Ho-Ho’s. You really know how to tempt a guy. Add some chips and you own me.”

They laughed, ate, and continued to talk until dark. They heard the truck horn honk. It had been the family signal for Justin to get home ever since he’d been old enough to be out on his own.

“I guess they trust us in the light but aren’t convinced yet about the dark. Better get back. Don’t want them to worry.”

It called for one more, long, wonderful kiss.

* * *

Justin’s evening call to Doc Adams wasn’t encouraging. Lucky was not worse but he didn’t seem to be getting better. Doc had changed the medication. Only time would tell.

That night, as he lay in bed, Justin had a lot of things to be thankful for. His family that loved him and protected him and taught him how to live a good and decent life. Meagan,

an understanding girlfriend who was honest with him and fun to be with, and was a wonderful kisser. A best friend who had always been there for him when he needed somebody (and when he didn't). Coach, who, unlike many others he'd had, always put the boys and good sportsmanship before winning. And, of course, Lucky - ever trusting, ever willing, ever content, Lucky.

Justin understood that he had a good life. He wished that in some way he could make it rub off on Billy. He had a few things up his sleeve, but they still needed some refining. Billy might think he always knew what was right for Justin, but Billy certainly didn't seem to know what was right for himself. That hadn't changed in the nine years they had been friends.

Justin just needed to arrange for them to be alone again, like the other night at the river. A canoe trip! Paddle a little. Fish a little. Eat a little. Talk a lot. Justin would see to it. With the outline of a plan in mind, he was suddenly ready to sleep.

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CHAPTER NINE: Camping Calamity!

School let out at noon. The teachers had the rest of the day to prepare the nine week exams which began on Monday.

By twelve thirty the boys had Billy's canoe in the pick-up and, with Mr. Fox at the wheel, were headed for Wilson Point, a jut of land just north of the rapids where they could enter the water. The river wound north and east from there into Adair County. It was generally wide and smooth - not exciting canoeing but Justin had experienced enough excitement for one week.

Mr. Fox would pick them up the following morning at the spot where Hammison Creek met the river. It was thirty miles downstream - a secluded place where they had camped many times before. They would spend the night there.

Mr. Fox had just one parting word for them.

"I suppose I don't need to remind you that the doctor said no swimming until your back heals."

"I suppose you don't, but it seems the fatherly thing to have said. I have the salve with me. Billy can plaster on another layer if it gets wet."

"So, don't you worry, Mr. Fox. I'm here. I'll take care of him in my own special way."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

There were smiles all around. With Mr. Fox on his way home and their gear tied in place inside the canoe, they slid into the water and were on their way by one o'clock.

The sky was clear and blue. It would be a hot afternoon. They shed their shirts and put some serious effort

into moving south. There was little current to help as the river was wide and slow-moving all the way to the creek.

The two had canoed together for years. It was always Billy up-front and Justin in the rear. They had tried it the other way, but a canoe is steered by the rear paddle and when Billy rode back there he had them beached every ten minutes. Justin figured it was Billy's way of getting to ride the front. That was fine. He just let his friend paddle twice to his once - his own private joke since Billy couldn't see what was (or wasn't) going on behind him.

Justin wasted no time getting to the point.

"You've seemed different, somehow, this week," he began.

"Oh. How?"

"I don't know - acted more like a - how shall I say it - a human being, maybe!"

"Really?"

"Really!"

Silence. Billy needed more prodding.

"Like when we were planning the time after the dance. You didn't suggest getting a motel room once."

"Knew you wouldn't go for it."

"That's never stopped you before."

Again, silence. Justin couldn't see Billy's smile. He was enjoying the opportunity to draw things out and tease his insistent friend.

"All week you haven't made a single crack about me being a virgin."

"That's hopeless. You've made your decision about that."

Justin didn't give up.

"The thing with your Grandmother."

"I knew you'd bug me 'til I set that straight so I decided to get you off my back and do it."

"You're full of it, you know."

"I always have been, you know."

Billy turned around and grinned at his friend who just shook his head.

Billy finally took the initiative.

"So, I assume this whole canoe, camp, talk thing is your

way of getting my life in order. Save the preliminaries and just get on with it.”

They had never been able to con each other. It was one of the great things about being a best friend. They knew each other inside and out - what they liked and disliked, what they believed about most of the important things in life, how they reacted in various situations. They had very few secrets from each other - some things that Billy chose to talk about Justin would have preferred he didn't, but they were friends. They listened to each other.

“Okay, then, but let's bait some hooks to drag along. We'll be starved again in a couple of hours.”

The lines were prepared and thrown over the side. They continued at a leisurely pace.

“You and your parents,” Justin said, establishing topic one.

“I have two - one male and one female - at least that's what I've been led to believe.”

“Get serious. You treat them like dirt. You treat my parents better. Heck! You treat total strangers better. What's going on?”

“It's just how things are.”

“Baloney! Not an acceptable excuse. Just a way to relinquish any responsibility on your part.”

“Relinquish? Pretty big word for two ol' boys ridin' the river, Huck.” (The reference, of course, was to Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn.)

“You're doing it again! Make a joke and avoid the responsibility of searching for answers.”

“Of course. That's how I've been raised. Don't think about a problem today, if you can possibly put it off 'til tomorrow. It may be sick, but it's our way.”

“Well it's a lousy way. Change it. Take control. Sometimes the kid has to step forward and become the most mature person in the family. I'd say it was well past time you did that.”

“Me? No way. Too comfortable being the rich little brat.”

“That's either an outright lie or you have no understanding of yourself at all.”

“You’re pushing pretty hard, little buddy. I’ve drowned guys for less.”

“There it is again. Diversion. Move away from an unpleasant topic as quick as you can. At least you seem to understand that about yourself.”

“I get a gold star for that, do I?”

“Sure. One gold star. Ninety-nine more and I’ll crown you a well-adjusted human being.”

“You’re really serious about this, aren’t you?”

“Darn right!”

“Darn? Don’t you consider that cussing?”

“Close, but in this case acceptable to make the point.”

“Have you ever cussed in your whole life?” Billy asked. This time it didn’t sound like diversion. It sounded serious, so Justin answered.

“Sure. Mostly back before I knew what the words meant or what I was wishing on people when I said them.”

Billy grew silent, then:

“Doesn’t your darn it, mean exactly the same thing and my damn it? You say jeez and I say jesus. You say gosh and I say god. I don’t see any difference. We’re both really cussing, right.”

“I suppose you have a point but the words I say don’t offend folks the way your words do. It’s not a bad point. I’ll need to think on it. Back to you. How you gonna fix your family?”

“Hire a live-in psychiatrist?”

“Be serious.”

“I am. I don’t know how to fix things.”

“How about getting some help then?”

“My folks would blow a gasket if I suggested we go see a head shrinker, if that’s what you mean.”

“Then I guess it’ll have to be up to Dr. Billy and his assistant, Dr. Justin.”

Billy turned completely around in his seat and faced Justin.

“Think we can actually do something?”

“Well, I’m sure of one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“We sure as heck can’t if we don’t try.”

Billy looked his friend in the face for a long time. He nodded and turned around, dipping his paddle back into the water.

“Okay then. I’m listening.”

“You ever read the Raymond Masters Mystery books.”

“Yeah. A couple.”

“The old detective says the most important part of solving any problem is to find the right question to ask. I think that’s where we need to begin.”

“Like, how can Billy fix his family?”

“I doubt if that’s the right one. It covers way too much territory. Something more like how can Billy improve his relationship with his mother and father. Maybe it even needs to be more specific than that.”

“Like, how can I stop being a smart mouth when mom talks to me?”

“I think old Ray Masters would like that one. Clone it for your father and you got two dandies to start with.”

“How about this for another one: What can I do to make the members of my family happier people?”

“I suddenly see three new gold stars.”

“You know,” Billy said, after a few minutes of silence, “That detective guy was probably right. Now that I have the questions, I know exactly how to find the answers.”

“You do? How’s that?”

“I just have to think about how lil’ Justy would handle it in his home.”

“That’s a great compliment, but what works for me may not work exactly the same way for you. My folks and I have had my whole lifetime to work out our arrangement. And I don’t want you to suffer under the illusion that everything is always great and happy at my place. It usually is but there are times I get mad at them and they get mad at me.”

“Yeah. I can see it now. You come to dinner with dirty fingernails and your mother says: ‘Justin, dear. Would you please go into the bathroom and clean your nails. And you say: ‘It just doesn’t seem fair I always have to have clean fingernails. It really puts me in a huff to have you nag about it, but, if it will make you feel better, I’ll go take care of it right now’. Then you kiss her and your dad gives you the thumbs

up and everything is fine and dandy.”

“If what you’re getting at is that we don’t yell at each other, you’re right. But if you mean we don’t have really big disagreements sometimes, you’re dead wrong.”

“See, in my family we yell first and if that doesn’t solve it we yell some more - louder and longer. One solution fits all, so to speak.”

“And so . . .?”

“. . . and so, if I refuse to yell in the beginning the whole process gets short circuited.”

“Yelling people are never clear thinking people. Dad says the one who never raises his voice is the most mature and always wins.”

“So, you have a houseful of winners.”

“I like that. Yes. We work things out so everybody wins.”

“You really think that if I don’t yell back at my folks and if I don’t have a smart remark or put down for them, that things will get better?”

“No. I think what I’m saying is that if you do those things first, then you have set the stage for good stuff to begin happening from there - things like listening to each other’s concerns, thinking about working out solutions, finding ways to be helpful to each other.”

The next twenty minutes went by, mostly, in silence.

“Geese!” Billy said at one point, pointing to the ragged V racing ahead of them in the sky.

“Got a fish on the rear line,” Justin said pulling it in and putting it on a stringer.

“I’m starved,” Billy said a few minutes later as he pulled in his own four-pound bass.

They picked out a shady spot on shore and paddled toward it. Billy gathered wood and started a small fire on the sandy bank while Justin cleaned the fish. With the fish on sticks just above the fire they sat back against a log and waited. Billy took out his cell and poked in a number, handing the phone to Justin.

“Doc Adam’s office,” he said.

“Thanks. Thoughtful. Human even. Take one gold star.”

Billy grinned.

The news wasn't great. Lucky was no better. If anything he had slipped a little during the day.

The fish were excellent. By three, the fire had been doused, the ashes scattered, and the boys were heading north again.

A large inboard passed them going South making waves that came close to swamping the canoe. Billy clearly enjoyed that more than Justin, who knew he needed to stay out of the water. The idea seemed too good to pass up, so Billy slipped into the river and swam along beside Justin for quite a while. He was a strong swimmer and enjoyed the water.

It was a few minutes after six when they arrived at the mouth of the Creek. It entered the river from a grove of trees that hid it from view. The boys had a favorite place among a stand of pines in a natural cove some hundred yards up water into the stream.

They set up the tent and laid a fire in a circle of stones. Justin's mother saved and dried orange and grapefruit peels for them to put in the fire. It kept the mosquitoes away - or so she said. They were never bothered by flying insects so it must have worked and they turned the flames into interesting colors.

The ice chest was filled with pop and hamburger (Mrs. Fox's safety net, just in case the fishing didn't work out). They set cane, fishing poles at the edge of the water hoping not to catch anything so they could have the hamburger instead. Justin knew that Billy never baited his hook for that very reason. It was another unspoken joke between them.

He knew Billy wanted to swim - they always spent most of their time in the water when they were there.

"Go on in and swim. I'll wade and throw stones at you."

He wouldn't of course - well, none that would hit him! By eight, no fish had been caught so Justin broke out the skillet and started the hamburgers. They smelled wonderful. The heat of the day soon gave way to the cool of evening. Before they pulled on sweatshirts for the night, Billy put salve on Justin's back. It hurt but Justin gritted his teeth and it was soon done. Billy added a sizeable log to the fire.

It was a great evening in a great place. With the tall pine trees on three sides and the creek on the other, it was like their own private world. They sat, watching the flames and listening to the sounds of the night. Two owls hooted back and forth across the clearing. The background sounds of the crickets and katydids were everywhere.

“So, do you love Meagan?” Billy asked out of the blue.

“As a person, yes. In a romantic way, I’m not sure. I don’t think so. Sometimes when we’re kissing I think I do but then later I decide that feeling was just passion - my hormones talking. I’m still not sure how to separate those things. I really like the activity of being romantic with her, but I doubt if I love her in an emotional way.

“I’ve decided I love my parents and brother and that’s all your fault, of course,” Billy said.

Justin couldn’t keep from chuckling.

“What?” Billy said. “It is your fault. It’s all your fault.”

“Well, you can thank me now or thank me later, then.”

“The thing that started it was when you forced me to go talk with grandma.”

“I didn’t think anybody ever forced you to do anything.”

Billy ignored his comment.

“She hugged me and said she loved me and I said it back to her and then I realized I actually felt that way. It was like the first time I ever felt that. It’s terrible.”

Justin was confused.

“Loving somebody is terrible?”

“Sure, it is. When you love somebody you suddenly don’t want anything to happen to them so you have to worry about them and I’ve never even worried about myself.”

“Yeah. I can see what you’re saying. That’s the trade off, I guess. There’s nothing better than loving somebody - that’s my point of view at least. But in order to have that feeling you automatically share that person’s hurt and loss. Of course, you also share their happy times and successes. Seems worth it to me.”

“I hope so. I’m too new at this stuff to have an opinion, I guess. Want a pop?”

“Sure. Thanks. Orange if there is one.”

As Billy opened the ice chest they heard a heavy

rustling back in the woods.

“Shhh!” Justin said.

“Way too much of something to be a raccoon or a rabbit,” Billy said, ignoring Justin’s shushing.

“Let’s put some more wood on the fire,” Justin suggested. “Dad says most creatures don’t like flames.”

“I hope they know that,” Billy said.

At that moment, a bear cub came rambling out of the woods and into the clearing. It stopped, and stood up, sniffing the air.

“It can’t be good to have a bear cub in your clearing, right?” Billy asked.

“Seems that way to me,” Justin said. “I wonder if we’re better off here by the fire or out in the water.”

“I’d opt for the water,” Billy said.

Justin nodded his agreement.

They stood and walked slowly to the canoe, which they had flipped upside down at the edge of the water. Billy was in front, as, together, they slowly righted the canoe. He stepped back into the water, pulling the boat with him.

At that moment, the mother bear entered the clearing and ran directly at them. Justin fell backward as Billy pulled the canoe out of his hands and into the creek. The grizzly was on top of Justin in a flash. Justin covered his face with his arms preparing himself for the worst. Billy began yelling and splashing water, trying to distract the huge, growling, animal. The cub ran toward Billy, apparently thinking it looked like fun to go for a splash in the creek. Billy turned the canoe, keeping it between him and the bank. He continued to scream at the bear.

Justin tried to roll away, but was lodged between the bear’s legs. The bear stood and began sniffing the air. She sniffed left and she sniffed right. Then she lowered her head and sniffed Justin. Her growling ceased. She became quiet, nuzzling his hands and arms and chest.

Justin dared to move his head just enough to catch a quick look at what was going on. He was eye to eye with the mother grizzly. If she sat on him, he’d be crushed.

They gazed at each other for a long moment. He should have been terrified but there was something in her eye

- in her look. His fear turned to fascination. Could it be that this was the bear who had saved his life a few days earlier? She continued to sniff. Justin sniffed back, for some reason feeling it was the thing she expected him to do.

She sniffed him.

He sniffed her.

She sniffed him.

He sniffed her, louder that time.

He sure hoped that he smelled better to her than she did to him - not in the smells good enough to eat sense of the word, of course. Her stench was absolutely nauseating.

She slapped his face, playfully, though it moved his entire body a good foot to his right. There had been no claws - just the soft, time worn, pads of her paw.

She stood up on her back legs and turned, calling to her cub. As suddenly as they had arrived, they were loping off into the woods.

Billy was immediately out of the water. Justin sat up, his back hurting from having been pushed across the rocky ground.

“Well, how interesting was that?” he said as Billy knelt down in front of him.

“Interesting? I just puked my guts out!”

“And I’m about to, if you will excuse me.”

Justin crawled away into the tall grass and took his turn.

There wasn’t much sleep at the campsite that night. They kept the fire blazing and determined that if the bear returned, they would head for the creek immediately and swim downstream with the current. They might not be able to outfight her or outrun her, but they felt certain they could out swim her.

“Nobody’s ever gonna believe this, you know,” Justin said as they lay in the tent on top of their sleeping bags.

“I been thinkin’ about that. You’re probably right. So what we gonna say?”

“How about nothing?”

“Nothing? This is way too good not to tell.”

“The only people who would believe us are the people in our lives who love us and I guarantee you, if my Mom

learned of it, I'd never be allowed to come back here again. Not a good thing!"

"But maybe smart."

"Maybe."

"So, we're just going to sit on this most awesome thing that has ever happened to us - or probably ever will happen to us?"

Justin was silent in thought for a moment.

"Maybe, we can write a book about it someday."

"That would be cool." Billy said. "Maybe that's best. Like usual, you're probably right. The kids would all just think we were lying."

"And we don't want our voracity besmirched."

Justin giggled, knowing the reaction that was soon to follow.

"Voracity? Besmirched? Sorry, but I left my dictionary at home."

"You've never even owned a dictionary, dimwit. If you're going to become a writer you have to be willing to learn new words."

"You learn the new words; I'll charm all the girls into buying lots of books from us. We'll be rich before we're sixteen!"

"I sincerely doubt that we'll be rich if we have to count on your charm to get the job done!"

They managed to make a very uncomfortable situation into a good time. It was something the two of them had always been good at.

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CHAPTER TEN: The game of games

It was hard for Justin to keep his mind on school that morning. Lucky was still at the vet's and not doing very well. After school, they had the biggest game of the season against Springfield - probably the biggest game of Justin's life. The dance would be the following evening. There were just way too many important things to think about. School would have to wait.

He and Billy both slept in Coach's office during second and third periods and that helped some, but by the time school was out, they were both still feeling the effects of their sleepless night.

Justin had an hour before he needed to dress out so he and Meagan sat together under a tree at the edge of the school yard.

"So. Did you guys have a good time yesterday?" she asked, cuddling close.

"It was good. Yeah. I'd say it was real good."

"Catch some fish?"

"Yeah. Some. Had 'em for a late lunch."

"Is something wrong?" she asked, thinking his answers seemed strangely brief and distant.

"No. Just tired. We didn't get enough sleep last night. You could say we barely got any, in fact."

He was the only one who caught the little joke, but that was okay. He enjoyed it.

"There's something you're not telling me. Did you meet a girl?"

Justin broke into laughter, doubling over onto the ground.

“What?” Meagan said, completely baffled but smiling.

“It’s really nothing. You had to be there. No. I didn’t meet a girl. I did have a chat with a little guy’s mother but, believe me, you wouldn’t consider her a girl.”

Again, he couldn’t contain his laughter.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last. “I’m just all revved up for the game. I’m acting stupid. Guys do that.”

“Believe me, I’ve noticed.”

She pulled his arm close and laid her head on his shoulder. If he said there were no girls, she believed him.

Billy and Kayla walked up hand in hand and found places on the grass. Billy spoke first.

“Dance starts at seven. Dinner reservations at The William Tell at six. That should get us to the dance by seven thirty. That sound okay?”

“Sounds great,” Meagan said.

“We’ll pick you up at five forty and Kayla at five fifty.”

The girls both nodded. Clearly, Billy had decided to take charge. It tickled Justin and he wouldn’t say a thing.

“Dance is over at eleven,” Kayla said. “Our curfew isn’t ‘til one that night.”

The two statements really represented a question. Justin waited for Billy to lay out the plan. He did.

“Justin and I thought we could drive out to Miller’s hill and look up at the stars and down on the town. Maybe take some blankets. Maybe talk. Maybe kiss. You know - boy/girl date kind of stuff.”

“Sounds good to me,” Meagan said.

“Sure,” Kayla added.

Billy couldn’t resist getting in one zinger.

“So, who’s bringing the beer?”

Justin shook his head, looking directly at Billy.

“It will be root beer and I’ll spring for it.”

“Root beer. Yes. That’s what I meant of course.”

Billy handed Justin his cell. Justin nodded appreciatively and got to his feet. He walked off a few yards and placed a call to the vet’s. No change to report. Justin sighed and shook his head as he returned to his friends and

handed the phone back.

“Still about the same,” he reported.

“The girls say they need to go pick up some things at Spurgen’s Department Store. I’m going to give them a lift. You comin’?” Billy asked.

“No. I think I’ll pass. Maybe take a little nap.”

He kissed Meagan and then she and the other two walked off.

Justin got comfortable on his side in the grass and closed his eyes. He really didn’t sleep soundly, but in that twilight zone between deep sleep and wakefulness his mind wove a series of disconnected images from years before.

One, was about the day he met Billy - the first day of first grade. At recess, Billy stuck out his foot and tripped Justin. Upon the urging of the other boys, Justin got up and charged Billy, knocking him to the ground and - fully unintentionally - knocking him out. The girls ran to get the teacher - eager to tattle. The other boys scattered fearing they’d be in trouble. Justin knelt down beside Billy. Not knowing what else to do he began his six-year-olds version of CPR, breathing into the boy’s mouth and thumping on his chest - none of which was really called for, of course. A minute later and well before the teacher arrived on the scene Billy came around. Justin explained to him what had happened.

“That’s pretty cool,” Billy said. “I was knocked out? That’s totally awesome! Want to be best friends forever?”

Justin helped him to his feet, saying, “Sure. Everybody needs a best friend.”

They spit in their palms, rubbed them together and had been inseparable ever since. It brought a smile to Justin’s face.

There was another first to be remembered - the first time he saw Meagan. It had been on July fourth of the previous summer. Justin was walking home from town with the ten dollars’ worth of fireworks he had been able to afford for the evening. He saw a moving van at the old Wilson place - vacant for the previous six months. Helping move boxes from the truck to the porch was the most beautiful girl Justin thought he had ever seen. Long blond hair, petite in every

way, she moved with the grace of a ballerina. He walked over and introduced himself.

“I’m Justin. I live about a mile on down the road.”

He pointed.

“Hi. I’m Meagan. I live about ten feet in that direction and up the stairs to the right.”

A sense of humor as well, Justin thought.

“Can I help you unload the truck for the rest of our lives?”

She looked at him and smiled.

“Actually, that was the last box. The furniture’s already inside. Want to see my room?”

“Sure, if it’s okay with your parents.”

She acted like that had been an odd thing to ask. He saw her room. He’d been there often. It had belonged to a friend several years before.

“Got a girlfriend?” she asked at last.

“No one special. You? A boyfriend, I mean.”

“Had some but nothing ever very serious. I really didn’t want to move out here in the boondocks, but Dad took a supervisor’s job at the plant. Lived my whole life in Springfield. I already miss my friends.”

She looked sad.

“I’ll be your friend.”

“That’s very nice. You’re a sweet guy.”

“She gave him a short kiss on the cheek.”

That vision from the twilight brought a huge smile to his face.

It was followed by still another vision. The first time he saw Lucky. He was a pup, no more than two months old. Apparently, he had not been wanted by someone and they had abandoned him on the road close to Justin’s home. The little pup had taken a serious fall off a bluff behind the cabin into a dumping ground and had become entangled in barbed wire as he struggled there. Justin heard him yelping as he was on his way back from fishing at the river. It took nearly a half hour to bend the wires this way and that and finally get to the place he could free him. He was bleeding badly from deep cuts and scratches. His front right leg was clearly broken.

Justin had studied first aid at 4-H Club. He set the leg

and using a short stick for a splint and with strips of cloth that he tore from his T-shirt he bound it in place. He washed the cuts with water from his canteen and wrapped the pup in what was left of the shirt.

That memory brought a pained grimace to his face as he lay there in the shade. It trailed off into still another.

The day he and Lucky were walking the woods along the river and Justin got bit on the ankle by a copperhead. Justin knew he had to remain quiet - to move around would only increase his blood flow which would carry the venom throughout his body.

“Get Dad. Now. Dad. Go?”

Lucky dashed away through the underbrush. Justin took out his pocket knife and cut the required Xes across the two fang marks. Fortunately, the strike had been on the inside of his right ankle bone where there was very little flesh and therefore minimal entry into the bloodstream. He remembered smiling as he leaned down and began sucking the venom from his body. He'd often wondered if those unpleasant stretching exercises coach made them do were really worth anything. That day, being limber had saved his life. Lucky was soon back with Justin's dad. He had been a very sick kid for several days, but thanks to Lucky they had arrived at the hospital in time.

From that day on, whenever Lucky saw anything resembling a snake - a length of rope, a twisted stick, a piece of cable - he would attack it with all his heart and soul. It was always good for a laugh, but at the same time Justin did realize Lucky thought he was protecting his young master.

Justin was roused back into consciousness by the drip, drip, drip of something cold onto his forehead. It was Pop and came from a SuperGulp Billy had brought back for him. Justin sat up.

“You ding-a-ling,” he said, wiping his face with his hand. “Just what I need. Orange flavored eyebrows. And, thanks, by the way.”

He got to his feet.

“Where the girls?”

“Over at Kayla's, Oooing and ahhhhing over the unmentionables they bought at Spurgen's. They'll be here by

game time. We need to hustle or we'll be late - and I don't need any more extra laps this week."

Billy pulled up Justin's shirt to look at his back.

"Still doesn't look good. I'd keep that pointing away from coach or he might not let you start."

All the other players were already there as the two entered the locker room. Coach looked at his watch, but didn't say anything. Once they were dressed, he took Billy aside. Kirt sprained his ankle - not bad but I'm going to need you to be ready to handle the last four innings today. You up to that?"

"I think so. I've been getting stronger all season. Heck, why not just let me do the whole game."

Coach looked at him over the top of his glasses. "Four innings should be sufficient. How's that slider?"

"Justin says it's coming pretty good. Why?"

"Springfield can't hit sliders. Use it freely. Tell Justin."

As much as Coach wanted it to appear like just another game, Billy could sense he really wanted to win this one. He would do his part. Coach had been a great influence in his life; he respected the man.

Springfield was already on the field when the Vultures came up the ramp. They were met by a chorus of, "Twee, Twee, Tweedy - Twee, Twee, Tweedy."

It was difficult to find a way to mock a team called the Pioneers. Coach wouldn't have allowed it anyway.

Justin felt loose and surprisingly sharp. He took a few pitches from Randy, who was to start. He was throwing well. He did the same with Billy who was throwing blazing fast balls. Things seemed to be coming together. Kirt could pitch in a pinch, but having to favor his ankle took something off his delivery. Again, Coach had Justin take a pass on batting practice.

"Play ball," came the announcement from the plate umpire.

Justin felt confident behind the plate, joking with the Ump and hassling each batter in a good-natured manner between pitches. It was three up and three down for Randy in the top of the first.

Justin went down swinging as the leadoff batter for the

Vultures. There were three hits and two left on at the end of the first. Score 0 - 0.

The second and third were repeats of the first. In the top of the fourth the Pirates scored three. Randy was tiring fast. He'd seen the last of the mound for that day.

Billy entered the game one inning earlier than expected. Nothing much happened for either team in the fifth. Justin pegged two out trying to steal second in the top of the sixth. Billy was pitching well.

The seventh and eighth saw four Vultures reach base but no one crossed the plate. Billy held the Pioneers hitless.

As Billy struck out number three in the top of the ninth, the score remained, Pirates three, Vultures nothing.

From Justin's point of view the best thing about the ninth was that he would bat sixth which meant he probably wouldn't have to. He relaxed and joked with his teammates. Things began looking up. A single to left was followed by a single straight down the middle. Two on and no outs. The Pirate pitcher fanned the next two Vultures. Billy had been placed in the lineup just before Justin. He selected a bat and winked at Justin.

"I'll single to left and then all you need to do is get a solid double. That'll score the rest of us and we'll be all tied up."

Justin admired the way Billy handled the pressure. If he got a hit great. If he didn't, no big deal. It was just a game.

Justin was more competitive than that. He wanted to win. He picked up a bat and began pacing up and down the dugout. Coach noticed but didn't comment.

Billy took two strikes. On the third pitch, he connected and had his single to right. The bases were loaded. Justin took a deep breath and walked over to the coach. He was a team player and he wanted to give Coach an out. Justin had his say.

"Three men on. Two out. Last of the ninth. We're down by three. Don't you think you should put somebody in who at least has some chance of actually hitting the ball?"

"Did you just quit the team, Justin?" Coach asked calmly, looking him squarely in the eyes.

"No, Sir."

“Then get your butt out there and take your swings! The sun is going to come up tomorrow whether we win or lose, son.”

Again, it had been calm - reassuring, even. He sounded a lot like Billy.

“Yes, Sir.”

Justin picked up his bat, took a deep breath, and walked toward the plate. He glanced into the stands. Meagan smiled and waved. His dad gave him the thumbs up. He nodded back. There were a few boo’s from some of the local bullies, but he’d become used to them the past few games. He adjusted his hat and took his stance. The first pitch was on its way.

“Strike one!” the umpire called, as the bat remained on Justin’s shoulder.

Justin backed off and hit at his cleats with the end of his bat. He looked over at Coach. The man’s face showed no emotion. The signal remained the same, ‘Swing if it looks good.’

Justin approached the plate again.

Another pitch.

“Just low for ball one,” came the announcers voice over the speakers.

“High and tight, ball two.”

“Swing and a hit,” the announcer said excitedly. “He got wood on that one folks. Look at it sail. Oh! My! Just foul off the third base line.”

Justin jogged back to the batter’s box and picked up his bat. He approached the plate, took a firm grip and waited.

“Low and away for ball three making it a full count.”

‘At least it hasn’t been three and out,’ Justin thought to himself, trying to put some positive spin on the most humiliating situation he’d ever had to face. He tried to keep his disastrous performance in the Paxton game out of his thoughts.

At that moment, the crowd behind him began to clap. A few guys whistled. A quiet chant started up from the bleachers - “Luck-y! Luck-y! Luck-y!”

The ump called time. Justin looked around. There on the sideline, in his usual spot, sat Lucky - panting hard, but

sitting up under his own power. Later, Justin would learn from Doc that when they turned on the game at the Vet's office and Lucky heard the familiar voice of the announcer, he apparently made his escape and unbelievably managed to make it the three miles to the ball field - a trip so demanding that it had taken him most of nine innings; but there he sat!

Justin wanted to run to him but the ump called, "Play ball." Lucky managed to bark twice.

'Sounds like a fast ball signal to me, boy,' Justin thought to himself.

The pitch came hurtling toward him. He took the swing of his life - just a fraction of a second quicker than usual. Clunk! Justin's bat met the ball head on. It climbed higher and higher. The announcer's excited voice echoed through the park.

"It's going... going ... going ... My goodness folks, it's out of here by twenty feet at the center field fence. Justin Fox breaks his slump with a grand slam to win this huge game and the conference championship for the Blackstone Vultures. He's jogging around third waving his hat and heading for home. I've never seen such a huge smile on a kid's face. As he touches the plate his teammates are on him like a swarm of bees. All I can see out there is a pile of arms and legs in a growing swirl of dust. There is joy in Blackstone this afternoon, folks. What a finish to a long, tough, season for The Fox. Gotta give him credit. He stuck right in there - played his heart out the whole season."

One by one the players peeled off the pile and made their way back to the dugout. Backs were slapped and caps were snatched as they continued to revel in their victory. As the final few got to their feet, Justin could be seen sitting there on home plate. Lucky had somehow managed to squirm his way through the players and onto Justin's lap. As the dust cleared he could be seen licking his young master's happy face.

Meagan ran to be with them and was soon sitting there beside him. Justin's strong arm pulled her close. He kissed her cheek. Billy remained there with his two good friends - standing behind them - his hands on Justin's shoulder. He looked up into the stands. His grandmother blew him a kiss.

He took off his hat and waved it at her. It had been a great week for Billy.

Meagan looked up into Justin's face knowing their relationship was solid and good. It had been a great week for Meagan.

Justin stroked Lucky and pulled Meagan even closer. His smiling face was wet with tears. It had been a great week for Justin.

Lucky barked his first, full-blown, healthy sounding, bark in weeks and wagged a happy tail. It had truly been a great week for Lucky!

Sitting there in the twilight that warm, Spring, evening, several wonderful things became clear to Justin. Lucky had obviously battled back to health and they should be together for a long, long, time. He realized how fortunate he was to have two wonderful friends - each special in their own ways. He looked up into the bleachers and saw his smiling, happy, parents, standing, and still clapping for him long after the others had begun heading out. He was surrounded by love. What more could anyone possibly need? All things considered, Justin felt just plain lucky in life.

The End