



The Invisible Vigilante:
Delayed Justice
by Tom Gnagey



Five lookalikes -
One seeks justice!

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PROLOGUE

Jake was five years old when he first learned babies came from their mother's tummy. It sparked only a passing interest.

Jake was ten years old when he first learned how babies got into their mother's tummy. It was by any measure disgusting.

Jake was thirteen years old the first time he personally experienced the process by which babies were placed in their mother's tummy. The fanfare touted by the older boys had left him disappointed – intrigued enough to keep practicing, but disappointed.

Jake was nineteen when he first figured out why his single mother named the baby that had come out of her tummy, Jake. He became filled with rage and set his sights on exacting his pound of flesh – make that *four* pounds of flesh.

Jake's mother had been the upstairs maid at the elegant, sprawling, Montgomery Estate atop the wooded hill on the north edge of Rossville. It was a town of ten thousand, give or take a few depending on the ratio of births to deaths each year – nobody moved in and only a few young people left. Its economy was fully dependent upon the only major employer, Montgomery Machine Parts, Inc. MMPI employed nearly one thousand workers, from the extremely well paid administrative and supervisory staff through the well enough paid tool and die machinists to the lesser paid line operators, packers, dock workers, and janitors. The Montgomery family, although it represented the life blood of the community, was not well liked – was universally hated would come closer if an honest appraisal were necessary. Their intent was clear: make their employees fully dependent upon the company and provide the least compensation and fewest benefits possible under the law.

At nineteen years of age, Marsha Brown, Jake's mother, had received him in her tummy as a result of intimate moments with the four teenage Montgomery boys – those moments having been more or less evenly distributed among them as she frequented their rooms on the second floor in the

pursuit of her assigned duties as upstairs maid. Those moments were clearly required without discussion if she were to keep her position. Poor and unskilled, she felt trapped with no immediate alternative.

During the era of the tummy intrusion, the Montgomery boys were the definition of that phase often referred to as the age of raging hormones. Like their father, they possessed no moral compass and understood there were never consequences for their less than laudable behavior there in Rossville. More than that, the Montgomery boys were a one in 13 million phenomena – identical quadruplets. They not only took great pride in that, they also took full credit for it as if their parents and numerous, improbable, genetic and physiological flukes had nothing to do with it.

* * *

This story takes on life the day Jake turned 19 and the Montgomery boys had just left 40 in their wake. Jake had finished high school, having spread his senior year over two calendar years so he could work full time to support his mother who suffered from a degenerative disease. When she became ill she was let go from the Montgomery's employ without a dime of compassionate compensation or medical assistance. Since Jake turned ten, he had been doing odd jobs to help with their finances. At about that same time he came to understand in a vague way – small town gossip was never guided by compassion – that one of the boys from up on the hill had made his mother pregnant.

During his middle teen years, Jake understood just enough about DNA testing to follow a fully misguided dream: He would claim and prove paternity from one of the Montgomery Quads and amass a fortune for him and his mother in the process. More recently, the reality of modern day medicine destroyed the dream – he could be matched to the male side of the Montgomery family DNA, but not to a particular quad. The science was a bit fuzzy, but the Montgomery legal team would shred the claim in the first minute of their opening argument. The four boys' father would claim the responsibility lay with one of his sons and not him, so filing some sort of general claim against the family based on the DNA evidence would get Jake nowhere.

From the first-time Jake asked his mother about his father – at five – she had made it clear that it was a forbidden topic. Her thoroughgoing shame and raging anger overpowered any sense of duty to her son. Later, Jake's all-consuming determination to find out, led him to read her diaries, which had clearly laid out the four-fold possibilities – probabilities – had to be's. Later, putting 1 and 1 and 1 and 1 together he came to understand that his name, Jake, held her only public declaration on the subject. The Montgomery boys' names were: Jerry, Adam, Kyle, and Ethan. To Jake, it was all quite plain; he wouldn't ask for, nor did he require, any further substantiation.

He had long since stopped feeling sorry for himself – his fatherless self. His concern was for his mother – the way she had been used – misused – and then discarded. It had stolen her soul. It had destroyed her self-respect. It had condemned her to a life, mired in depression, which, even without her disease would have rendered her an invalid. For all intents and purposes, Jake had run the home since he was eleven.

Jake could have followed his mother's self-destructive path. Everybody in Rossville knew the general story of his parentage and could have understood. To a person, not named Montgomery, they rooted for him, however, providing work and other assistance as they could – a loaf bread here and an odd job there. Upon discovering that not having a father was in no way his fault, he was determined not to let it either bother him or influence his life in any unfavorable manner. Jake had morphed from cute, through awkward, to better than average looking. Jake was likeable. Jake was hard working and responsible. Jake was determined to achieve his goals in life.

So, if he couldn't make the specific Quad pay through a DNA match, how could he achieve justice? *That* became the potentially useful obsession of his young life. He was aware that when a court of law found a person guilty and punished them it was socially sanctioned, if not required, justice. He was also aware that when an individual found another person guilty and punished him outside the court, it was considered vengeance and society frowned on it. Still, for Jake, his plan

was at every level based in the virtues of justice. From the beginning, he pledged to himself that if any aspect of his plan seemed driven by revenge he would reformulate it. Unlike the brothers, Jake proudly lived his life within the law and held himself to the highest standards.

Jake had worked part time at the small Community College since he was fifteen. He began sweeping the floors in the library and had worked himself into a position of responsibility – maintaining the computer center and all things digital there.

It had not been a random employer who happened to need some floors swept. He had carefully and methodically sought it out and thoughtfully made himself indispensable. The position came with free tuition for up to nine hours a semester. Upon graduation from high school, Jake immediately began taking a summer class there – *Introduction to Criminal Investigation*. Jake's long time vocational goal was to become an FBI agent. Even at the early age of eight he was solving local mysteries – who took Mary's pencil during PE, how did Mike's library book disappear from his backpack, did Miss Terry really have a boyfriend? His prowess was recognized by his age mates, and by middle school he became the go-to guy where mysteries or perceived wrongdoings were concerned. His reputation followed him to that very day.

The solution arrived full blown and ready to execute late one hot, summer evening as he lay in bed dripping in recently acquired sweat – his and Cynthia's. The next morning, he began his thorough and systematic investigation of the larger arena of the 'less laudable' activities perpetrated by the Montgomery boys – the ones for which they were never held responsible – the ones, which, if it had been Jake, would have surely landed him in prison. His plan was simple – prove at least one prison-worthy misdeed against each one. Fulfilling his plan would not be simple – he would be swimming upstream against the power of the seemingly invincible, Montgomery empire. He would need to move with stealth – invisibly – like an Invisible Vigilante.

CHAPTER ONE

Transformation

“So, we’re really doing this, plastering the Montgomery boys against the wall for their past misdeeds?”

It had been Cynthia, Jake’s bright, beautiful, intended.

“We?” Jake said, clearly asking, as he finished dressing there in her bedroom.

“Of course. You don’t think I’d let the love of my life go off halfcocked all by himself, do you?”

“I love you, you know, but I don’t want you to get hurt by my fiercely, maybe even irrational, personal mission.”

“I just have one thing I want to make sure you understand before we begin, Jay.”

He smiled and said:

“Yes, I will continue to make myself available to keep your toes warm on cold winter nights.”

She slapped at him playfully.

“I need to hear you say that you understand your goal is to put your biological father in jail for who knows what, and in the process, put three others away who are *not* your father.”

“I hadn’t stated it in exactly that way to myself, Cyn.”

“You know how much I hate being called that.”

“Sorry. I think of it as an endearing nickname.”

“And I think of it as *sin*. I think sin trumps *endearing* in this case.”

“I will do my best to remember. How about each time I remember *not* to use the name, I get a kiss?”

“How about each time you remember, I *don’t* slap your face?”

“You win. I really will try. I know you hate it. I guess it’s a guy’s way of teasing. Guys’ teasing is often in poor taste.”

“I appreciate that and will see that it doesn’t go unrewarded.”

She offered him a gentle peck on his lips.

“Settled, then,” he said. “Back to the father thing. I figure any stupid, ignorant, irresponsible, post pubescent male can father a kid – in the biological sense of the term. It takes absolutely no talent. So, to amount to anything, be worth

anything as a father, he has to also dedicate himself to modeling love and compassion and responsibility for his child and support and love the child and its mother.

“In this case, however, all four brothers abused my mother without regard for her needs or feelings or the helplessness of the situation in which they trapped her. They never offered support or love. They are all four guilty of being world class assholes. I will not think twice about putting all of them away. And you *know* my mother was not their only victim. When – if – they each get out of prison, I may just find other criminal acts that will send them off again.”

“You have set a huge order for yourself, Jay. You can’t let your whole life become a one-track mission.”

“So, all of a sudden, it’s just, *Jay*, again; you’re backing out? I thought you just elbowed your way onboard this ship.”

“Okay. A huge order for *us*, then, Captain.”

She snapped a quick salute over her wonderful smile.

Jake returned it and spoke.

“I have to skedaddle or I’ll be late for class. The prof wouldn’t know what to do if I wasn’t – weren’t – there to question his every breath.”

“But you haven’t had breakfast.”

“I guess my breakfast was the non-nutritional kind this morning.”

“You’re terrible.”

“I know – don’t you just love it? See you at noon.”

After class, Professor Potter motioned Jake to his desk at the rear of the room.

“So, what’s wrong, Jake?”

“Wrong. Well, I’m bummed about war, poverty, inadequate care for the sick and elderly, and starving children, but none of that’s new. Where are you coming from?”

“I had to run the class all by myself, this morning. No questions. No corrections. No ‘what ifs’. I’m sure everyone noticed.”

“I guess I have things on my mind, Sir. Nothing for you to be concerned about. I do have a question, come to think about it – wasn’t related to the topic today. Where can I find a list of statutes of limitations by crime or infraction for this state?”

“I have no idea. I should. There certainly should be one. Your easiest route is probably to make a list of the infractions and let me fill in the information. Have any specific ones in mind?”

“I will by tomorrow. Thanks. Please don’t be concerned. I’m fine, really.”

When Jake was in third grade, *Benny Somebody*, the gardener at the Montgomery estate, visited his class and talked about flowers and bushes. Jake was impressed – as much about the man as a kind and gentle person as his knowledge about the plants. At nine, he still had hopes of finding a father for him and a husband for his mother, so he made it a point to climb the hill and spend more time with him. Age did not enter into matrimonial equations for a nine-year-old. Benny was clearly always happy to see him and for several years Jake spent time helping after school and on the weekends.

Benny had been with the Montgomery family for many years and was still there. He lived in three small rooms upstairs in the sizeable gardener’s shed. He knew all the family secrets. Jake felt it was time for the two of them to get reacquainted.

After stopping at the library to make sure a cantankerous older printer was feeling cooperative that day, he set off on foot for the hill. Rossville remained an old-fashioned town, set in the flat of the valley below the hill, with most of the businesses and professional offices spread along both sides of a three-block section of Main Street. Dead center stood the county courthouse. The more expensive houses fanned out along the base of the hill. The majority of the middle-class houses surrounded the main drag four blocks in all directions. The least affluent folks lived near the river to the east where the property was subject to spring floods every half dozen years or so. Higher hills rose to the north and west behind the Estate and were dotted with summer homes of wealthy folks from the City. Jake and his mother lived on a bump of land near the bend in the river and had escaped the rising water for as long as he could remember.

Their house was small, old, frame and displayed more naked wood than the flaking, white paint that had once graced

its surface. The roof was a patchwork of colors as Jake had used what he could find to repair leaks and replace wind torn shingles. There were three rooms – a small kitchen, a small living room, a small bedroom. Since he turned eleven, Jake had slept on the couch in the living room. He was fine with that.

By ten o'clock the temperature was already working itself toward ninety. Jake figured Benny would have already moved inside out of the sun. In hot weather, he worked in the relative cool of the vine covered shed. It was set among a dozen tall pines which moderated the temperature year 'round – providing deep shade in the summer and shelter from the considerable updraft that relentlessly lay siege to the hillside all winter long.

One of the double doors was open. He knocked – three longs and two shorts, their 'secret' signal from when Jake was younger.

Benny greeted him warmly wiping his hands on a towel as he approached the door.

"Jake, my boy. I've almost forgotten what you look like."

"I know. I'm sorry it's been so long. Had stuff, you know."

"Oh, yes, the fearsome, omnipresent, two headed, green scaled, Stuff."

Nobody seemed to know about Benny's background. He had arrived in his early thirties accompanied by encyclopedic knowledge of plants and the vocabulary of an English professor. It was understood his past was to stay as his private past. Nobody cared. Everybody loved Benny. There had always been high turnover among the estate staff – Winthrop, the head of the family ruled with an uncharitable, iron hand; Olivia, his wife and the mother of the late-in-life quadruplets, was meek and in every other way an odd mismatch for her husband. The boys – by then grown men – still maintained separate apartments in the mansion and remained egocentric, self-indulgent, loose cannons with only marginal association with the company. The unkind, though locally amusing, community buzz was that the four of them shared two wives.

“What circumstances afford me the honor of your presence, Jake?”

“Can’t an old friend just drop in?”

“He can. I apologize if my insinuation of insincerity was inappropriate.”

“Still with the penchant for alliterations, I see.”

“We did have some great times with preposterous battles of the vocabularies didn’t we, son?”

“Thanks to you I was encouraged to move beyond the two-syllable limit of the majority of our cherished, if illiterate, residents. I’ll be upfront so you can kick me out if my motivation is inappropriate. I have reason to be interested in the missteps – the most serious misdeeds, really – of the Quads.”

Benny grew serious.

“Missteps in what area of their lives?”

“All.”

“And you really believe there is time left in our lives to contemplate such a boundless topic? It is one of the greatest disappointments of my life, Jake. I can rejuvenate a wilted plant. I can graft cuttings from a dying tree so its beauty lives on. I can arrange the perfect soils to meet the needs of non-native species. But I have been unable to influence the boys in any meaningful way.”

“From what I’ve gleaned over the years, Winthrop has forbidden you – as hired help – from having any association with them.”

“Basically, yes. Still . . .”

“Like I indicated, Benny, if it’s in anyway uncomfortable, you have no obligation to say a word about it.”

“It presents an interesting challenge in a way. I have to warn you, you may not like what you hear.”

“And why would that be?”

“Please forget that. It was an unfitting assertion on my part.”

“Look, I know one of them fathered me if that’s your concern.”

“You know?”

“Yes, and you’ve known?”

“I’ve known. Anybody who knew them at your age has

to know. Let's go upstairs."

Jake took a seat on the couch that had held him many hundreds of times during his visits. Benny took a brown envelope from his desk drawer and, uncharacteristically, sat beside Jake instead of in his recliner across the room. He slid the contents out onto his lap and searched for just a moment picking up two pictures.

"Here are the boy's pictures from the yearbook page when they were seniors in high school. Here is the one you gave me of you, at the same age, this year."

He handed them over and remained silent, studying the boy's face.

"So, *quintuplets*, you say. I had no idea how much I resembled them. My! My!"

"Five very handsome specimens – identical clones," Benny said, an odd sort of pride showing on his face.

"What are you not telling me, Benny?"

The old man sighed deeply, patted Jake on his knee, and moved across to his recliner.

"Are you up to a life altering revelation?"

"How can I know before I hear what's on your mind?"

"You can't know, of course. That was a misstatement on my part. That being understood, there is no way for you to be prepared. The legitimate question is, therefore, do you want to hear what I have to say? I believe this is the appropriate time and place."

"I've always trusted your judgment, Benny. So . . . what?"

Jake hadn't a clue about what was to come. The pictures verified what he had already come to know – he was the son of one them. The fact the five of them looked nearly identical at nineteen, was reasonable. It did nothing to point a finger at which one was his father.

"If you will indulge me, Jake, there is a necessary back story."

Jake nodded and shrugged. He sat back into the sofa, relaxing just a bit from the building tension of those past few moments. Benny began.

"It is the confluence of several stories, actually, Jake. At 23 I finished college with a Master's Degree in botany. My

dream was to become an experimental botanist – creating new species of plants and trees – the kinds that would be more resistant to the vicissitudes of nature and spread heightened beauty by their mere presence in the world. I experienced good fortune beyond anything I deserved when a wonderful girl and I fell in love and became engaged. Then, one night in an uncharacteristic moment of intemperance, I was driving alone down a narrow road on a mountainside when I veered into the wrong lane and hit another vehicle, sending it off the road and into a chasm fifty feet below. Two passengers were killed. I was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter and served five years in prison – five of a ten-year sentence. A fortuitous confluence of good behavior and overcrowding resulted in my early release.

“Upon sentencing and expecting to be away for ten years, I had released my fiancé from our engagement, of course, admonishing her to find and live a wonderful life. I lost track of her – by design. Upon my premature liberation from my incarceration, I searched for her, mostly to make sure she was happy and engaged in a good life with a loving husband. I had no intention of contacting her. While in prison I was determined to make my stay productive and I finished a Master’s degree in English through the state’s outreach program.

“What I did next was, by any measure, unacceptable, although as I construed it in my mind it was as much altruistic as selfish. It may have been nothing more than self-protective rationalization.

“At any rate, I located her. At first take, I was pleased for her. She had married well, into money, and lived in a beautiful part of the country. She needed for nothing, arrived in a family of status, and had the opportunity to pursue whatever interests became her passions.

“Upon listening to the locals in bars and cafes, however, I gleaned a very different picture. Her life was painted in hues of sadness and loneliness, framed less in security than despondency. It tore me up inside, Jake – understanding that brilliant, effervescent being had degenerated into such a state. Of course, I still loved her – such a love would not be dissipated by time or distance or

dispatched by some guilt-fed pronouncement of freedom.

“Can the despondent be made more despondent? I decided not – a decision driven by thoughtless selfishness, I understand now looking back on it. But, my decision cleared my path to seek her out. The Garden Master, as the position had always been called at her estate, was old and in declining health. I just showed up one day and began assisting him. I claimed I was there to gain experience. Whether he bought that or not, he allowed it. I drew no salary and I did the majority of the work. What was not for him to like?”

“The moment presented itself when the woman was alone in the flower garden near the gazebo. I approached her having no way of knowing how she might react. I was both terrified and buoyed up with possibilities. The moment she noticed me her face bloomed. She pulled me into the lattice-work structure and embraced me. She cried. She lifted her face to mine and we kissed. It was as if not a single day had elapsed since our last private moments together.

“She arranged for the old man to retire on a pension, and for me to be hired in his place. She scrubbed the information that accompanied my resume, so only the positive features remained.

“The upshot, which you have most likely already ascertained, was that she – Olivia Montgomery – and I have had an ongoing, intimate relationship since that time. As has been said by the wags, Winthrop’s get up and go, got up and went long before I came on the scene. They had discovered he was sterile soon after the marriage. Still, out of some sense of husbandly duty, I suppose, he took to her bed once a month until – surprise, surprise – the boys were born.”

“Are you saying what I believe you are saying?”

“Most likely. Jake, I am the boys’ father – the quadruplets.”

“You know what that makes you, then,” Jake said, deep furrows creasing his forehead while a smile curled on his lips. Benny provided an amusing answer.

“An oversexed old man with an undying passion for the love of his life?”

It garnered a quick, but soon faded smile from the young man.

Benny stated the obvious. He believed it was his place.

“Yes. It would seem that I am your grandfather – by which route, I have no idea if that is part of your reason for coming today.”

Jake grew silent for a long moment. Things were quickly resetting inside his head.

“I’m thinking you invited yourself to my third-grade classroom knowing who I was and that I was enrolled there.”

Benny nodded as a smattering of tears began overflowing onto his timeworn face.

“And when, the next day, Miss Terry asked for volunteers to go and help you, you had asked her to steer me in that direction.”

He nodded again, breaking the slightest smile as if needing to keep his feelings tentative until he received some indication from Jake about his.

“It seems you wanted to spend time with me as much as I came to want to spend time with you,” Jake said.

“How nice it worked out that way,” Benny said risking a bit more of a smile.

“Up, up, old man – that is, old grandfather man,” Jake said standing and moving to him for the hug of all hugs and that magnificent, fully unexplainable, instant settling-in of the love of all loves.

Neither wanted to let go. Eventually, it became a gradual, mutual decision. Benny kept hold of his ‘new’ grandson’s hands and stood there looking him over.

“I wasn’t sure this time would ever come, you now,” Benny said across his trembling lower lip.

“You were correct; it needed to come. Thank you for that. You just doubled the size of my family – mom and now mom and you. Do we tell her or does she know?”

“I have no reason to think she knows. It is your decision, but I want you to think long and hard about it. Weigh the pros and cons *very* carefully.”

“Well, off the top of my head I’m thinking that as much as she hates everything Montgomery she would happily welcome the news. Looking at these pictures I understand, now, that one reason she and I have been somewhat distant these last few years is that when she looks at me all she can

see is Montgomery. She looked at me and she saw her molesters. My poor, poor, Ma.”

He remained silent for a moment, then, “You’ve always avoided telling me your last name, Benny . . . grandfather.”

“Jackson. Hard to get more American than that, or anonymous, I suppose.”

It only required a smile and nod.

“Although I haven’t had much time to rethink things,” Jake began, “most everything between us seems to stay the same. I cherish you as a good friend, I appreciate you for all the fine things you’ve done for me – not the least of which was ‘the talk’ when I was ten – and I love you now just like I always have. One of the best things is that when Cynthia and I get married and have children they will have a great-grandfather.”

“Thank you for all of that. Can you imagine me a great grandfather, Jake? I can’t wait. Go home and get busy; I’m not going to live forever, son – I guess that’s officially ‘grandson’, now, isn’t it?”

“By the way, is it actually just Benny?”

The old man broke a broad smile.

“I prefer, Benny, you understand, but officially – brace yourself – it’s Benjamin Franklin Jackson, Jr.”

“You and old Ben share many obvious traits right down to the rimless spectacles. Sometime in the not too distant future, Cynthia and I will see what we can do about whomping up a Benjamin Franklin the third. I’m not yet properly prepared to be responsible for a child you understand – education and finances.”

More tears. Another extended embrace.

“Does any of this change things – you spilling your guts about the Quads – who I now know are your son’s? I certainly understand if it does.”

“I am their father in lineage only. I have not had the opportunity to play the part of role model, and moment to moment guide for them. My values have not become their values. I feel bad about how they have turned out and the fact I have been relegated to the sidelines of their lives, but the fact remains, they are despicable human beings like their father. I’m sure you understand he let their mother have no say in their upbringing. I assume you have a plan. I’d like you

to share what you can of it up front.”

“I will, but it certainly calls for a new incarnation of your lemonade . . . *grandfather*. I know that has to remain private between us, but you can’t know the amazing feeling that flows through me every time I say it – grandfather.”

“Much like the feeling I have when I hear it, I imagine. Cynthia should know, I think. *But*, what’s this about my lemonade emerging in a variety of incarnations?”

“You have to know that your lemonade has only one redeeming characteristic – it’s wet. In the ten years I’ve known you it has never tasted the same twice.”

“You got that, did you?”

The old man smiled.

“It would take a taste-bud-deaf tongue, not to.”

“You often mix metaphoric and other aspects of speech in really off the wall ways, you know, ‘roundabout grandson’.”

“And finally, I understand that tendency is genetic.”

For some reason grandfather felt a twinge of pride. For some reason grandson suddenly understood the *grand* connection that had always been a part of their relationship.

With the drink mixed in the kitchen they sat at the table there. Benny handed Jake a glass filled to the brim.

“Your daily allotment of ‘wet’, grandson.”

There were nods, smiles, and chuckles. There had always been nods, smiles, and chuckles between them, but suddenly they were simply the best ever.

“My plan is simple, grandfather: find unresolved things each of the boys has done that have been either illegal or hurtful to others, indisputably attach each to a specific boy, prove the case, and see that justice is served. I envision all this as a fully anonymous undertaking. It will be as if an Invisible Vigilante has come to mete out justice where the legal system has failed – except it will all be finalized in the courts. It must be justice and not vengeance.”

“I applaud your plan. Nothing less than what I would expect from you. It may encounter one glitch, however. Judge Madison, who hears all such local cases, is on Winthrop’s payroll. It is how the boys have eluded justice for so long.”

“Hmm. Good to know. Then, there must clearly be a

preamble to the plan that will assure the long time *corrupt* judge of Ross County becomes the unequivocally *fair* judge of Ross County. What do we know about the less praiseworthy side of Madison's life?"

CHAPTER TWO

The First Fieldtrip

Jake went home to check on his mother and fix her lunch – soup and toast. He sat across the table from her as she ate. He had to keep reminding her to eat. He talked about the pretty day as he arranged the small bouquet he had picked for her as he descended the hillside. Not everybody in town had their own personal gardener. He wanted to tell her about Benny, but the time didn't feel right.

Before he left, he settled her into her recliner in front of the TV and made sure both the remote and her cell phone were within arm's reach. He kissed her forehead and left. She followed him out the door with her eyes. He was the only thing in her life that she could garner the strength or the will to attend to in that fashion.

Cynthia lived with her parents in a white, two story house with a full porch across the front and a free standing, single car garage at the rear of the large lot near the center of town. Her room was at the rear of the second floor – large, bright, neat. Jake usually ended his day there, but seldom stayed all night. The two of them had been best friends since Jr. High and a good deal more than that since their sophomore year. She was a realist who tended to overthink things. Jake was a dreamer – a dreamer with well-defined goals and a very good head on his shoulders to steer those visions toward fruition.

Cynthia's father was an attorney – mostly wills, contracts, business related documents and financial management. Her mother worked in the County Clerk's office doing whatever clerks in the County Clerk's office did. Compared with the population of Rossville as a whole, they were well off financially. Cynthia was in her second year of RN training. It was a cooperative program between the college and Montgomery Hospital – the one semi-charitable undertaking the family had made to the community decades before.

Jake was proud of Cynthia and regularly offered himself to be the basis of her anatomy homework. They would be

married, but not until she finished her four-year degree. Her father had offered to help finance Jake's college expenses but, appreciative as he was, he would have no part of it. He had his expenses covered for at least the first two years through his job and the tuition perk at the college. He felt sure there would be scholarships for him at the university after that.

They were in her room, sitting together on the loveseat that faced the large, floor to ceiling window that looked out over the back yard – green lawn, flower beds, and a double row of tall, old oaks and pines across the rear of the lot.

“So, how would you like to have a great-grandfather for our children?”

“You're into raising the dead, now? That must be *some* class your taking.”

“It is, but that is irrelevant to the topic I just proposed for our upcoming dialog, love of my life.”

“You've spent time with Benny. I can always tell when you start talking like him – ‘irrelevant to the topic’, boy.”

Jake grinned, pulled her close and kissed her – gently.

“I love it when you talk ‘Benny’ back at me. Are you ready for this?”

“I am if in your opinion, I am.”

“This is just for your ears – and eyes and face and lovely neck and alabaster shoulders and fantastic . . .”

“Whoa, Boy. We haven't even had lunch yet.”

“Okay, seriously, then.”

“You mean you weren't serious about my lovely neck and alabaster shoulders and fantastic . . .?”

Jake passed it off with a smile and nod.

“Here's the thing. I informed Benny of my intention to nail the Quads to the wall on my paternatage – is that a word – my fathering. He said it was time I knew some things. Upshot is, he is the actual father of the Montgomery boys which makes him my grandfather – ergo – the great-grandfather of our children.”

“My! That's enough to . . . I have no idea what that's enough to . . .”

“To add a wonderful new dimension to our lives for one thing. Benny's my grandfather. That's the most fantastic thing since . . . I have no idea what that's the most fantastic thing

since. . .”

“It is though” Cynthia said beaming. “It’ll just take me a while to rethink things. He’s okay about you going after the quads – his sons?”

“We determined there needs to be two terms for ‘son’. One, meaning ‘biological son’ and one meaning ‘loved and raised and supported and prepared for life son’.”

“I get that and since Benny wasn’t allowed to be the second, he sees himself only as the first. I think I understand where the conversation went.”

“Anyway, according to grandpa – I love saying that! – my – our – first hurdle in all this will be to convince Judge Madison to sever his ties with the Montgomery clan and begin truly serving justice again.”

“He’s been under their thumb?”

“Since day one of his appointment, the way I understand it. Where do you stand on blackmail?”

She thought for a moment.

“I think there needs to be two terms for ‘blackmail’. One meaning ‘a way to serve the evil intentions of the blackmailer’ and one meaning ‘a way to fulfill the implications of justice’ – more like providing powerful motivation to do the right thing.

It deserved and received another peck to her lips.

“You are fantastic! Did I ever tell you that?”

“In many ways every single day, Jay, and I love it. I hope you never stop doing it. I hope I never stop deserving it.”

“Feels like things here could go in either of two directions right now,” Jake said.

“I understand and I think lunch down stairs is the proper direction for us to proceed. Sounds like we have a lot of work ahead of us.”

“You’re no fun when you’re practical, pragmatic, preemptive – and right.”

“But, just consider the fun yet to come.”

Downstairs they made sandwiches, opened chips, and poured milk. They continued talking.

“We need some way into the back alleys of Madison’s life,” Jake said. “Who would know the dirt?”

“His clerk, I imagine.”

“Who is that?”

“Got a new one some months ago. Don’t know his name.”

“Maybe the former one would be more help – the no longer needing to be loyal thing. Who was that?”

“Wilbur Kittering. Retired after forty some years. Was in the office before Madison was appointed. He and his wife live down in Alma. With that, I’ve probably told you more than I know.”

“We need to figure a way into his heart. I read something once by a wheeler-dealer type. He said the best con is the one that bypasses the head and goes straight for the heart – emotional appeal over intellectual.”

Cynthia’s mother walked in the front door and joined them at the kitchen table. Cynthia spoke to her.

“Remember Wilbur Kittering, the circuit judge’s clerk.

“Knew him well, in fact – there in the courthouse. Why do you bring him up? He retired almost a year ago.”

Jake jumped in.

“I find I need some information he may possess.”

“This feels like something I don’t want to know about,” she said raising her eyebrows and patting Jake on his arm. “I’m afraid you’re too late, however. The man died last month – down in Alma.”

She stood.

“I just really stopped by to pick up the library books I need to return over my lunch hour. You two have fun. You work this evening at the library, Jay?”

“Yes. Five to ten.”

“Fix yourself a snack to take along. Ding Dongs in the bread box. Cheese in the fridge. You’re probably the only human in history that loves to munch on Ding Dongs and a chunk of Cheddar at the same time.”

She put on a shudder and left the room.

“Bummer,” Cynthia said.

“Maybe not. His wife is still available. How about we approach her – maybe as if I’m doing a paper for school and see where it leads?”

“See where you can steer it, you mean. So, now we’ve added *lying* to blackmailing?”

“No, we are merely presenting creative perspectives on

reality, to achieve the greater good.”

She shook her head, not so much putting it down as acknowledging the often-inspired justifications he found lurking in the outer reaches of his gray matter.

“It’s one o’clock,” he said. “Are you up for a field trip to Alma?”

“I don’t have classes this afternoon,” her way of saying, ‘of course I’m up to it. I’ll get to be with you.’

“Alma’s what, half hour away?”

“About that.”

“Your car or mine?” Jake asked apparently seriously.

“We want to get there *and* back, sweetie. Mine of course.”

In a town, the size of Rossville, a young man Jake’s age had no real need for a car – bad weather or back seat romancing, perhaps. He had one mostly so he could take his mother to and from her medical appointments and for a picnic in the park when he could convince her out of her recliner. She would always go places for Cynthia. His car was 40 some years old and ran more on hope than gas, and was held together by the seven layers of black paint it had acquired during its lifetime.

Cynthia liked to drive and, unlike many young males, Jake felt no degree of humiliation in letting her. Jake was a talker. The story was that his first ‘word’ was, ‘Let’s go get ice cream now’, when he was not quite three. Ice cream would still coax just about anything out of him – well, that and Ding Dongs – and cheddar.

Cynthia had a heavy foot and they entered Alma from the north at one thirty. They turned to each other and giggled at the same moment.

“Well, we’re in Alma, but, of course, we have no idea where Mrs. Kittering lives.”

Jake was the one who had voiced it. He pointed at the newspaper office to their right. If Rossville was small, Alma would be tiny. Still, it clung to its widely circulated, *Weekly Observer* as its trusted source for local and county news, information and gossip.

They obtained directions from the pleasant woman at the front desk and left the car parked out front. The City

Fathers of Alma had apparently not yet discovered parking meters. It was a two-block walk – one on down Main and then one to the right on Oak.

“How home town America can it get,” Jake said taking in everything. “Three blocks of Main Street fed by Oak, Elm and Cherry.”

The house for which they were searching had been described as small, white, with a black shingled roof and red brick fireplace and chimney on the north end. There were no house numbers.

“Thar she blows, Cyn – thia. Almost a woops there. Sorry. I get a kiss for fixing that, right?”

“You can have a kiss, but just because you are the most loveable boy in the universe.”

“Stretch that much more and I’m afraid you’ll be getting close to exaggerating,” Jake came back.

He received a second. He’d have tried for a third but they had arrived.

An elderly lady was sitting in a rocker on the front porch. They cut across the lawn. She waved. Jake spoke.

“Mrs. Kittering?”

“Yes, I’m Ethel Kittering.”

“I am Jay, Jake, Jacob Brown from up in Rossville.”

The old lady looked at Cynthia and spoke an aside from behind her hand.

“He always have to chase after his name that way?”

Jake jumped in.

“Only when he’s in the presence of astonishing beauty, ma’am.”

“She again leaned and spoke as if just to Cynthia.

“He’s a keeper, dear, whatever his name turns out to be.”

“He is ‘Jay’ to his closest friends and I get the idea you are about to qualify. I am his girlfriend, Cynthia and he may or may not have ever gotten around to mentioning that.”

“Girlfriend and boyfriend. How nice.”

“Really, fiancés without a ring,” Jake said. “Other things require our pennies these days.”

“I assume you have some purpose other than pestering me for my just out of the oven peanut butter cookies.”

“Perhaps we should try some and see if you qualify for step two,” Jake said offering her his special grin.

Again, from behind her hand:

“Spunk, we used to call it. He has spunk. I always liked students with spunk. Married my husband because of it as well.”

She got to her feet and stood taller and straighter than the youngsters had figured.

“Milk or lemonade? I don’t fuss with coffee on hot days like this.”

Cynthia answered.

“Lemonade will be fine.”

“I’m not set up for company out here as you can see. Make yourselves comfortable on the porch floor – siding or railing – both have been known to support young backs.”

She opened the screen door and disappeared inside.

“What a delightful old . . . person,” Cynthia said.

Jake nodded. They had determined long before that a nod indicating agreement saved a good deal of time over oral answers. Since they had never been at a loss for important things to talk about, that seemed like a wise decision.

Presently, she appeared behind the screen door, a tray in her hands. Jake popped to his feet and opened it.

“A footstool by the door, just inside, there, son. We can use it for our table.”

With that in place and the tray sitting on it, she backed up to her chair.

“Your arm, son. I’m a much better getting-upper than I am a sitting- downer since I turned seventy-five.”

Jake moved to assist her and began to respond.

“My, you don’t look a day over . . .”

“I know, not a day over seventy-six – that’s what my husband used to say. It was as close to making a joke as he came.”

They might pursue that later, but let it go.

“So, is it time to get down to brass tacks yet?” she asked looking back and forth between them.

They looked at each other. Somehow, they understood it was Jake who would take the lead.

“Judge Madison.”

“Oh, don’t get me started. Wilbur worked for him for 23 years – terrible years.”

“Terrible?” Jake said hoping the request for clarification would turn on the spigot.

“I don’t care who knows now that Wilbur is gone. Eli Madison is a rotten excuse for an officer of the court. Now, Ken Bertrand, the one who served before him, he was a gentleman’s gentleman who was truly dedicated to upholding the law and arriving at just decisions.”

“You’re saying Judge Madison is reckless?”

“No, I’m saying he’s a conniving cheat who’s in the Montgomery family’s pocket. Not a single verdict in those 23 years ever went against them and you know it’s a despicable accumulation of human beings up on that hill. Well, Mrs. is a different breed – sweet, beat down I think. A mismatch made in hades I’ve always thought.”

Again, she looked back and forth between them.

“I make no excuses for my language. I say what I mean and I mean what I say.”

“We both appreciate that,” Cynthia said. “It’s how Jay and I are with each other. It makes life easier, we believe.”

“Good for you. Bright ones. I had you pegged. We old schoolmarms can pick them.”

“So, you were a teacher?” Cynthia asked.

“What she means is we are interested in hearing what you taught. The question she asked would only require a yes or no answer.”

Ethel leaned slightly forward and spoke directly to Cynthia, again.

“You have a Lexiconically picky partner. Don’t fret. That’s okay. Works to improve both parties.”

“He always catches me when I trip over a split infinitive or dangling participle,” Cynthia said offering a smile.

“I taught English and World Literature at the college beginning back when it was called, Miss Prichard’s Finishing School for Young Ladies.”

“What did the young ladies need to finish?” Jake joked.

“That was always a great mystery to me, I’m afraid. And, you know, you are the first person in fifty years who has had the sense to ask the question. I like you, young man.”

“That’s certainly mutual.”

“Just you remember he’s taken,” Cynthia added slipping her arm through his and tipping him in her direction.

Jake continued.

“We would like to take you into our confidence, but only if you agree to it. We don’t intend to place pressure where none has been agreed to.”

“If, as I suspect, it has something to do with sticking it to Madison, you can count me in. He had gutter-ugly dealings with attorneys from the City as well. They’d get changes of venue to Rossville and he’d sprinkle his illicit devil dust to make happen whatever they wanted.”

“For a price?” Jake asked.

“You bet your backsides, for a price.”

Jake turned to Cynthia.

“Don’t you just love her eloquent command of the English Language?”

“I’d hate to be on the wrong end of one of her interrogatives!”

The sweet old lady laughed out loud.

“Where have you two been all my life – oh, that’s right – angel dust cascading through the Universe for most of that time.”

She enjoyed her little joke.

“Please, get specific,” she managed at last, leaning forward just a bit.

Jake gave her the short version of how he got inside his mother’s tummy and the recent revelations from Benny.

“Benny! Wonderful Benny,” she said when his name was mentioned. “That orange rose on the trellis is one he developed. Love him to death, but that man makes the worst lemonade this side of Harry Belafonte” [a singer who popularized a song about a lemon tree in the 1950s].

“The upshot is that in order to obtain justice for the four Montgomery boys, we need an honest judge and in order to make Madison into an honest judge we have to find some creative ways to urge him to get back in line.”

“You two have set quite a task for yourselves. I have two reactions: first, of course, I *will* and I think I *can* help you. Second, I admire you for not taking the easier, more direct,

and these days, popular approach of blood and guts revenge. Working it out by way of the law is laudable. If it doesn't work, I still have Wilbur's double barreled shotgun in there over the fireplace."

She waited for just a moment to see the smiles form on the youngsters faces suggesting they understood it had been meant as a joke – maybe.

"What about the lawyers from the City," Jake asked. "That might hold some advantages over the Montgomerys since they will be our eventual targets."

Ethel folded her hands in her lap, nodding, clearly organizing her thoughts.

"This gets a bit complicated, but I think I can reconstruct it for you. The judge and the lawyers used a private signal system rather than any form of direct contact so as to not implicate any of the parties. They used the want ads in the *Observer* – to keep it one step away from Rossville. You have paper and pencil in your backpack, Jay, Jake, Jacob?"

Smiling at her humorous offering, he opened it and handed over what she required.

"I think we've determined you can just stop at the Jay, ma'am."

"And you can stop at the Ethel – *ma'am* makes me feel old."

She shuddered.

"I really doubt if you ever legitimately feel *old*, ma'am Ethel."

As she began printing something on the paper, Jake and Cynthia moved to positions beside her so they could watch.

"It worked something like this – you can find the real things in back copies of the paper."

JBC to KLT. No time for writing paper. Ten bills.

"It meant the attorney – JBC, his initials – was referring to a case involving KLT – the initials of the defendant – in which he was to receive no jail time for his misdeed – in that case writing paper – in other words forgery of some kind. That would give Madison all the information he needed about the case. Ten bills referred to what the attorney was willing to pay

for the service – one bill representing \$100. Only if Madison would *not* agree to the sum did he reply – something like: JBC out of town. Or JBC unavailable. Something like that. Then he'd wait for a revised offer."

"Wow! So, your husband became aware of this somehow."

"The Judge had Wilbur take him a copy of the Observer every week. He had to wonder why so he began his own investigation. Most ads in the paper make sense. Those didn't. He began putting one and one together with the cases. By the time he figured it out he only had a few years left to retirement and, thinking about my welfare, he decided not to confront him and risk our pension. One of those good news/bad news decisions, I'm afraid."

"Are transcripts of the Montgomery family court appearances available?" Cynthia asked.

"All public record. Filed in the County Clerk's office in this state. There are thousands of case records of course. If you have some way of knowing which ones you're looking for you'll save lots of time."

Jake turned to Cynthia.

"Benny, maybe, for the quads' misadventures. He knows everything that has gone on up on the hill."

"You've been a huge help, Ethel," Jake said as they got to their feet.

"Let me get a little sack so you can take the cookies along."

Jake removed a plastic bag from his hip pack. Cynthia explained.

"Every woman in Rossville spoils Jay rotten with things from their kitchens. He is not bashful about accepting, so comes prepared, you see."

"I can believe it. I hope he shares."

"If I took everything he offered, I'd look like the Hulk – you know the Hulk?"

"I get the Hulk confused with Papa Smurf – one's green and one's blue as I recall."

"This would be the green guy."

"Not as loveable as the blue one, I'd say. You kids are welcome anytime. Give me an hour's notice and there can be

cheese cake.”

It had been an enjoyable and valuable half hour and the cookies hadn't been so bad, either.

As they walked back to the car Jake launched a trial balloon.

“What if we begin softening the judge up right away?”

“How? And for some reason I already have reservations.”

“We put one of those ads in the paper that can't make sense to him just to make him begin squirming a bit.”

“Surprisingly, that spawns no reservations from me.”

“And you're sorry you misjudged me.”

“Yes.”

“And as punishment you will deliver six kisses to any part of my anatomy that you wish.”

There were six, rapid fire, pecks to his nose. It drew his smile and he dropped his fantasy.

“So, we need to give this some careful thought,” he said.

Cynthia began.

“They start with the three initials of the person sending it – we need to find an unlikely yet believable set.”

“How about QVW?”

“Sounds fine. Then there are three more for the defendant.”

“That seems obvious – Madison – Eli – making it E blank M.”

“I'm ahead of you, stud of my life. Cell phone – county web site . . . Eli J. Madison. Guess for our purposes the J is as good as a middle name.”

“Okay then. Next comes the offense – let's give this some thought – it will need to relate to Madison's offenses and not be too cryptic.”

“How about something involving greed or betrayal,” she suggested.

“Like, ‘Life for betrayal of public trust?’”

“That's perfect, Jay! Now how much in bills?”

“Hmm. Not sure about that.”

They remained silent for half a block. Cynthia had a thought.

“Minus. Minus some amount as if he needed to pay something back.”

“Great! Now, some interesting amount like 100,000.27 bills.”

“Hilarious to us. Bothersome to him. Are we good or what?”

“We’re very good at some things and getting better with practice the way I recall.”

Cynthia ignored it. She spent some significant amount of her life with him ignoring those sorts of references. Perhaps more piling them up for future deployment than actual ignoring.

“So, ready to do this?” she asked as they stopped in front of the newspaper office.”

“Sure. We need a story about its cryptic nature if asked. Hmm? Got it. Let’s do it – that is, let’s place the ad.”

Cynthia slapped him, playfully.

Inside, Jake began.

“Need to place a want ad for my grandfather. He and a friend have been playing chess by want ads for many years. I don’t pretend to know their code but this is what he gave me.”

He jotted it down on the form:

QVW to EJM. Life, for betrayal of public trust. -- 100,000.27 bills.

“We’ve been getting these off and on for many years. Always in a small envelope with the three-dollar fee in bills. Always wondered, of course. It’ll run on Friday. That’ll be three dollars.”

“Oh, of course, sorry,” Jake said handing over three of the five ones in his wallet.

They left and got in the car.

“So, the Invisible Vigilante has struck for the first time,” he said.

“The what?”

“A phrase I coined up at Benny’s . . . Grampa’s, this morning.”

Cynthia let it go. They were soon back on the highway heading north.

“We should have gotten Ethel’s phone number,” she said.

"I did. A land line on a little table just inside her front door."

"You're good, Sherlock."

"Thank you, Watson. It is good to have one's skills appreciated. That reminds me, cookies – you?"

"No thanks."

"Cookies remind me of both food and sweet things. By the time we get home, there will still be time for food or *something*."

"There will be time for you to go spend it with your mother. Save her a cookie. I have the idea that sort of time may be short the next few weeks. I'll make a lunch for you to take along with your *Cheddar Dongs*."

He smiled at the newly coined term.

"Okay. Drop me off at home and I'll stop by your place on my way to work."

"I need to make a new batch of Jell-O for Mom – it's one thing she'll always eat. I've been lacing it with crushed vitamin pills since I was eleven. She won't take them otherwise."

"I thought you put her antidepressant pills in her Jell-O."

"No, that's her oatmeal. Don't you pay attention to me when I talk?"

"I always pay attention to you – you know that, sweetie."

"Yes. Among the very best moments of my life."

"I have a test in the morning," she said, "so I'll need to study tonight. Come early for breakfast and you can quiz me."

"No rubbing noses, tonight?"

"At the rate we've been going at it, I'm afraid you'll wear out your nose before we're married."

Jake sighed and smiled. He wouldn't push the matter. He loved and respected her, after all.

During down time at the library Jake began his initial search for information about statute of limitations in the state. His professor was right – hard to find it all in one place. He did find information stating that those periods were typically a good deal longer in that state than in most. He figured that would work in his favor and although it intrigued him why that should be, he'd wait to pursue it until he needed a topic for a

paper.

There were no limits on rape, murder and molestation. There would be no way to prove either rape or molestation, and murder would most likely not be a factor, although in his fantasies when younger Jake had devised creatively horrific ways to do in the four of them. To that day they provided a huge adrenalin rush when they flashed across his mind. He detested the part of him that needed and relished such ideas, but figured the part that kept him from acting on them demonstrated the higher and revered capacities of the human being. Another topic for a paper in an upcoming philosophy class, perhaps.

Clearly, the place to begin was to compile information on both the quad's known and unknown misdeeds and he figured he had the best possible source in Benny. The following morning after class he would revisit his newly revealed relative and get to work on that. It had been some time since he had worked in the soil, side by side with him and looked forward to helping him. He smiled: trading dirt for dirt. It should have been worth more than the faint smile it produced. Times were suddenly becoming very serious. For most of his life all he could do was sit back helplessly and watch his mother deteriorate physically and emotionally. Suddenly, he felt empowered to do something. He couldn't restore her health, but he hoped when he finally could tell her that justice, at least in a roundabout manner, had come to the boys, she would feel some sense of relief and maybe even restitution.

At ten o'clock, when the library closed, Jake remained, beginning his research into the judge's corrupt activities. The *Alma Weekly Observer* had been digitized back nearly twenty years as a joint project of the Future Librarians and the Computer Club at the college. It was part of a massive searchable database of rural social history that universities across the country were cooperatively completing.

He soon discovered that, even so, the search was time consuming. The only regularly occurring unique word in the coded messages from the want ads was 'bills'. He found three of the posts during the previous twelve months. Cynthia would search the court records for cases that included names

having the initials in those ads. According to Ethel, the first set of three initials referred to the attorney. He emailed those to himself so he could search an attorney database later. It suddenly occurred to him that in the process he was going to acquire the wrath of a number of less than reputable – and probably unscrupulous – lawyers from the City. That could present a problem he hadn't figured on. They needed to be extremely cautious. If an attorney would risk his license and freedom to buy a judge, there probably would not be much he wouldn't do to protect himself.

The following day was Saturday. Jake's plan was to pay an early morning visit to Benny.

CHAPTER THREE

Setting Up the Judge

“A good day for gardening,” Benny said as they worked the hand trimmers on the hedge. “Cloudy and cooler.”

For some reason, Jake was reluctant to bring up the real reason for his visit. Benny soon sensed that.

“So, I’ve been thinking which of the many terrible things the quads have done that might be the best for you to pursue,” Benny offered as a not so subtle nudge.

Jake appreciated the opening.

“I’ve been thinking one *each* rather than any group activities,” Jake said. “And, there has to be some way of identifying the person other than by his looks.

“I’ve come to those same conclusions. I think the place to begin is with Jerry. When he was nineteen there was an accident over on the Loggers’ Road on Hathaway Mountain. A teen couple was headed down the narrow road while a speeding car was heading up. The couple’s car was hit on the front right corner and forced off the road. It dropped a hundred or so feet into a ravine below. The girl was killed.”

“Right side? That means the car that hit them was coming up the wrong side of the road.”

“That’s right – a drunk or an Englishman. The boy’s description of the car at least hinted at that of Jerry Montgomery. When the police investigated they found Jerry’s car had been sold as junk and had been crushed for the metal a few days before the accident. The bill of sale for both that car to the junk dealer and for the new car from the car dealer to the Montgomery’s were each dated days before the accident.”

“Jerry’s car was unique in some way – easy for the boy to identify?”

“Oh, yes! Bright yellow Mustang with two red stripes running from the grill in front up across the hood and roof and back down the trunk to the rear bumper.”

“Relatively new, I’d assume?” Jake asked.

“No more than a year. The boys got new cars every birthday.”

“You know the names of the junk man and the car agency?”

“Right here on this slip of paper. He had several of his friends vouch for the fact he had been with them that night. It gets better. His friends took him to the emergency room around midnight with a broken collar bone. Their story was he broke it when he fell out of a hayloft. I don’t have their names, but I imagine one of them was Wes Kenny – he hung with the four of them. Slept over here as much as he did at home. Police records should have them I imagine.”

“You remember the date of the accident?”

“That’s an easy one - the fourth of July.”

“Thanks, of course. Cynthia and I have begun working on Judge Madison. Any ideas how Montgomery paid him off? I assume it would *not* have been by check, I mean.”

“It could always have been cash, of course. I have one other way-out idea. The Montgomerys own a huge amount of land. I don’t even know where it all is. Land would be one way to make a payoff, I’m thinking. Not sure how it might work. Also, vehicles. I do know that Madison drives a new Lincoln every year. I suppose he could afford it on a judge’s salary. I really don’t know. None of those things would have to be given directly to Madison – relatives perhaps or some sort of hidden companies.”

“You’ve been thinking about this for a long time haven’t you, Grampa?”

“Goodness yes. I just haven’t had the courage to pursue it. Thanks to you, maybe I can help, now.”

“There will be records of land transfers at the court house, right?” Jake asked

“Oh yes. Problem is, we have to be able to connect the dots and if the real names of people are somehow disguised, I don’t know how to do it.”

“I can look into that. The boy in the car didn’t see Jerry at the time of the accident?”

“I never heard that he did or didn’t. I’d say not since he was never charged. I suppose it would be in the accident report. There were articles in the paper and it was on TV news. The car that caused the accident – the one coming up the hill – was never located. It must have been in good

enough condition to be driven off.”

Jake figured he had his starting places. He worked on beside Benny for a few more minutes.

“Go, grandson! Your mind is clearly elsewhere.”

“I suppose it is. I’ll keep you informed.”

Jake walked down the hill working his cell phone trying to locate information about the accident from the local newspaper. The first article appeared on the fifth of July and the last on the tenth. The fourth was a Friday. There was also an entry in the hospital admissions that verified Jerry was admitted late on the night of the fourth and released on the fifth. In the edition on the fifth, there was an item in the ‘About Town’ column that seemed to verify Jerry’s fall at the barn.

Jake had personal knowledge of that barn. It was known as the Black Barn due to the darkened wood on the old, unpainted structure. It was a very large building used strictly for the storage of hay, baled and unbaled. It stood in the center of fifty acres that had been used exclusively for hay for decades. It was also used as ‘make out central’ for young teens looking for a private place, but who were not yet drivers. A Friday night should have found it occupied with a bevy of young couples each in their own private nest in the loft. It seemed quite unlikely to Jake that three boys would have been up there together without girls.

He detoured out toward the barn, which sat a mile or so north of the bottom of the Montgomery’s hill. He picked up his pace to an easy jog and was there in fifteen minutes. It had been a number of years since he had been there. The floor between the upper and lower floors was solid and stood twelve feet above the cobble stone floor. There were two openings to the loft at the tops of ladders – each opening something less than four feet square. Upstairs, those were surrounded on three sides with a solid wooden railing three feet tall and a door in the floor that closed the opening, intended to keep the loose hay from falling through.

He climbed one of the ladders, pushed the door up above him and entered the loft. He studied the area, thinking about how somebody might come to fall through the opening. He quickly concluded it would be nearly impossible. It also made him wonder again why 19-year-old guys would have

been up there to begin with. It was well known to be a 'driver's license and out' area – a local rite of passage from the hay to the back seat.

"If I could just find somebody who was up here that night," he said out loud.

He did some quick calculations. In a town of 10,000, 3,000 would be adults, 6,000 would be kids, 1,000 would be retirees. Divide the 6,000 kids into 20 age groups and there would be about 300 each. The younger make-out group of 13, 14, and 15 year olds would comprise 900. Since it would be the boys rather than the girls who would be more likely to admit to being in the barn, that set the figure at about 450 – still way more than he could interview. They would be in their late thirties.

The examination of the barn convinced him that Jerry could not have been injured the way the alibi stated it happened.

He left and headed to the junk yard to see if old Zeke could remember about the car he reportedly had crushed into a block of steel. It bothered him that a relatively new car would be sold for junk and then actually trashed without raising questions. The logical inconsistency should catch up somebody along the way.

"Zeke. Good to see you."

"I believe you mean that, son. How are you and your mother and Cynthia?"

"Seems you know what there is to know in this town. In order: I am super; mother is honestly still going downhill; Cynthia is fantastic. She's in nurses training, you know."

"I do. You'd be surprised how the resident junk man has an ear to just about everything in a town this size. I imagine you are here for more than saying, 'Good to see you'."

"I am. Can the resident junk man be counted on to keep certain inquiries under his hat – and I'm very serious about that?"

"For you, son, nothing is too much. How many times have you shoveled the snow for my mother and ran errands for my sister?"

"Those weren't intended to be like deposits in a bank

account that I could ask to withdraw later.”

“I know. I really didn’t mean it in that way. Still. My old lips are sealed.”

Zeke sat on a steel barrel and indicated another to Jake with his hand.

“You will remember the time about twenty years ago that one of the Quads sold you his yellow car with red stripes for junk to be crushed in your big rig over there.”

Zeke looked puzzled for just a moment.

“I know about it, but it weren’t done here. It was done over in Springfield at my cousin, Deke’s yard. Why you think it was done here?”

“I heard the rumor about the Bates Junk Yard and I guess I just assumed it would have been here. Deke’s name is Bates, too, I suppose.”

“Yes, cousins on our father’s side.”

Do you know anything about the circumstances, then?”

“I do. Let me see. I can get all the details for you if you need more than I know. It was such an odd deal all the way around. Deke was gone the day it happened. He said his assistant, Tom, finally owned up to it all after my cousin found documents that had been falsified. That’s big problems with the authorities if it’s found out.

“Okay, this is what I remember. A boy in his late teens named Alexander Patchel – I think it was – drove up in a black Mercedes and made Tom a deal. For five thousand dollars cash Tom was to make out a bill of sale from Patchel to *Deke’s Junk Yard* in the amount of fifty dollars. The boy had a title in the name of Alexzander Patchel obtained several days before the sale to us – got it in still a third county. Then he was to enter its VIN on the log of cars they had crushed down there. We are required to do that and then send it into the state. The young man insisted that the car’s condition not be entered on the form – that was optional anyway. Then, Tom was to forget about it all. There was no car, of course. Tom did jot down the plate number of the Mercedes – the only sensible thing he did in it all. It was Winthrop’s vehicle – Deke eventually looked into that. Deke didn’t find out about it until reviewing the paper work at the end of the month. Deke thought it was best just to leave things as they were so neither he or Tom got

in trouble. Deke don't usually do things like that. He'd not have done any of it if he'd been there."

"So, the paper work was all dated before July 4 even though the Patchel kid showed up at the junk yard after the 4th."

"Right"

"About your offer to get me anything else I might need – could I get a photograph of the title transfer from Jerry to Patchel – I assume the young man had to sign it."

"Oh, yes, he'd have signed it. And, sure I can. Let me call Deke right now. I assume you won't implicate my cousin."

"You assume correctly."

"I love listenin' to you talk – all those 'ly' words nobody else ever uses."

Deke moved off a distance to make the call and keep what was said private. He returned.

"Give him five minutes – probably less. He'll send me a picture and I'll send it on to you – less of a direct connection he said."

"Sounds just fine to me."

"This thing sounds important to you, Jake."

"Very important. Can that be the total answer?"

"Of course, it can. Like I said back at the beginning."

"You will never know how much I appreciate all your help. Tell your cousin that your anonymous friend thanks him, as well."

The photo arrived – three of them in fact – each one a clearer rendition than the one before it. Jake only wanted as clear a view of the date and signature as possible. The name, Alexander G. Patchel, had a wide sample of letters – eleven with three upper case examples. Date of transfer to Patchel is July second making it before the accident.

"This is great, Zeke. Let me know how I can repay you."

"Didn't do it to make a deposit etc, etc, etc."

They exchanged a grin. Zeke called off the shake Jake offered on account of very greasy hands. Jake turned to leave.

"One more odd part to the story, Jake."

He turned back toward the old man.

“Jerry Montgomery had broken his collar bone in an accident out at the Black Barn just the day before the Patchel kid approached Tom at Deke’s Place. – that Patchel boy had his arm in a bulky sling. Then, a few days later, Jerry came in here to my yard with a brother – can’t never tell ‘em apart – to get some short sections of heavy scrap iron. His brother’s car was in the shop he said. His brother and I loaded what they needed into the trunk of Jerry’s yellow car with the red stripes. Two things for you the think about: the front license plate was bent and scarred like it had been run over by a Mac Truck. Also, and this is really odd, his rear brake lights were the new ones – they’d been modified half way through the model year by the manufacturer. The original lenses were prone to falling off. There was no recall to refit with new ones. Just the change on those produced during the second half of the year like I said. Don’t know if any of that’ll help.”

He waved Jake on his way.

Jake had no idea either, if it would be of any help. His debate coach in high school had said there were two essential elements in solving a problem or proving a point. First, gather as much related data as possible, and second, no problem could be solved until the right question was asked. He would keep collecting data and keep asking questions in the hope one of them would be the right one.

Jake felt he had accomplished a lot by eleven o’clock. Cynthia was working the morning at the hospital. Her shift ended at eleven thirty. He decided to meet her in the lobby; it would give him time to read the paper and maybe catch a nap. His mother had been uncomfortable during the night and he had missed a good deal of sleep taking care of her.

The next thing he knew, he felt his shoulder being tapped, gently. He played possum waiting for the kiss to his forehead he was sure would follow. It, in turn, was the precursor to the kiss to the lips, which *he* always then initiated. He wondered momentarily if things like that should be considered well established ruts or traditional celebrations of affection. He would go with the latter although it would get a good discussing at some later time.

“A good morning?” he asked.

“A great morning! The Perkins girl was dismissed.

Three weeks since she was broken into little bits by that hit and run driver.”

“Good for her. That driver was caught, right?”

“Right. I walked this morning – it was so pretty at five.”

“It’s hot now. We’ll stick to the shade.”

“How was *your* morning, Jay?”

“Really good. Had a long talk with Benny about the Quads – personal and personality stuff I’m sure will come in very useful. They really are and apparently always have been assholes.”

“You’ve been using that term too often lately. Put it on your off-limits list.”

Didn’t even know I had an off limits list.

“You do now.”

“Ah. I see. Okay. You do take care of me, don’t you?”

“I try to.”

It was worth another brief lip lock before they moved outside.

Jake slipped out of his T-shirt and threaded it through his belt. They held hands as they walked.

“I also had a fascinating talk with Zeke at the Junk Yard. I’m sure I’m on to something. We will need to sort it out together.”

He filled her in on Deke and what he had learned about the car titles, the exchanges, and the other details.

“According to the paper work, Jerry supposedly sold his car to that Alexander Patchel guy for five thousand dollars – a reasonable amount for that model after six months use I suppose. ‘Patchel’ drove up to Deke’s Junk Yard in Winthrop’s car. The quads wouldn’t be recognized on sight up there and had one of them been recognized it could never be verified which one it was. He had his arm in a sling over a bulky sweat top. So, I’m thinking we can just assume it was Jerry posing as the non-existent Patchel. I have both Jerry’s and Patchel’s signature on the title transfer form – photographs from Deke. Here. Look. Would you say they were the same person’s handwriting?”

“Sure looks that way. Even worse than yours.”

“I can get that verified by Dr. Blaugh at the college – among his many talents is handwriting analysis.”

“What does that tell us, for sure?” Cynthia asked.

“One, that Jerry really didn’t sell the car.”

“He wanted it to look like he had. What dates are involved?”

“This gets interesting. The accident was on July fourth – ten at night or so. The original car sale to Patchel was dated July third. The transfer to the junk yard was July fifth.

“That is interesting. So, Jerry was trying to set things up so it looked like it would have been the Patchel character’s car at the time of the accident – not Jerry’s.”

“Right. And that the re-sale to Deke’s place for demolition was dated just after the accident like he was trying to get rid of the evidence, thereby implicating Patchel. With no physical description, it couldn’t be proved or disproved that it had been in an accident.”

“What about the notary on the first title transfer?” Cynthia asked.

“We have the name on the form. I think I can enhance the photograph so we can read the license number that goes with it and look her up – Agatha Millsap the way I read it. How about you?”

Cynthia took the phone and looked closely enlarging it as much as she could. Jake tilted his head and raised his eyebrows as if to say, ‘Why didn’t I think of that?’

“Agatha Millsap, for sure. I can’t read the number either. I’ll bet mom can find out about her from state records – address and such.”

“Good thinking. Remind me to properly reward you for that later.”

“I have the idea I’m already about a year ahead in the ‘being rewarded department’. There is another thing – is Zeke implying Jerry had two identical cars?”

“I’m sure that what he believes. He wouldn’t have purchased the second one from our local dealer – probably in a larger place some distance from here. I’m thinking it was a special paint job. We’ll have to think about how to discover those things. It all had to be done very quickly. I imagine the father was in on that.”

“Let me just see if I have the thinking right about that,” Cynthia said. “We are saying Jerry is the one who killed the

girl in the car accident and did several things to alibi himself. He staged the fall from the barn to cover the broken collar bone he really got in that accident. He somehow disposed of his car so there was no evidence of the accident on it – except maybe that front plate. Then, he purchased a new, identical car, which he was seen in later in the week to ‘prove’ it had no part in the wreck.”

“That’s how it’s coming together for me. He did all the car stuff away from Rossville so nothing would seem out of the ordinary, here. He paid off those he needed to have remain quiet. We need to debunk his claim that he fell at the barn, but that will take witnesses other than those claiming they witnessed it – I wonder who those witnesses were. Back newspaper copies may give us some idea there.”

“It’s the kids who *didn’t* speak up that we need – the ones who can verify that Jerry *wasn’t* in the barn that night. That may be impossible. Couples making out aren’t prone to notice who is NOT there.”

“How old would they be, now?” Cynthia asked.

“Well, if the kids averaged say 15 and the Quads were 18, and the quads are now about 40 it would have been 22 years ago plus 15 equals 37 or so.”

“That was ‘round Robin Hood’s barn, but accurate I guess. That’s a couple of years younger than mom. We need to ask her who might have been there that night.”

“Ask and ye shall receive. There’s you mom on the front walk.”

They hurried to catch her. She was walking in from the car with a bag of groceries.

“We need to pick your brain, mom.”

“Your beautiful, perfectly formed, most efficient, brain, that is, of course,” Jake hurried to add.

He took the bag.

“I just might share my egg salad with this hunk of yours, daughter. Pick away.”

They were soon sitting at the kitchen table. Cynthia became the picker.

“You will remember the night of the car accident on Logger’s Road over on Hathaway Mountain.”

“Yes, I remember. Terrible. A teen-age girl killed. The

boy is in a wheelchair to this day. Bobby somebody, I think. The banker's son from down in Alma."

"That was a Saturday night on the 4th of July. We need to find some of the kids that would have been in the loft of the Dark Barn that night."

"What time? Those Saturday nights at the barn started early and went into the wee hours of Sunday morning."

"Do you remember about what time the accident happened?"

"I sure do. At least the time it was reported – eleven ten."

"How could you possibly remember that?" Jake asked.

"I was dating the son of the man who ran the tow truck service and we were parked in my driveway when he got a call on the CB radio in the car from his dad saying Billy should meet him in the valley below to pick up the car for the sheriff. The whole thing simply ruined what was supposed to be my first *real* kiss. Eleven ten. You can bet the farm on it."

"So," Jake said, beginning to figure, "give it all an hour to have played out to that point – after the actual wreck, the cops arriving, the ambulances, and so on – let's put the window at between 9:30 and 10:30. We need to know if Jerry showed up at the barn loft before, say ten o'clock."

"What would a boy his age have been doing at the Dark Barn?" her mother asked. "Once a boy had his license he'd never show his face there again."

"Just what we thought, but Jerry used his presence there as the place he broke his collar bone and we believe he actually broke it in that wreck."

"I see. My! Nobody but a Montgomery could have gotten away with such a lame excuse. I guess I didn't know about that. I know that after the fireworks – about ten I'd say – there was a mass exodus of young teens in that direction. It started drizzling as the final big display burst into the sky so everyone was looking for a sheltered spot."

"Do you know if Jerry was ever a suspect?" Jake asked.

"I never heard anything like that. I do remember about his broken collar bone. All I ever heard was it happened in a fall of some kind. You have to remember that when bad

things happened to any of the Quads, the whole town just cheered and didn't question it."

"So, names?" Cynthia asked.

"Give me the rest of the day. Alright if I make discreet inquiries among some of the girls who were my friends back then?"

"Certainly. Thanks Mrs. Carls."

She turned to Cynthia.

"Do you think he will ever get up the nerve to call me, Ann?"

Jake answered.

"I'm just waiting until I can call you, mom."

"And will that be soon?"

"You know our schedule, Mom," Cynthia said.

"Who but you two would put love on a schedule? You kids skedaddle, now. I'll due up the dishes. Sounds like you have work to do."

They stood and started for the stairs. Jake turned and spoke.

"One pretty important question: Did you ever get the first kiss from tow truck boy?"

"Oh, my, yes. Larry kids me that he – Larry – was lucky that I had such a good teacher. He and I started dating the following September."

Up in the room a moment later:

"That was a hot conversation with your mom."

"That was a disgusting conversation with my mom – largely thanks to your puerile interests."

"As I recall I promised to reward you for something."

"Down Fido. We have things to get on with."

"Isn't that what I just said?"

She picked up a pillow and threw it at him with some vigor.

"Here's this week edition of the Alma paper, the *Observer*. I haven't looked yet."

They lay on the bed on their stomachs examining the paper. Jake paged through the three sheets.

"Twelve pager this week. Why so big?"

"*Alma Days*, remember. Lots of ads I imagine and lists of events."

He nodded – one of those no response necessary moments.

“Here we are, lots of personals. I guess it’s true that love blooms in June. That reminds me . . .”

That time it was knuckles to his shoulder.

“Here it is. The ad we placed. Now we have to follow that up with a doozie of an anonymous letter to the good judge.”

“Let’s get to it, then,” she said rolling off the bed to get a yellow pad and pencil.

She motioned him to the love seat. In circumstances where thinking and writing were required, Cynthia wrote, Jake thought, and then Cynthia fixed Jake’s thoughts. It was a time tested method that had served them well since grade school.

“Okay, what will the ground rules be for this – all of this, I guess?” she asked.

“Good place to begin – well, second best, but you seem to be uninterested in my amorous advances.”

“I am always interested in your amorous advances, but we need to stick to our non-amorous priorities. If I didn’t keep us on track you’d never accomplish anything else when in my presence.”

Jake did the bounce his head nod thing and turned the page – so to speak.

“Okay. Nothing we do can be traced back to us. So, we need to disguise things and take every precaution.”

“Let’s do a first draft clear through, then we can analyze it for such things and for content,” Cynthia said.

“Dear Despicable Public Servant: How’s that for an attention getter right up front,” Jake said, clearly pleased with it.

“Got it. Now, how detailed do we get?”

“Good question. We don’t want to say things in ways that will make Ethel Kittering suspect in any of this.”

“I think she’d be delighted if he did suspect her,” Cynthia said.

Jake nodded as he formulated a next thought.

“The Invincible Vigilante is aware of your dirty dealings with a variety of judges from the City and with the Montgomery family.”

“Where did Invincible Vigilante come from, again?”

“Just hit me not long ago. I figure it will make him focus his search on transactions from his past and therefore bypass us.”

“Okay for now, but we’ll need to think that through carefully.”

“Next, how about adding sets of initials of judges and clients – the ones my search of the data base found. I have several of them on a slip in my wallet.”

Jake had dozens of notes to himself in his wallet so it took a minute to find the one for which he was searching.

“Here we go. Just the lawyers first: ‘The attorneys: ACF, WJG, GFH, RRD’. Then add something like, ‘And the judge’s clients:’. Here are some of them: ‘JPK, ATP, ALF, STS.’ That’s enough references this first letter.”

Cynthia nodded and added: “How about adding something like:

“I am in the process of acquiring affidavits from attorney’s former staff members.”

“And then some link to the future,” Jake said thinking aloud. “How about, ‘Your necessary actions to at least prolong your prosecution will arrive by mail in the near future.’ Then sign it, I.V. All on the word processing program, of course. I’ll use a computer at the college – like the one in the Geology Department to keep it really separated from me.”

“Basically, a good plan,” Cynthia said. “Now we should sleep on it until tomorrow and see if it still makes sense.”

“Speaking of sleeping on something my dearest, one and only love . . .”

Cynthia locked the door. Jake pulled the drapes.

CHAPTER FOUR

Two Saddening Conversations

Sunday morning found Cynthia making ready to accompany her parents to church. Jake didn't do church. He didn't object to others partaking. He did object to discussions about his nonparticipation. It had been long settled between the two of them.

Jake headed for the big hill and Benny's gardener's shack. The seventy-five degrees at seven thirty would soon morph into the low nineties according to smiling, Big Jim Buchanan – the area's favorite Weather Man. He was known locally as, 'Mostly Sunny'.

Benny greeted him with a smile and raised arm. Jake pressed the moment to include an embrace. It was easily accepted and returned.

"I hoped to see you this morning," Benny said. "Like the old days – Sunday mornings, dirt and hot chocolate."

"I move we skip hot anything this morning. Heading to be a scorcher. Almost enough to entice me into church attendance there in the AC."

"It'll be cooler inside. Caught the cool of the night and closed it in."

Jake followed the old gentleman up the open, wooden, stairs.

"Had breakfast?" Benny asked.

"Cynthia's mom fixed waffles and sausage."

"Let me rephrase the question. Had *enough* breakfast?"

"You know I never have enough breakfast. I see you have the fixin's ready."

"Thick cut pepper bacon, scrambled eggs, grits and juice. Coffee for any among us too stupid to refrain from drinking the foul brew."

"Remember the first time I had coffee?"

"I do. Seldom have I ached so badly for anybody. You'd been pestering me for months to let you have a cup with me. That morning I gave in – not sure if it was just to quiet

you or to chuckle at your reaction. I remember you insisted on, 'Black like yours'. You took a big swig right off the bat and then it just sat there in your mouth."

"Tell me about it. I suddenly had my mouth filled with the foulest tasting brew I had ever experienced. It wouldn't go down and I was determined not to spit it out in your presence and look like a baby. I remember the pained look you got and then you turned back to the stove and reset the pot. In that moment, I spit the contents into the potted ficus tree next to me. I understand now that you turned away to allow me to do that."

"You had the audacity to say something like, 'Yum. Now I think I'll try it with cream and sugar – just for comparison, you understand'. How old were you?"

"It was that first year so probably eight I guess."

"And to this day you still take it with cream and sugar."

"Cynthia's dad says I take a little coffee with my cream and sugar."

Jake took a seat at the table. Benny found it a strain to have others attempt to help him in the kitchen – he would, but clearly preferred not. Benny made conversation.

"So, things are still fine between you and Miss Cynthia."

It was less a question and more a statement.

"Wonderful and getting better. Not sure why the universe has supplied her for my life. I really feel fortunate."

Benny smiled and nodded. He didn't pursue it.

"And your mother?"

"I'd be lying to say things were going well. She's failing – the depression more than the physical problems. In fact, she's been holding her own that way for over a year now."

"I'm glad to hear that at least. Do you still get her out sometimes?"

"It's a struggle. Cynthia can get her to do most anything. Mom senses what a treasure she is. When she's around I think mom gets good feelings about me and my future. That make sense?"

"Sure does. I remember those springs when I'd come down and the three of us would set the flower gardens and hanging baskets around your house. Not too late even this year for some mid-summer blooms if you think it would cheer her up."

“I doubt if she’d participate, but Cynthia could probably get her to come outside and watch – boss us even. Maybe a few things for fall. Just a few things where she can see them out the window from her recliner.”

“How about next Sunday morning.”

“Cynthia will be in church.”

“All morning?”

“Well, no. She’d probably be willing to go to the eleven o’clock service. If we started at sunup we’d have plenty of time. Cool enough still for Ma to be outside. Let me talk to her.”

Benny set the food on the table and took a seat.

“So, is this strictly for Sunday morning old times, or you have something else on your mind?”

“It can be both, can’t it?”

“Certainly. Hard to remember a visit that wasn’t both. Your head was always churning with wonderful questions and amazing – if sometimes bizarre – ideas.”

Jake offered a shrug and smile. Enough about that.

“Like you to just put your head on autopilot and tell me about how the quads were as kids and maybe beyond that. Truthfully, you know, I’m still looking for soft spots – chinks in their armor – dastardly deeds – I can go on.”

“I know you can. I get the message.”

He offered a major sigh. Jake couldn’t translate it into his feelings, but figured it was some sadness about how they – his sons – had turned out and partly some sadness about laying it all on me – the son of one of them. Jake offered a question hoping it would help to ease into the matter.

“Could you tell them apart as boys?”

“It was really hard when they were preschool age. Got easier after that – if I saw them close up. Not sure if they changed or I got better at it. From ten feet away they *always* looked identical to me well into their twenties, and I had reason to want to tell them apart.

“They were always an unruly lot. As five year olds they ganged up on a guest at their birthday party because he kept winning the games – they nearly killed him. Such things just followed them their entire lives. Impulse control problems. They all had them. I have read since that in multiple births

there is frequently just enough oxygen shortage for a short time that some brain functions can be damaged. Impulse control is often one of those.

“They only ever really had one close, mutual friend – Wes Kenny. He was the poorest kid in town – lived with his father on an old river boat. You know him. Mr. Kenny, partner in the lumberyard. He’s a year younger than the quads, but the way birthdays fell they were in the same class in school. Couldn’t figure that relationship – most likely because Wes would put up with whatever crap they laid on him. They bought him things – clothes, video games, you name it – probably girls once he reached that age. Wes was a bright one. He may have even done their homework – who knows.

“As to the individual boys: Jerry was the first born by several minutes. He was more likely to lie than tell the truth even when he had nothing to hide. He was always in fights – broke the knuckles on his right hand when he was eight taking on a twelve-year-old. Never learned his lesson. From then on his handwriting was virtually illegible – reverted to printing so it could be read – even his signature. Eventually, he became the most muscular – he was always interested in sports and body building. A good football player until he broke his collarbone his senior year. To this day, he carries a scar on his chin from his football days. The rumor was he got it tackling a tackling dummy. You better believe the guys knew better than to remind him of that. He had a car he loved; wouldn’t let anybody else drive it – not touch it more like it. Well, his many female interests I suppose were allowed.

“Then Adam – the second born, again by just a few minutes: As a little boy, he was always playing Robin Hood or William Tell – men with bows and arrows. He was insistent that I set an apple on my head so he could shoot it off. I agreed to make him a scare crow sort of figure and he used it as an apple perch for years. I must have rebuilt that head a dozen times. I remember his first attempt – right through the scare crow’s face. He thought it was funny saying something like, ‘If you’d a let me use you, you’d be laid out stone cold dead’. There was no sense of remorse or indication it would have been an unpleasant or bad thing. Adam never really had a conscience, I’m afraid. In high school and college, he was a

championship archer. Won first place in the state as I recall. He was a tinkerer – always inventing things. He probably sneaked off to spend time here with me more than the others – he'd help me build things. Had good ideas.

“Kyle was the least smart of the lot – I've always thought that left him out of the pool for being your father. Chord was around his neck at birth – third in the line. You've always been brilliant.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Most important, I suppose, as a third grader you picked me to be your friend, didn't you? Hard to get much smarter than that.”

They exchanged smiles and chuckles.

“Then those straight 'A' report cards might add some weight to my contention.”

Jake seemed uncomfortable. Benny moved on.

“When Kyle was about ten or eleven I found him downstairs here behind the flower pot rack passed out drunker than a skunk. I carried him up to the house and put him on the porch swing, sat the bottle beside him, then left. By thirteen he was a confirmed alcoholic. His mother pleaded with Winston to get the boy help, but he said it would be a blot on the family name. He said boys out grew such things. By high school, he managed to hold his own 'til sundown most days. It was a miracle he didn't kill himself or others once he got a car. By nature, he was a quiet lad – shy even – but with booze flowing through his risibles, he became an angry sort – believed he was invincible. His brothers brought him home beaten to a pulp quite regularly. When intoxicated, he'd take on the entire football team and be surprised when he didn't win. Girls wouldn't have anything to do with him – after school hours, at least. He was, in his own sad way, accepted if not mildly popular at school. As I recall he dated mostly girls from the City – selected from the wealthy crowd. When Wes was about thirteen, I suppose, he told me that of the four boys, Kyle was the horniest by a country mile – I suppose that term is still understood.”

“Yes, we still measure distance in miles.”

It was good for a chuckle from Benny.

Jake nodded and smiled.”

Even coming from his 'birds and bees' guy, terms like 'horney' made him oddly uncomfortable. Benny wouldn't stop.

"That's not to say any of the four of them were prone to keep their zippers up when they and a girl happened to share the same shadow."

Jake shrugged, trying to alter his response a bit, still not speaking. Benny continued as if not sensing the boy's discomfort.

"Then to Ethan – the last to arrive some twenty minutes into the deliveries. He was the sneakiest of the lot. He'd spy on his brothers and then blackmail them by threatening to tell their father. He had an air of superiority about him – he was a Montgomery Quad and that established certain privileges in his mind. They were all that way to a degree, but Ethan was way in the lead and therefore the least liked by the other kids in town. Early on he was a gambler. Got sent home from kindergarten for organizing what he called, 'quarter toss'. He'd assemble a group of boys with quarters and they would pitch them toward a wall. The one who got closest to the wall took all the coins. The principal related that he had applied a thin coat of rubber cement to both sides of his quarter so it didn't bounce back once it slid into the wall. When in high school another boy's father confronted Winthrop about Ethan forcing his son to flip a coin for his car or get beaten senseless. Winthrop had the car returned. Ethan was sporting a new car the following week – his father's way of saying, 'there, there, let me take some of the social sting away'. A farmer called the sheriff on him once – about a sophomore, I'd say – when he spotted the boy and three girls skinny dipping in the pond on his farm. To this day, old acquaintances call him 'Dipper'. He seemed to take to that nickname with some degree of pride.

"I guess that will give you a baseline from which to begin."

"Oh, yes. A good deal more than I figured, Grampa. I have no idea how any of that may fit into my mission, but I bet it will. I hadn't thought of how differently they might have become as they matured – personalities, interests, skills. I guess I assumed Quads would just all be alike in all ways forever. Here in town when people see one of them they say,

'There goes one of the Quads.' Nobody ever tries to figure out which one. Not sure if that's because they are really that hard to tell apart any more or if nobody really cares which one it is."

"My bet is that last one, son. I used to let it make me sad. Olivia, their mother helped set me straight about that. You really don't know her, do you? I must fix that in the near future. She wants that very much. Like me, she's thrilled you know we are your grandparents."

"I really hadn't taken it that far yet. How dumb can a guy be? I have a *grandmother*, as well! How wonderful. How sad."

"Sad?"

"Her marriage. I'll never get to be close to her like I am with you."

"She and I have some ideas. We still manage private time together four or five times a week. Winthrop is often gone for a week at a time. We will see that you have the opportunity to be included."

You still feel like you're engaged to her, don't you?"

"Yes, indeed. I never felt any other way all those years. Nor did she, as it turned out."

"Well, thanks for the breakfast. Let me help with the dishes and then I need to be on my way. Do you still know Wes well enough for me to mention you as a mutual friend to get a conversation going?"

"Certainly. In case you aren't aware of it, you should know that his only son was killed in action a few months back and, as would be expected, he and his wife are having great difficulty dealing with it."

"I thank you for that heads up. I can't imagine losing a child."

Benny sniffed and shook his head. He had lost four, but wouldn't mention the sadness he felt about that.

"I'll save the dishes until after lunch. You be on your way now."

"If I didn't know better I'd say you wanted me to be on my way."

"Winthrop is out of town. Olivia is at early church."

"You be sure to work out a meeting. I'm overjoyed at the prospect. Maybe Cynthia, too."

“We’ll talk about it today.”

With a new happiness in his step the young man set off down the grassy hill toward town. Wes and his wife had a very nice home along the buffer zone between the wealthy near the base of the hill and the doing very well middle class homes that spread out from there onto the valley floor. Wes had done well – come a long way from his early life.

Jake hoped he might be home alone. He knew his wife was a church goer. Cynthia’s mom was on committees with her and had mentioned her by name.

“The universe is smiling on me this morning,” he said out loud, but to himself as he spied Wes watering the flowerbeds.

“Mr. Kenny,” he called from a distance waving his arm above his head as he approached.

Jake had only had a marginal association with the man – he would let Jake have left over singles and end pieces of wood sometimes. Nothing much those past few years.

“Jake, isn’t it?” he asked as Jake came close.

“It is. Any objection if I jump the fence, here?”

“None. Good to see you. It’s been awhile.”

“Thirteen red singles ago, as I recall.”

Wes laughed and nodded. Jake figured he probably hadn’t had much to laugh about recently. He wasn’t sure whether or not to bring it up. He opened his mouth and his tongue just followed the lead of his feelings.

“I wanted to convey to you my mother’s and my condolences on the loss of your son. I can’t imagine such a thing so won’t go on about it like I am known to do.”

“Thank you. Probably the most honest thing anybody has said to me on the topic. I appreciate that.”

“Some more honesty, then, sir. I also had an ulterior motive for this visit.”

“What might that be?”

“Well for one thing you are overwatering the pansies. They’d rather have a little water often than a lot all at once. That variety has very short roots so much of what you are giving them will be of no value to them and just help the long-rooted weeds maintain their grip on the bed.”

“That’s right, you’re a long-time, Benny the Gardener

groupie aren't you? Thank you, but surely *that* was not your ulterior motive."

Jake grinned sheepishly.

"It is no secret here in Rossville that one of the Montgomery boys is my father. I have come to learn that there is no way of knowing which one. That is unimportant to me, but I am trying to learn more about them. I understand you were their closest childhood friend. I should say upfront that I know they are four despicable human beings, so I'm not asking you to spare my feelings. I can only say there are reasons right now that I feel the need to learn as much of the truth about them as possible. You have to trust me on that. If you prefer not to talk about them I understand and will never pester you about it again."

"You're Cynthia Carl's boyfriend, right?"

"Yes, sir. Four years now. We consider ourselves engaged without a ring for obvious reasons."

Jake pulled out his empty pockets to demonstrate the truth of the statement.

"Been there, son. Her father, Larry, helped arrange for the loan that allowed me to buy into the lumber yard. He's a fine man. Co-signed for me if you can believe that. I was hardly dry behind the ears at the time."

"He *is* a fine man."

"He brags on you all the time, you know."

"No, actually, I didn't know. Thanks for telling me."

"As to my preference about talking about the quads, I am suddenly eager to do that. This conversation will take some time. How about you come in where its cooler and have a cold drink – the fizzy kind or lemonade."

"Thank you. I've sort of over fizzed myself this week. Lemonade sounds very nice."

They sat across from each other at the kitchen table – it seemed a comfortable place for both of them. Wes wiped away an unexpected tear and began.

"My wife and I have never told this story for reasons that will become obvious. She and I agree it is time, now. For the time being I just ask you keep it between the two of us – and Cynthia I suppose – on a need to know basis."

Jake nodded. Wes continued.

“I appreciate the chance to try it out on you. If my words become uncomfortable just tell me and I will stop.”

“At this point in my life, Sir, I believe truth will certainly trump uncomfortable.”

“As you suggested, I was the only friend the quads had and ‘friend’ should be put in quotes. I didn’t like them. In reality I used them. I’m not even sure they ever realized that. They bought me things my dad never could have – clothes, games, took me to concerts, and once I turned thirteen, saw that I had all the female company and comfort I wanted. Not proud of any of that, but we need an honest beginning here. It was my decision to be a part of their lives. I’d often sell things they gave me to help out at home. Dad provided for us by doing odd jobs – us being him, my younger brother, and me. There were times when food was hard to come by. I was almost always able to finagle money from the boys. Kyle would always pay me if I’d let him hide and watch me with a girl. I shudder thinking about it now.

“Ethan would often pay me to be a lookout when he took a girl into the woods behind the big house at night. Sometimes his dad or mother would take evening strolls, and then there was Benny any of. One night, when I was nineteen, while on lookout detail for him, I heard the girl begin to talk loudly – angrily. After a while it worked up into a scream. I was uncertain how to react and remained at my post for far too long. Eventually, I decided I needed to see what was happening – as if I didn’t know. By the time I got to them Ethan was well into raping her.

“He rolled off of her and smiled up at me when I approached.

“‘Your turn,’ he said laying back’.”

“The girl was beside herself and pulled her clothes against her as I approached her. I knelt beside her and drew her close. She knew I would not harm her.

“Ethan got dressed and then stood close above us. He shook his finger at us and told us if either of us ever mentioned the incident to anybody, he would kill our younger siblings – my brother and her sister. He pulled out his hunting knife – he always carried it clipped inside his pants – and put it to the girl’s neck, making more threats. He’d been drinking

and although not really drunk he was mean and sincere. He left and told me never to come back to the house.

"I quickly put things together; the girl's father had run him off his farm for hunting there. The farm was a wild life sanctuary. He turned him into the sheriff and he had to go to court. Nothing came of it of course – they never go in trouble so long as they were in this county. He raped her to get back at her father. It was dumb because he had set it up so she could never tell her father about it. Ethan was undoubtedly content in that he had conquered still another girl.

"She and I talked for some time that night and then I took her home. We agreed that for the time being, until we could think it all out with clear heads, we would keep quiet about it. We started spending lots of time together and came to be very fond of each other. We had a lot in common and our values and goals were similar.

"She missed her period that month and was terrified. She harbored suicidal thoughts – pregnant without being married would be bad enough in Ross County but to have to live with the knowledge it had been Ethan Montgomery who was the father was just about more than she could handle. I offered to marry her. I really did love her. I just wasn't in any position to support her. We talked it out. She agreed to get a job and we'd save back as much as we could. I was working almost full time at the lumber yard at that time. We went over to Madison County and got married by a justice of the peace. My father's house was tiny but it had two bed rooms. Dad had always had one and my brother and I shared the other. Dad never questioned the marriage. He had my brother move in with him and gave the second room to us.

"Some folks believed I got her pregnant and married her because of it. Others didn't. I had my brother spread the rumor that we had been married for two months before we started living together. Like dad said, people will say what people will say. He knew she was pregnant before we were married, but like I said he never questioned it. Since I never knew my mother I never knew the circumstances of my birth. I still don't but figure whatever they were, they contributed to his understanding and support.

"You can guess the rest of the story. We raised him as

our own and despite my wife's initial doubt that she could ever come to love him, she did, the moment she set eyes on him. Fortunately, he really didn't favor the Montgomery clan. I doubt if anybody in town ever suspected.

"That was when your future father-in-law helped me get the loan. We have had an unbelievably wonderful life, up until the recent tragedy. Our sibilings are thousands of miles away by now, and with no need to continue sparing the feelings of our son, we are ready to let the world know."

"Thank you for that. You understand that may make your son and me half-brothers. I like to think that's a possibility. This will seem strange and maybe even out of place, but can I ask you to hold off on making your story public? I understand there is a plan out there to bring the lot of those quads to justice for numerous offences they've gotten away with in the past."

Wes stood and walked around the table.

"Does Jake Mallory accept hugs from the father of a maybe, almost, perhaps, possibly half-brother?"

"Does he!"

Jake got to his feet. They held it for several minutes, each sobbing quietly as they dealt with grief and new possibilities.

Jake waited for Wes to make the move then they separated.

"There are a few other things if you are interested."

"Yes, sir, I am. Collecting all the data I can."

Wes indicated for Jake to take his seat as he refilled the glasses and continued.

"This is more in the line of speculation – speculation based on things I knew about the quads that nobody else on earth knows about them. Understand, they were an oversexed quartet. I know their father encouraged it – rewarded it even. I got the idea that was because Winthrop had some sort of problem in bed – things the boys chuckled about – esoteric references in that direction. Anyway, to the story. At about the same time that Jerry broke his collar, there was a deadly train wreck on the tracks coming down the mountain from the west, northwest of Rossville. Here's what I know for sure. Adam got the daughter of a partner in the little J&O railroad

pregnant. It all started as a bet with Ethan, who would gamble for anything. Not clear how it came up. Anyway, Adam did his part then paid the girl's boyfriend a lot of money to claim it was his. The boy and girl got married. That assured him a place in the J&O family, which is what he was really after in the first place. It was a wealthy family. At some point before the child was born, she confided in her father – Mr. Owens – about her child's real father. Owens confronted Adam about it and said he was going to prosecute him for rape. He probably didn't believe he could win but I'm thinking he would settle for the public humiliation. Also, his railroad was in financial trouble and he may have seen it as a way to extort money from Winthrop to keep the pregnancy quiet and the railroad running.

“At the time of the accident, Owens, his daughter and her new husband were in his private train; engine, business car, living car and caboose. They were, as far as I can figure, on their way here to Rossville to meet with Winthrop – to initiate the extortion, I've always thought. Half way down the slope the train left the track and tumbled in a ball of fire the 50 yards on down to the valley floor. Everybody was killed.

“The investigation found it had been deliberate – a substantial piece of iron had been securely affixed across the tracks. It had been specially built to raise the wheels just high enough so their lips would be shunted off to one side of the rail. Ingenious, really. Adam was an inventive genius. If he had reason to think his father was going to give away some chunk of the boy' fortune, he wouldn't have hesitated to kill somebody – even four somebodies. “

“My goodness! You really believe that, don't you?”

“Like I said, I knew how those boys' minds worked better than anybody.”

“What did the investigation find?”

“Scrap iron available at any junk yard, welded into a one of a kind killing machine.”

“I guess they didn't find the source of the scrap iron.”

“Not sure how hard they looked. If any part of it pointed at the Montgomery family, any evidence would soon be buried – here in Ross County. Many public servants have had their bread buttered by Winthrop.”

“Do you suppose the iron device is still being held somewhere?”

“No idea. Larry or even Ann might know; she is still working in the Clerk’s office.”

Jake nodded.

“I have a question that is difficult for me to ask, Mr. Kenny.”

“Please go for it. I’ll reserve the right not to answer if they will make you feel better about offering it.”

“Okay then. I understand that you were one of the boys who alibied Jerry the night he broke his collar bone.”

“That’s not a question, you understand,” Wes said offering a smile.

Jake shrugged. Wes continued.

You have to understand that by the time I was that age I was so used to telling fibs to protect those four that it came without thinking. The five of us had the system down pat: one of them would do something wrong, I’d lie for him, they’d give me a fifty or hundred-dollar bill. I slid into that so gradually – from quarters in kindergarten – that I didn’t even stop to consider the ramifications any more. Jerry said he was hiking route 72 east of the river that night and a car hit him and left the scene, breaking his collar. I was at his place at the time he got home. He showed up in terrible shape. He had his public alibi ready – fell in the barn – and we carted him off to the hospital. We all four said we were there together at the barn horsing around and he got pushed and fell. Of course, none of us were anywhere near the barn. That was before I had heard about the accident on Logger’s Road. And, I never got any verification that Jerry might have had any part in that, if that’s one place your head may be going.

“I’m sure you know how the loft was arranged with a six-high wall of bales back six or eight feet around the opening and then loose hay nests behind that all over the loft arranged for privacy. I assume it was that way in your day as well. If we had been out in front of the bales, none of the kids would have seen us. Sometimes kids waited for each other out there if they didn’t come together, but never stayed once they got together.”

“So, not being seen by anybody else really didn’t say

you hadn't been there," Jake said making sure he had it right.

"Exactly. Bottom line, as folks say, it worth two, hundred, dollar bills that time."

"Why did Jerry say he didn't want to tell the truth – his truth about having been run down east of town?"

"He said he knew who had done it – Judge Madison's son. He said that kid would never be prosecuted so he wanted to dole out the punishment in person. As far as I know, he never did. Hint. Hint. That incident with the Madison kid never happened."

"Any other things?"

"One, that I think may be major. It involves Kyle – he was an alcoholic from the time he was in seventh grade – maybe even earlier. He was laid back when sober, but became aggressive and mean when he'd been drinking. There was a very sweet, very pretty girl at school when we were sophomores. She went out of her way to be nice to Kyle. No girl would allow herself to be with him outside of school – his reputation for being mean and sadistic when drinking was well known.

"Anyway, Kyle got the idea she wanted to be his girl. He went so far as to stop drinking for a month or so in order to prove his worth to her – he had me let it be known he had stopped drinking. He took her to a dance at school. Her older brother drove them to and from so she wasn't alone with him off campus. He was ready to ask her to be his steady girl and talked with us about it all the time. He really had stopped drinking. It had probably been the best thing that had ever happened to him. Two weeks later he got up the nerve and after school one day he popped the question. She told him that she and Freddie had started going steady. He was royally pickled before he got home from school that afternoon. A month later Freddie 'fell off' the cliff above the gravel pit one night and was killed. Freddie's body had way over the drunk level of alcohol in its blood. Freddie never used alcohol – his family was Mormon.

"There were ligature marks on his wrists and ankles. Still it was ruled an accidental death due to intoxication. All of us suspected Kyle, but never confronted him. A year or so later the boys set me up with a blind date. It was one of the

quad's 'happy parties' out in the woods behind their house when their parents were out of town. To be perfectly clear, 'Happy' should be translated as a drunken orgy. I never have used alcohol. The girls I was with had a mild buzz going by midnight. We separated from the group and just talked for a long time. She was a frequent all night visitor to the boy's room – I always left early on those occasions. Anyway, she began talking as if I were one of the quads. She said something like, 'I know a secret your brother Kyle told me. He said he pushed that Freddie kid into the gravel pit. That he tied him up, forced him to drink before so it would look like an accident'."

"You know her name? Does she still live here?"

"Doris Mitchel – lives in Alma – divorced a long time. I need to be left out of that if possible."

"Certainly. Wow. I've been calling them despicable – what's worse than despicable?"

"I think that term is 'Quads', son."

They both put on shivers.

The conversation had run its course. Jake left. He momentarily questioned whether he should have undertaken the mission. Very likely, his father was a murderer – a rapist in the least. The deepest sort of sadness – some kind of mix of grief and despondency – filled his being. Tears began to flow. He felt helpless. He didn't want to risk having Cynthia's parents see him like that so he climbed the oak tree that stood beside her windows and entered her room like he had many times when younger.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Big Anatomy Test

Cynthia was not in her room. Jake lay down on the bed on his back, hands behind his head. From time to time his chest would heave. The tears would not stop. He didn't understand what was happening, but whatever it was had to be very disconcerting to some part of him.

Presently, back from church, she entered the room, looked down at him, and without a word lay down beside him. He pulled her close and held her. Eventually the tears ceased. She reached the tissues and dabbed at his eyes and cheeks.

"Not entirely sure what's happened," he said puzzled, but indicated no shame about it. "Something to do with the quads – my quad, I guess. It is terrifying to know I hold part of them inside me – hard wired into my DNA. They are horrible, horrible, people. How can I even consider passing any of that on to a child?"

"My. Clearly an eventful morning. No pressure. You know I'm always here for you."

Normally, Jake would have jumped on a statement like that to pursue the amorous side of their lives. Not that time. He just nodded and studied her face. He managed a huge sigh and pulled her closer, heads touching. He spent the next half hour relating what he had learned, carefully keeping the true separated from the probably, the maybe, and the doubtful.

"I assume we are still pursuing it," she said at last, not moving.

He nodded – long, determined, nods. She continued.

"I suggest we make of list of the things we need to pursue – things to clarify, things to discover, and so on."

Jake nodded again. He turned his face back into hers.

"After all you've just heard you still want to be a part of my life?"

It had been a sincere question coupled with a sense of amazement because he knew she did.

"Here's the deal," she said sitting up ready to talk facts,

separate from his emotions. “They are terrible people. Their lives since they were little boys prove that. You are wonderful. Your life since you were a little boy proves that. One of them helped give you a magnificent body, a handsome face, and a brilliant mind. I hope someday you can appreciate those things. I’m thinking that all of that took up all the gene space available from the male side of the equation. From your mother, you received common sense, spunk, love, compassion, caring, and a drive to right wrongs and sooth suffering. A good measure of brains, as well.

“Take inventory: are you hurtful, do you take pleasure in other’s pain, are you morally corrupt, are you a cheat, are you greedy, do you have no conscience? The list of good stuff goes on and on. Look at what you’ve overcome in your life – survived might be a better word. The quads would have given up, curled up, and dried up by the time they were five, had they found themselves in your situation.”

Jake turned onto his side, facing her, and spoke.

“I can’t understand how they came by such traits – biologically I mean. Their mother is reportedly a sweetheart, and Benny is one of the finest people on earth.”

“You just scored one, huge point for my side, Jay. If not their *genes*, then what? I’ll tell you what; the environment and corrupt influences their reprehensible, immoral father inflicted on them. If not in THEIR genes, then not in YOUR genes. Got THAT, my loveable lunkhead?”

She pushed him over onto his back. A smile broke across his face along with a few lingering tears.

“It’s settled then. We’ll make lots of babies.”

“Who but you could start at Z and end up at A?” she said.

He sat up, administered three short, sweet pecks to her cheek, and scooted back against the head board. He removed his shoes – a long time habit for him when he was in her room.

“Won’t you need a pad and pencil if we’re going to start that list of stuff we need to get after?”

It became a long, random, list and they both knew there would surely be other things to add. Cynthia added initials after some of them indicating who would take the lead in

running down that item.

Verify that Jerry bribed the notary for the documents pertaining to the sale of his car. [C]

Dismiss the idea there ever was a man named Alexander Patchel [?]

Determine what happened to Jerry's 'original' car [J]

Find somebody who was in the loft that night to say Jerry hadn't been there [C & her mother]

Talk with Bobby, the injured boy from the car accident in which the girl was killed [J & C]

Talk with the tow truck driver and son to see what else they had observed about the wrecked car. [J & C's mom]

Find out what additional information might be available about Jerry the night he went to the ER [C]

Tie the iron used to cause the train wreck with the iron that one of the quads bought from Zeke [J]

Get to the girl who Kyle told about pushing the Freddie boy into the gravel pit. [J & C]

Then, regarding the judge there were lots of things to investigate. [C's mom and maybe Ethel Kittering]

Attorney names, reconstructed from initials in newspaper ads

Client names, reconstructed from initials in ads

Ferret out which cases were involved, their outcomes and so on

Make the connection between Judge Madison and payoff from Montgomery

Write and send final draft of the letter to the judge. [J & C]

Get Cynthia's father involved in reviewing evidence as it surfaced.

That's a good start, don't you think?" Cynthia said.

Jake just nodded and took the pad to review it.

"The initials and names are a good addition. That initiative will be included in your next reward."

"Dinner will be ready in a few minutes – roast chicken and all the trimmings," she said. "I need to change out of my church going duds."

“May I watch?”

“You always do. I don’t know why you even ask.”

“You are gorgeous, you know, in whatever state of dress or undress you’re in. I just enjoy being amazed about that all over again.”

“Nice try.”

They were soon downstairs helping put things on the table. They eased into the subject of obtaining help from the parents not for sure they would want to get personally involved.

“We’ve been wondering when you’d let us pitch in,” her father said. “You make your requests of us and we’ll tell you what we believe we can or can’t do to be of assistance. Ann will not risk her job and I will not risk my law license. Beyond that we are at your disposal.”

The arrangement was sealed with nods around the table.

“Well, I have several general questions, I guess for either or both of you,” Jake said. “How long is evidence kept, where’s it kept and how can I get access to it? I’m thinking, first of all, about the device, specially designed to derail the private train of the owner of the J&O Railroad some 22 years ago. You remember the accident?”

“Oh, yes,” Larry said. “The investigation just petered out and the culprit was never apprehended. The suspect was one of the minority owners as I recall, but he was eventually cleared because he established he had been in Canada and no reasonable accomplices were discovered. As to that device, I just don’t know. Since there was no trial it would most likely not be held by the court. If it’s still around, I’d think the Sheriff’s department. You have reason to believe that wreck is tied to the Montgomerys?”

“We are basically sure of it,” Cynthia said.

“We have one witness to locate and if we can also locate the iron pieces we can probably clinch it,” Jake added. “Benny has often purchased large pieces of scrap iron from Zeke and I remember every sizeable chunk of iron is struck – branded, so if it’s stolen it can be claimed by Zeke. Lots of little things are taken from him – he has no security. I suppose every piece of iron over thirty pounds is struck with his mark.”

“I’d be careful snooping around the Sheriff’s compound. He is very friendly with Winthrop.”

“Good to know,” Jake said.

“Mom, is there a master list of notaries in this state – with how to contact them. We need to find one from over in Madison Country from back about that same time – twenty or so years ago.”

“I’m sure there is. I’ll get to work on it in the morning.”

“Also, Mrs. Carls, how can we get a list of attorneys from the City who have had cases before Judge Madison since he became a judge?”

“That may take more elbow grease. Let me think on it.”

“There is a searchable data base, which includes attorney, defendants, judge, and case number. It’s available out of the State Attorney General’s office. Can you narrow it down? We’re talking maybe thousands of cases in the three decades Madison has been on the bench.”

“How about using the three initials of both the attorneys and the defendants?”

“Yes. Really? You have that? That will only take minimal time. I can have my assistant begin that tomorrow if you can get me the information.”

“I can get you some to begin on,” Jake said. “We need to still find more. I can do that at the college library. It’s a time-consuming task – I’ve already found that out.”

“How about Ethel?” Cynthia said. “Alma has a library with computers.”

“A real possibility. Looks like another road trip.”

The parents didn’t get involved in that conversation.

“I will make a list of things we think you can help us with,” Cynthia said. “We can compare notes evenings.”

“I can see I’ll need to begin baking,” Ann said. “Evenings, having a certain young man in the house, always depletes the goody shelf in a hurry.”

Jake understood it was good natured ribbing and didn’t mean she wasn’t delighted to see him enjoying her ‘goodies’.

Cynthia and Jake herded the ‘old folks’ into the living room while they did the dishes. Ann took time to fix a plate for Jake to take to his mother. They knew if Cynthia was along she’d try to eat. She loved Cynthia and appreciated that she

was part of her son's life.

When Cynthia entered the room with the plate, Jake's mother's face lit up and she reached out for a hug. Jake heated the chicken, dressing, peas and mashed potatoes and moved the apple salad and other cold items to a separate plate. He fixed her a place at the table and got out the good place mats. He poured orange juice hoping she'd at least try it.

They kept up a constant stream of chatter for her about things they had been doing – classes, going to Alma, Jake's time with Benny and Wes. She clearly enjoyed it all and managed to eat a large portion of what had been prepared for her. She even asked Cynthia about her parents and what kind of things she was doing in her practicum at the hospital. It was more than she had spoken at one sitting in months. Jake couldn't stop beaming, seeing his mother come to life like that.

"I brought you a surprise," Cynthia said reaching into her large straw bag.

"A jigsaw puzzle for you to work on right here at the table. See the picture – trees, hills, a country lane and a white board fence. Jake and I have time to help sort the pieces before we leave."

Cynthia began the task without giving her the opportunity to opt out. They took seats around the table and in fifteen minutes had the pieces more or less sorted by colors and designs around the edge of the table top. Jake had put the straight edge pieces in one section and began stringing them together. At one point Cynthia playfully slapped at his hand saying he needed to leave some of it for his mother to finish.

The youngsters stood. Jake kissed his mother and Cynthia provided a hug.

"You need anything else for the afternoon, Ma? Remote's on your recliner. Why don't you put your phone in your pocket since you will be moving around?"

She did as he suggested. She thanked them for coming.

"I expect to see good progress on the puzzle next time I drop in, Marsha," Cynthia said.

They left.

“Wow, my little miracle worker,” Jake said. “Did you see her eat and hear her talking and see her start working on the puzzle? That was the best two hours she’s put back to back in five years. Thank you.”

“Just trying to build up my stock for reward time.”

They stopped walking and took time for a wonder-filled kiss. Then, hand in hand they returned to her place. It was going on three. Jake decided to pay a clandestine, Sunday afternoon visit to the Sheriff’s compound on the north edge of the city. Cynthia made her way to the hospital. Thomas, a long time orderly, had cut his schedule back to just Sunday afternoon and evening. They were good friends. She thought he might remember things about Jerry’s visit to the ER.

“Asking about Jerry’s *visit* to the ER is like asking for an accounting of every drop of rain that’s fell this week.”

“He was here often, you mean?”

“He was a good athlete, but he fancied himself much better than he was. He was a daredevil. Dislocated a finger playing football with older boys when he was about five or six. From then on it was one thing after another. After he got older he’d always tell a nurse he was ready for his sponge bath and they’d always tell him they’d call me and tell me to bring my sand paper. He kept trying, I’ll give him that.”

“Could you tell the four of them apart?”

“Close up I could tell Adam by the heavy callouses on his fingers on his right hand – from archery. Ethan had a long narrow scar on his butt where he’d lost a fight with a barbed wire fence when he about nine or so. If he dropped his pants I could identify him. Not so much the other’s I guess. Jerry always called me pops – he meant it in a demeaning way, but since I never took it that way it never was. Did you follow that?”

“Like Eleanor Roosevelt is quoted as saying if you don’t accept an intended put down as a put down then it’s not – or something close to that.”

“Exactly. Now, which ER visit was it?”

“The broken collar bone visit.”

“Oh, yes. That came the day before the morning he came back with a nasty rattle snake bite. Like I said, with Jerry it was always something. That night it was his collar

bone – a fracture, actually, the doctor said. He was drunk as a skunk that night – near midnight the way I remember it. Smelled of gasoline and smoke. His eyebrows and the front of his hair were all singed – a picnic fire gone bad, he gave as his explanation. He was filthy so he finally got his sponge bath. Too bad he was so intoxicated that he probably couldn't appreciate it. Doc put a plaster cast on it. His left shoulder as I recall."

"He come alone?"

"Had a whole squad of kids bring him."

"His brothers and that friend of theirs – Wes somebody I think."

"Did he or they say how his accident happened?"

"Like six year olds repeating a piece at church on Mother's Day."

"Too perfect, you mean?"

The old man nodded.

"When three teens tell a story using the same words and don't argue over any of the details, you know it's been rehearsed to cover up something. They said he fell out of the loft at the Dark Barn. It was the fourth of July. That was a busy night here in the ER. The usual burns and such from fireworks, of course.

"I suppose a few nights later was really worse. There had been a bad car wreck over on Logger's Road. A girl and boy in their late teens were brought in. The girl was dead on arrival. The boy struggled between living and dead for three of four days. He made it. Had a spinal injury that set him in a wheel chair for the rest of his life. Terrible thing. Terrible thing."

"You remember that boy's name?"

"Yes, I do. Gerald Ford, like the president and he'd been driving a Ford car. The girl was from over in Mason City and he was from down in Alma. My, my! Can you believe how well my old gray matter is working today?"

"From what I've seen, most days your 'old' gray matter works better than most 'young' gray matter. Thanks for your time. I hope you can keep my questions under your hat."

"This here white hat hides a thousand secrets, Cynthia. You don't have to worry."

Meanwhile, half a mile to the north east, Jake found himself at a tall, link wire fence, with razor wire unrolled along the top. He smiled, wondering which of the evidence they were trying to keep from escaping.

He began walking the fence toward the rear of the compound. There were several security cameras. He stopped every so often and picked a wild flower assembling a small bouquet. He hoped that kept him above suspicion if he became the star of some late afternoon monitor.

A small dog trotted across his path some twenty feet ahead. It seemed to know what it was doing. It did. At the fence it hunched down and crawled underneath. It then proceeded in among the buildings up front. Jake continued until he arrived at the spot. It appeared that none of camera's covered that particular area. The depression at the fence was over grown with tall grass. He lay down on his back and wiggled under the wire. He crossed a grassy area to a large metal building that sat near the fence along the back of the compound. It had the look of a storage area – perhaps fifty feet square and twenty feet high.

There was a side door. It was not locked. That seemed like poor judgement on somebody's part. Perhaps the thinking was that inside the fence things should just be secure. Whatever. He eased it open. It was dark inside. He stepped in hoping his eyes would adjust. They didn't. There were no windows or skylights. It would be futile to search the place by braille. He would have to return with a flashlight. He left the building, closed the door, and began walking back across the yard toward the fence.

"Hey, you," came a gruff sounding voice.

Jake turned in its direction. It was a deputy – a huge deputy – a huge six foot six, three-hundred-pound deputy with a flat top, a scar on his cheek and most likely coupons from Dunkin' Donuts in his pocket. Jake gulped, put on a broad smile and stepped off in the man's direction.

"Good afternoon, Sir. I'm looking for my girlfriend's little dog. I chased it up to the fence, but it scooted under. By the time I wiggled myself in here, it had disappeared. Have you seen it? Sort of dirty white and about this long. A mutt by any description."

“Sounds like Bubba’s little dog. He comes and goes.”

“Suppose I was chasing the wrong dog all afternoon? Jeeze! I may just give up on girls, ya know?”

The big man smiled and chuckled.

“I’ve chased my share of things for women, too. I wouldn’t suggest you give up on ‘em though. They bring definite perks to a guy’s life.”

He pointed to the fence, further west.

“There’s a locked gate up there. Let me get you out a more comfortable way.”

Jake thanked him and was soon on the outside, feeling both remarkably clever and luckier than he probably should have been.

Sunset was at eight or so. He’d return. He would bring a large flashlight and also his forehead light if its batteries were still up to it. It was four fifteen so he went to Cynthia’s place. He figured there could be a chicken sandwich in his immediate future. There was!

Cynthia was already back from the hospital. She sat at the kitchen table while the love of her life created his sandwich. She would have gladly made it, but he had always had an independent streak and she treasured that in him.

They shared information. Hers seemed more useful than his. Jake went first.

“Wes admitted to me he had been paid to lie about Jerry’s fall. I’m sure he’ll testify to that if needed. That only confirms what it wasn’t, however, not what it was.”

“Without that alibi, Jerry will have to manufacture another one – which he probably can with the right amount of money in the right palm,” Cynthia said. “He’ll have to get creative about why he lied about the first one.”

“I’m more interested in the snake bite,” Jake said.

“I don’t get it.”

“What place around here is said to be filled with snakes – the place every kid under ten knows to stay away from.”

“The snake cave?”

“Bingo.”

“Do you know if it really has snakes?”

“Oh, it has them alright. Hibernate in there all winter and then make it home base in the warm months because it’s

cool and damp and unmolested by man. A million babies slither out every spring.”

“So, you think that’s where Jerry got bit – bitten – struck?”

They exchanged a smile at her running attempt to get it right. He sat with his triple decker sandwich – three well Mayoed slices of bread, lettuce and tomatoes, with all the chicken it could hold. She was always amazed that anybody’s mouth could open that wide.

His mouth full, he simply nodded in answer to her question.

“Why *in* the cave?” she asked.

It took a moment – he’d not hurry the sandwich.

“That’s where the snakes are.”

“I’ve seen snakes lots of places.”

“Think about it this way. How many of those snakes that you’ve seen, viciously attacked you?”

“None. They always scurry away. Or slither away, really, I guess.”

“Benny says that seldom did any of the four of them ever go anywhere without at least one of the others. So, picture at least two of them crossing some meadow or walking along the river – they’d make more than enough disturbance to cause snakes to scurry/slither out of their way.”

“Probably right. So, you’re thinking that leaves the cave where there’s less room to slither. I still don’t get why that could be important.”

“What huge piece of evidence is missing in the whole Logger’s Road car wreck?”

She thought for a moment as she refilled his milk glass. Her face lit up.

“The car that caused the wreck, maybe?”

“Another Bingo, Miss Carls.”

It suddenly came together for her.

“Oh. You’re thinking Jerry might have hidden his car in there after the accident and got the bite in the process.”

“A far-out possibility, I know. And, even if that’s accurate he’s had twenty some years to move it from there.”

“I assume we are going to take a look.”

“We? Yeah, I guess, *we*. Need to wear high boots with

jeans tucked inside them.”

“Mine should work, right?”

Jake nodded as he finished his milk and wiped his lips on a napkin.

“You can use dad’s hunting boots. When?”

“Now?”

“Sure. Okay. I’ll get the boots.”

Ten minutes later they were in Cynthia’s car heading north toward Logger’s Road.

“I really don’t know where the cave is,” she said.

“Off to the left about three quarters of the way to the top of the mountain. There’s no room to park off the road – barely room for two narrow lanes of road – so we’ll need to go on up to the top and park at the lane to the Watkins farm, then walk back down.”

She nodded.

“Seems to take forever using roads,” Jake said. “Can’t be more than a mile from the city limits, walking cross country. We’ve already driven four.”

“And that is of interest in a general way or in a more relevant way?”

“Relevant. After the wreck, if it were Jerry, and if we find his car like I think we might, and with a broken collar bone . . .”

“Just fractured, according to Thomas at the hospital,” Cynthia added, interrupting with what seemed to her to be relevant information.”

“Okay, fractured. The five mile walk back to Rossville by the roads would have been a really long way, banged up like he was. A mile cross country, not so much – doable, wouldn’t you say?”

“Two things. Yes, probably, and remember he was drunk so the pain may have been dulled considerably.”

“If he hid the car in the cave that seems like pretty good thinking for a drunk.”

“I know. I was thinking about that. It may tell us something else, also,” she said. “Being drunk and damaged, he wouldn’t have been able to really fix his car if it wasn’t still in good enough shape to run very far, would he?”

“I doubt it. Interesting! Good thinking. Let’s get parked

and then walk back across the hillside to the cave to make sure he really could have driven the car there. As I recall it's flat and open enough."

They parked and moved off like Jake had suggested. He had been correct. There were stones – some as large as footballs – but nothing large enough to stop a car.

"How far you estimate it is from the wreck site to the top of the road here and then around to the cave?" Cynthia asked.

"Maybe two hundred yards. We need to begin watching for snakes."

He stopped and broke a small limb off a mostly dead tree and began beating the grass ahead of them.

"I assume that's to ward off vipers rather than because you are suddenly angry at Mother Earth."

He turned back to her and offered an appreciative smile in recognition of her little joke.

"It's over there behind the stand of pine trees."

He moved into the trees leading Cynthia by the hand.

"Here's the entrance. The trees have grown across the opening during the past twenty years, that's obvious."

"It answers my question about how he could have gotten a car past them and into the cave," Cynthia said.

"Dark!" Jake said.

"I hear caves are often that way," she teased.

They turned on their flashlights.

"How big is the cave, to you know?"

"Ten feet wide, like you can see, and I've heard maybe thirty feet deep.":

He focused his light on the wall a few yards ahead of them.

"See there where it curves to the left?"

"There are snakes in here alright," she said. "I often wondered if that was just a story to keep kids away."

"We should have brought a torch," Jake said. "You move your light back and forth across the floor and I'll light our way. Maybe they'll move away from your beam."

The snakes did, in fact, move away. They got to the turn in the cave.

"Well, lookie there," Jake said stopping.

"You are so smart. Jerry's car. A bit rusted, but its

yellow with red stripes for sure.”

“I want to look it over. Think your phone will take good enough pictures in here?”

“If we flood an area with both lights, I imagine it will. I’ll also use the flash on the phone.”

“Let’s get the rear end view, first then. Let me hold your flash light. How about that?”

“Looks good. Let’s see what we got?”

She held the phone out so they could take a look.’

“Excellent! Follow me. I’m interested in the front where the impact would have occurred. There it is. Sure looks to be the right front fender. Bumper’s bent on that side as well. Seems odd, but what is, is, I guess. The tire’s flat and eaten to pieces by the rim. Must have happened while the car was being driven up here. Probably flattened during the impact of the accident. Come in close here. See. Dark red or maroon paint streaks on the damaged fender. From the other car, I’ll bet. You know what color it was?”

“No. I’m sure we can find out.”

“Okay. Let’s try this. I’m going to scrape some of that off into an envelope – and you scoff at the fact I always carry one. While I do that you take a short video of me doing it. Then I’ll seal it, and make a mark across the flap to show later that it hasn’t been opened. Just something to give it credibility. Ready?”

“Just a sec. Okay. Ready. I’m shooting.”

The entire process took no more than fifteen seconds. The paint had degraded and become somewhat loose from the fender.

“Get a picture of the front, then just one more picture. Can we position the camera and the beam of light through the dash and onto the VIN number there on the top of the dash on the driver’s side?”

They worked for several minutes before they found a way to reduce the glare and get a clear shot. They examined the picture and concluded it was what they needed.

“Let’s get out of here,” Jake said.

They navigated their way back to the opening with only a few random fang strikes to their boots. Outside, Jake had lots of comments while Cynthia slowly flipped her way through

the photographs and the video.

“The doors and windows on the car were closed. Reasonable. Probably a hot summer night. That means no varmints chewed up the inside. There may even be prints in there. If Jerry’s are the last ones on the steering wheel, it makes him the driver. Leave that for the forensics professionals. Having been closed all these years, there was virtually no accumulation of dust inside. That’s why we got such a good view of the VIN. We’ll need to blow up that pic of the dark smudge on the fender. We might just luck out and find it’s a finger print encased in the carbon from the smoke at the accident.”

“That’s why you blew the dust off it before I took the picture – to uncover what may be a fingerprint?”

“Right.”

“You are so smart, oh, did I already say that?”

“You did but there’s nothing wrong with emphasizing the obvious. I’m hoping that will be rewarded later.”

He smiled.

“It’s really exciting,” Cynthia said.

“Sure is. Almost as good as sex – and I just want to make sure you know I was kidding about that.”

“I don’t know – I feel it too.”

“There are lots of private spots out here. I suppose we could take time to make a comparison.”

She slapped at him playfully and they returned to the car.

Jake talked as Cynthia drove.

“A problem with the evidence,” he said. “Jerry went to the ER with the fresh snake bite the day after the accident – *after* he had been there the night of the accident with his shoulder.”

“Hmm. You’re right. A timeline problem.”

“Maybe not,” Jake said. “Follow me on this. Let’s suppose, the night of the accident he managed to drive the car away from the scene of the accident and hide it – somewhere. Being drunk his judgement was fuzzy. He hid it temporarily – say in the woods up there – and then left for home with his broken shoulder. Upon sobering up the next day, he realized the car – his car – still presented a problem so he returned to

hide it in the cave. That scenario could account for his snake bite the *next* day.”

“Sounds both possible and probable,” Cynthia said.

Jake moved on.

“We need to find the boy – man now – who was driving the other car in that accident.”

“Thomas said he lived in Alma – at least at the time of the accident. He thinks he is wheelchair bound. His name is Gerald Ford. Look up the name in the white pages and see if he’s still living there.”

“Nice going. Okay. Let’s see.”

Jake went to work on the phone.

“Yes. Gerald Ford. Maple Street. Must be lots of land lines left in Alma. How about we go back down there tomorrow morning. I like our Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday class schedules this summer. Gives us lots of time to work on things.”

“Reminds me. I have a huge anatomy test on Tuesday. If it’s a part of the human body, I need to be able to name it. I’ll very likely need to do some intensive review tonight. You available?”

“You do ask silly questions, sometimes.”

Cynthia’s mother had set some things out to ‘graze on’ for supper, she said.

“You shovel some onto a plate and bring it up stairs,” Jake said. “I want to go up and see what we can do with these pictures on your computer.”

Fifteen minutes later he had made several interesting findings.

“It *is* a finger print and a partial next to it. It’s on the damaged fender. And look at this – fascinating. The print looks like a thumb and see how it’s on top of both the yellow paint and the bare metal of the car?”

“I do. It doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“It means the print was made after the wreck – when the metal would have been exposed. Prints just on the paint could have been made before the wreck, but not this one.”

“Wow! How do you think of such things?”

Jake shrugged.

“And here. I hadn’t noticed while we were in the cave,

but that first rear end shot you took – no license plate.”

“So, they were removed. Why’s that important?”

“Just additional corroboration. Zeke noted that the front plate on Jerry’s car – the new, replacement car – the day he and his brother came to get the iron was badly damaged, crinkled up, like it had maybe been in an accident.”

“What about the VIN?” she asked.

“Let’s look it up, here. I have a picture of the title transfer and the record of the nonexistent crushed car at Deke’s Junk Yard. There it is – the same. We have proof that somebody used a false number. Clearly the car with that VIN was not crushed. If Jerry got subsequent car licenses using the old VIN for his new car, he’s also in legal trouble on that or those points.”

Cynthia turned off the computer. Cynthia turned off the lights. Cynthia drew the drapes. Cynthia took Jake’s hand and led him to the bed.

“Enough of this fooling around, young man. It’s time to get serious and get on with a thorough review for my test tomorrow.”

“I think I’m up for going over everything twice if you feel that’s necessary.”

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CHAPTER SIX

Colonel Sanders, Really?

The following morning Jake was awake early and slipped out of the house to go check on his mother. To his astonishment she had fixed scrambled eggs and fried potatoes – one of his favorite breakfasts as a boy. They ate together and she had things to say. It was all quite new.

“You seem so strong this morning, Ma. That’s just great. Your body your voice, and I saw the puzzle as I came through the living room. You must have kept at it a long time yesterday.”

“Once I got started I began remembering all the puzzles you and I worked on together when you were younger. Those were good times. You have a wonderful girl. I love her like she was my own, you know.”

“She is and I know. She feels that way about you.”

“She used to be here all the time – when you were little. Those were good times.”

She paused, picked up her plate of food and held it out toward him. She smiled.

“What, Ma? I don’t understand.

“Well, I’m not having oatmeal his morning so I figured you’d want to mash up my pill and sprinkle it over my eggs.”

She laughed out loud; a rare thing those past several years.

“You sly old fox. You’ve known about that have you?”

“Several years ago I came to notice I always felt better after I had my oatmeal in the morning. I added that to my question about why you brought home new prescriptions for me every week when I never took my anti-depressant. I have to admit I spied on you and discovered what you were doing. It was such a loving act on your part that I just let it go on. As for the vitamins in my Jell-o, I just caught on to that a few months back. I love you so much, son.”

“Oh, I’ve always known that, Ma. I am a bit confused by why you seem so much better the past week, though.”

“I hope you will forgive me, son, but last week – maybe the week before – I found your yellow pad sticking out from under the seat pillows on the sofa. You must have slipped it in

there before you went to sleep. I wondered if you were still writing stories like you used to. I loved them, you know. Well, I slid it out and began paging through it, not thinking beyond hoping I'd find a story. I came across your plan, son. I couldn't stop reading it. I'm sorry. You know I've always allowed you your privacy and secrets, but I couldn't stop. When I put it down I had the most wonderful feeling inside me – I mean deep inside me. It was like some grand bubble of hope and joy, even, began building inside me. I can't explain it. I won't pry anymore. Really, I won't."

"You won't have to. Tell you what. Tonight for supper, I'll bring home some Kentucky Fried Chicken and Cynthia, and we'll lay the plan out for you. Maybe you will share any suggestions you have with us."

"That sounds so wonderful. How long has it been since we had Colonel Sanders in this house – five, six, eight years? I have saved back some money from my disability check you can use."

"No, this will be on me. I get paid this morning. Cynthia and I have to go down to Alma today. You be okay 'til supper time?"

"Oh yes. I love you so much."

It might have been she had forgotten that she'd just said that, but Jake believed she just needed to say it again.

They finished eating and Jake did up the few dishes. He got her situated at the puzzle table and administered his regular on-his-way-out-the-door-kiss to her forehead.

"I forgot my pill . . . I suppose the vitamins will be in the left over Jell-o I'll have for lunch. I promise to take them every day, son. You can count on my promises now, just like in the old days."

He provided the pill and a glass of water. He turned and left. His eyes were moist before he reached the door. He would wait and share the wonderful developments with Cynthia later in the day. He would have the ten-minute walk to her place to get whatever it was with the tears, out of his system.

By the time he arrived at her window he had himself under control. She was making the bed as he entered.

"My you left early – go see your mother or your other

girl.”

“Had breakfast with Ma – Gretel was still sleeping. She worked on that puzzle you took her – Ma not Gretel. Has it about a third done in fact. We’re going there for supper tonight. I promised her fried chicken and all the trimmings.”

“My. She must be feeling a lot better today.”

“She is. She sends her love. You really are important to her, you know.”

Cynthia nodded appearing a bit embarrassed about it. She spoke.

“We need to finalize the letter to Madison if we’re going to mail it today like we planned.”

They worked for half an hour putting on the finishing touches on the letter to Judge Madison. They would mail it from Berry County, about forty miles south of Alma. In the end they changed it very little from the original draft. It read:

*“Dear Despicable Public Servant,
Madison:*

The Invincible Vigilante is aware of your for-profit, dirty dealings with a variety of attorneys from the city and with the Montgomery family, locally.”

A sampling of the attorneys by initials (to maintain some sense of decorum): ACF, WJG, GFH, RRD. And the attorney’s clients: Here are some of them, similarly disguised: JPK, ATP, ALF, STS.

I am currently in the process of accumulating affidavits from attorneys’ former staff members eager to rid themselves of guilt and be protected from prosecution. It appears that you are being implicated by many.

Your necessary actions to possibly protect yourself in these matters will arrive by mail within a week. In the meantime, it will, of course, be in your best interests to keep this matter to

yourself.

– I. V.

Jake saved it to a flash drive and they stopped at the Geography Department to print it and the envelope. Jake used latex gloves. With Cynthia behind the wheel, they were on the road to Alma before eight o'clock.

"So, three goals for this morning," Cynthia said, making sure they were on the same page. "See if Ethel will help with the research needed to put attorney's names with the initials, find and talk with Mr. Ford – probably should call first and not just show up – and mail the letter."

"Right. I can make the call while we're on our way. What first?"

"How about making the call so if he'll see us we can work around a time that's convenient for him."

"Good idea. I'll do that now."

He made the call and, somewhat to his surprise, found an eager participant on the other end of the line.

"Says ten would work out well for him. That will give us time to see Ethel and get her set up at the library computer."

"If you want more than cookies you better call her, now, too," Cynthia said only partly joking.

"Ah, yes. She did flaunt the possibility of cheese cake."

Jake made that call. She was chatty and it occupied a good deal of time. Before it was finished she knew the why, how and wherefore of the visit. She said she had a relatively new computer and sounded quite fluent in its use. That didn't surprise them. She was familiar with a data base of attorneys in the City and had other ideas.

Jake figured they had handled everything on the phone. At the end, he asked:

"Can we still come and see you?"

He sounded like a lonely five year old pleading to get to see his grandmother.

"Of course. Won't be cheese cake like I promised, but there's a double chocolate cake about ready to come out of the oven. You kids stop and get vanilla ice cream and we'll have a party."

They hung up. Jake turned to Cynthia.

“I don’t have any money for ice cream,” he said. “I promised Ma Colonel Sanders.”

“This is exactly the sort of emergency dad gave me the credit card for.”

They exchanged a smile. Jake continued to study her face.

“I love you so much that sometimes I don’t know what to do about it.”

“I understand, but I think we both find ways to show it dozens of times every day.”

Jake understood but, still, it never seemed like it was enough. They drove on in silence for several more minutes before passing the Alma city limit sign.

“There’s a grocery on Main,” Jake said. “They’ll certainly have ice cream.”

They did. They walked the several blocks from where they had parked to Ethel’s house. They filled her in on the larger picture of what they were undertaking knowing none of it would ever be passed on. She was clearly happy to be included and eager to support the efforts in any way she could.

“Hot chocolate cake, piled high with freezing ice cream presents an interesting dilemma for the human brain,” Jake said.

Cynthia, in an aside to Ethel: “At this point we just let his brain run its course. I firmly believe that interrupting his creative, if only marginally connected to reality musings, will break him.”

The two of them giggled. Jake took it in, but pretended to ignore it.

“So, the ice cream begins to melt and the hot cake begins to cool at the points of contact. I wonder which is the more powerful force. It is one of the few times we get to eat something that is both hot and cold at the same time. The white of the melted ice cream and the dark brown of the cake each maintain their colors – just mingling, not making a tan mixture like other such intersections of brown and white typically make.”

“Do you want to mess around inside your head some

more or have another serving?" Ethel asked.

"Oh, another serving, please, thank you. Sorry. Sometimes my head finds itself in an endless loop with no off ramp and I need to be prodded out of it. Experience suggests that cake and ice cream are reliably good prodders."

They chatted on for a while and received directions to the Ford home – a ten-minute walk. Ethel knew his wife's mother quite well. After his accident, he turned to writing as a career and was at the point of being quite successful. They crossed the yard to a two story, pale yellow house with flower beds and a matching yellow picket fence.

"Put some clothes on a line in the side yard and a dog and boy playing in the mud out front and you'd have a Normal Rockwell print, right here, live and in living color," Jake said.

Any parts of that Cynthia didn't understand, he'd explain to her later. The door opened as they approached the front porch. A middle-aged woman stepped out to greet them.

"Mrs. Ford?"

"Yes. You'll be Cynthia and Jake, Ethel's friends. If we appear to know more about you than we should it is because Ethel just called and gave us the ten minute run down – all of it good, by the way. Come in."

She turned into the house and called out.

"Ger! The young people are here."

He wheeled himself through the double doors from the living room out into the entry hall. He offered his hand to Jake and beckoned them into the other room.

"Ethel says she just filled you up with sugar. Could I offer coffee or orange drink?" his wife asked.

"Thank you. Coffee for me and drink for Cynthia."

Between handshakes and refreshment orders it appeared to be the day of the men. The young folks sat beside each other on the couch. Mrs. Ford left to get the drinks.

"So, you are pursuing the accident. Ethel instructed me not to ask why so I guess that's on your plate, if or when."

"Short version," Jake began, "we are trying to promote justice in the case."

"Laudable, for whatever reason. I will help in any way I can, of course."

“It’s not our intention to dredge up painful memories,” Cynthia added.

“I dealt with them long ago. Don’t be concerned. I enter into this of my own free will.”

He flashed a smile. Jake began.

“We have reason to believe we can prove who caused the accident,” Jake went on. What we really need from you is a firsthand account of the moments just before and during the accident. What you saw, everything you remember.”

The drinks arrived. Mrs. Ford sat. Gerald began.

“It was late. Hardly any moon that night. Mary – the girl who was with me – and I had been up on top of the mountain – really just a high hill – to watch the fireworks. Afterwards, we attended to the kinds of things eighteen-year-old couples attend to when parked, alone, in the dark with no curfew. About eleven – I don’t know the exact minute – we started down Logger’s Road toward Rossville. It was Mary’s car and she was driving. That has been reported wrong.

“About two hundred yards down the road I noticed headlights coming up the hill toward us. The car was swerving erratically. I immediately feared that it could not end well. I told Mary to hug the hill on our right and make as much room as possible for the car to pass us on the outside. There was no more than four feet of ground on the outside of the road at the edge of the cliff. The safety rail was just flimsy – one corrugated, metal beam strung a foot high along wooden 4 X 4 posts. It seemed that as soon as she moved as far right as she dared – there is a sheer, rising, hillside right there with a drainage ditch between it and the gravel road – the other car moved in that direction as well. The impact was between the right front area of that car and the left front area of ours. The impact spun our car clockwise. The next thing I remember was looking up into the face of the EMT. Our car had tumbled end over end down the cliff and lit in a ball of flames in the valley I’m told.

“For some reason, I had apparently unfastened my seat belt. As the car spun, its frame was twisted just enough to spring the passenger side door and I was flung out of the car and into the ditch. Mary wasn’t so lucky, you know.”

“Do you have any memory of the kind of oncoming

vehicle?” Jake asked.

“None, I’m afraid. Its headlights were on high beam, effectively blinding us until the moment of impact. It took about a week for all the memories I’ve shared to properly reassemble in my mind – traumatic amnesia it’s called. Brain gets scrambled and it takes time to set things right.”

“Any memory of flashes of colors?” Cynthia asked.

“Hmm? Interesting question. Never been asked before. Yes, in fact, I do recall an image of red and yellow – like flames shooting out from under the hoods, I imagine. Nothing more specific than that.”

“So, that image is from after the impact?”

“Couldn’t be. Upon impact our car was spun to my right so I couldn’t really see anything up front. I guess that places the image an instant prior to the impact. Interesting.”

Jake and Cynthia glanced at each other understanding there was another explanation for the whirl of those specific colors. Gerald continued.

“I remember that neither car was there when I came to, and I asked if they had already been towed away. The sheriff’s deputy said he thought the cars had both gone over the cliff. That was no more than a half hour after the wreck and details were still foggy, I guess. I’ll spare you my discovery about Mary.”

“As we understand it, only your car actually went over the cliff – only one was found down in the valley,” Jake said.

“That’s right. It poses a real mystery – what happened to that other car and so quickly that nobody ever saw it. It still apparently baffles the investigators. The State Bureau of Investigation got involved later.”

“Who called the authorities that night?” Cynthia asked.

“Another couple came along a few minutes later – how much later I have no way of knowing nor did they. They proceeded to the nearest farm house to call the Sheriff.”

“What color was the car you were in?”

Unexpectedly, Gerald managed a quick smile.

“Mary and I could never agree. I contended it was darkish red. She contended it was medium maroon. She was probably right – women are always right about colors.”

“Thank you for your time and the refreshments,” Jake

said, standing. “We promise to keep you posted when we have all the facts in order.”

He turned to Mrs. Ford – *Betty*, if you can believe that.

“That was delicious coffee. Do you share your secret?”

“A pinch of salt spread out over the grounds. Won’t work if added after it’s brewed.”

“If there’s a charge for that, send Ethel the bill.”

It was worth chuckles all around.

Outside, the chatter began at once.

“Red and yellow.”

“Erratic movement of the other car.”

“Car was removed in a matter of minutes.”

“That poor man.”

“That poor *girl*.”

Jake shrugged and nodded.

“The damage we found on Jerry’s car fits Gerald’s description – right front fender and grill and tire.”

“And the maroon paint.”

“Things seem to all fit together,” Jake said. “We will need to create a fact filled document with our argument in logical order when we get ready to stir the legal pot about it.”

“I’m sure dad will help us do that.”

“So, off to Berry County?”

“We are well ahead of where I thought be by this time – what, not even noon yet?” Cynthia said.

“It’ll be an hour and a half down and back to Benson – that’s just inside the Berry County line, right.”

“Pretty sure. Google it to make sure.”

“You think that’s really far enough away from home to afford any degree of deception?” Jake asked.

“I think so. It’s larger than Rossville. You having second thoughts.”

“I guess not. Suddenly, with the envelope in hand, it seems like a really big deal.”

“It is. It has to be. It needs to be.”

They got gas and started south. The road meandered up and down as if at play across row after row of gently rolling hills. The terrain counseled a leisurely pace. Jake used the time to catch up Cynthia on the developments with his mother.

“Sounds like what you are doing is as much for her as

for you,” Cynthia said.

Jake nodded.

“I’ve been really selfish about it. I’ve always made it all about me – about getting justice for me – when all the time it really should have been about Ma. I wasn’t hurt – I was just born. She’s the one who was hurt – hurt for how many years now – twenty plus. I’m really ashamed.”

“You want to know what I think?”

“Of course.”

“Back when you first found out about the circumstances of your conception you were as angry as I’ve ever known you to be. You were ready to get a gun and go kill the lot of them – and their mother and father. You used to make up simply terrifying tortures you wanted to inflict on them. I would listen to you in the hope that once you heard them they’d freak you out like they did me. Even at that age I understood that was a boy’s reaction to something he could neither understand nor fix – you were helpless. All you had was your creative mind. Then, as you matured, the angry need for revenge simmered down and helped you define the clear and present dark side of human nature as epitomized by the quads. More recently, you have set about pursuing justice. From the start, you put yourself at the center – how else could it have been, knowing only what you knew? So, as your understanding grew through seeing them for what they were to seeking justice, you just clung to keeping yourself at the center. It seems a reasonable metamorphosis to me.

“Suddenly, through it all, you have come to better understand your mother – her perception of the situation. The effects on her. As an adult, now, you can shed your central role in it all and see the wider and more complete picture. So you’ve suddenly grown up. So, you suddenly feel guilt and shame about how you’ve been viewing it. Just be pleased you have progressed to where you are today. It’s called growth!

“It’s not like you’ve ignored her feelings – her position. You’ve known all along how it has affected her. You’ve had to live with the results. You’ve taken care of her. You’ve done the best you’ve known how to help her. You’ve loved her. You have always been there for her. You’ve done without so she could have her medicine and doctor’s visits. You have nothing

to feel ashamed about. Think of it as two troops of soldiers that have been separated for a time finally coming together to defeat the enemy and win the battle.”

Again, Jake's face was awash in tears. He remained quiet for a few moments.

“I am so damn lucky, Cynthia. I have always had Ma's love and support. I've almost always had your love and support. I've had grampa Benny's love and support for even longer than I ever knew.”

“This might sound trite, Jay, but all of those things work in reverse, too, you know. We all treasure you and love our association with you.”

Jake nodded and attempted a smile in her direction.

They drove on in silence for some time. Presently he pointed.

“Benson, one mile.”

“You ready to do this, then?” she asked.

“I'm ready. I had planned to use my hanky to handle the envelope – fingerprints – but it's soaking wet.”

“Tissues in the glove compartment.”

He nodded.

“Let me find the address of the post office. I want to make sure it really gets mailed.”

Ten minutes later the deed had been done and the car was pointed back north.

Soon into the trip, Jake fell asleep. Cynthia understood. She drove even more cautiously to assure he wouldn't be disturbed.

Back in Rossville she parked at the red and white chicken place wondering whether to wake him up, wait for him to wake up, or go on in and get the goodies herself. She wouldn't have to make that decision. He stretched himself to life at the moment the motor stopped.

“Sorry about that. Haven't been sleeping well this week.”

It was nearly three when they entered his house.

“Late lunch or early supper,” he said holding up the sacks as they entered the living room. The unmistakable aroma filled the room.

“Well, mid-morning would be brunch. I suppose mid-

afternoon can be lunner. I only had my vitamins – I mean my Jell-o – this noon.”

Jake leaned down and kissed her.

“We haven’t had lunch either so we’ll pretend we planned it this way,” Cynthia said taking the sacks into the kitchen.

“You made lots of progress on the puzzle,” Jake said stopping to take note.

“Brought back lots of good memories. Remember how you would always take one piece right off the bat so you’d be able to put the last one in place?”

“I was a stinker, wasn’t I? And do you remember the time when I searched my pocket for it and wasn’t there and you pulled it out of your own? From then on I always remembered that Ma could be trickier than I was.”

Cynthia called from the kitchen.

“You two just going to chatter on about the old days or are you coming to eat Lunner?”

They chuckled. Jake offered his arm to his mother. He thought his heart might burst in joy over the miraculous improvement in her. She had tales to tell Cynthia about Jake as a little boy, many of them centering on their fried chicken escapades.

“Until I was six, this woman had me convinced the drum sticks were the best part of a chicken. One day I had part of a breast at Billy’s house and suddenly my entire world was turned upside down.”

His mother began laughing.

“Do you remember the bawling out you gave me that night? I recall words like ‘deprived’, ‘disgusting’, and ‘dishonesty’ having been thrown about with restless abandon.”

“I don’t remember. Sorry.”

His mother turned to Cynthia.

“Is he always, ‘sorry for this’, and ‘sorry for that’ with you?”

“He is. I suppose we need to break him of it.”

“We’ll get our heads together later.”

The young people filled her in on what their goals were, things they had set in motion, and where things stood as of then. She listened without comment. That usually meant she

had no disagreements or questions.

“It is strange to hear those boys’ names. I haven’t let myself say or even think them for twenty years. Surprisingly, I can hear them, at least, without any dire consequences.”

“Sorry. I hadn’t even thought about that.”

“Not *sorry*, son. Be glad! You’ve helped me discover that I’ve finally beat them.”

“I’m glad. I’m really glad.”

With *Lunner* out of the way, Jake offered to do the dishes – gathering the paper plates and putting them in the trash. He got razzed about it. Jake and Cynthia made plans for the rest of the day. Jake would stay with his mother until dark, when he’d go back to the Sheriff’s compound and see if he could find the lengths of iron used to cause the train wreck. He should be at Cynthia’s by ten. They would spend time organizing what they had against Jerry so her father could look it over on Tuesday. Actually, they still needed to speak with Tow Truck Man to clear up things related to the condition of the car that ended up in the valley. They both had morning classes so it would have to wait until afternoon.

Jake was ready to begin laying out the case against the next in line – J was for Jerry, A would be for Adam. He hoped the visit to the compound that night would yield the first piece of hard evidence against him. If he found it, he hoped Adam had been unaware of the way in which Zeke branded the large pieces of metal at his yard. He wasn’t sure how such a brand cut into iron could be removed or disguised so felt confident it would be there.

At straight up nine o’clock, Jake had slipped under the fence and was standing at the side door. Oddly, he thought, the back area was not lit. There were flood lights – they just weren’t turned on. Maybe they were on motion sensors. If so, he had made it that far through plain old dumb luck.

He eased the door open and entered. He was prepared with a powerful flashlight and a miner’s light strapped to his forehead. There were two floors. The stairs were to his right and he was soon at the top. He stopped to look out oversearching the vast area to get his bearings. It was mostly smaller items and shelves loaded with cardboard boxes – evidence boxes heis would learn. Each item was

tagged with a case number – sometimes several. There was an open, rope operated, elevator at the front.

He walked the floor in a systematic fashion sweeping the beams from his lights back and forth in front of him. After half an hour he had made it to the far, rear corner. He came to understand that the first part of the numbers was a date – of what, he wasn't sure. Also, the newer things were closer to the stairs. As he neared the far side he was coming upon things whose dates fell within his area of interest.

At one point, he stumbled over something. An iron bar sticking out from under several boxes. He moved the boxes. The bar was two inches square and six feet long. He hefted one end using his handkerchief to avoid leaving prints. It appeared to weigh three hundred and a hundred pounds or more. Along one side, two pieces of heavy iron were welded to it at angles off to the left as he was looking at it. It immediately made sense to him. He googled the width between railroad tracks – four feet eight and a half inches.

“Really? How odd,” he said to himself. “I must find out the history of that.”

He took out his roll up tape measure.

“I'll be. Four feet eight and a half inches between those diagonal pieces.”

They were triangular in shape with the high edge welded in place and low – narrow – edge setting at an angle so they were level on the floor with the main bar. His initial take on it was that the bar was placed across the two rails so the two diagonal pieces each touched one of the rails. When the train wheels met it, they were raised up the triangles at an angle that shunted the engine off the track to the left. It was very clever and, apparently, very deadly. H

He emailed himself copied down the case number from the tag. In the process, he ran across a gunny sack almost too heavy to lift. He untied the cord that closed it. Inside were five long, narrow pieces of iron, each about eighteen inches long and an inch square. They had been filed to a blunt point at one end. He then understood the second part of what he had envisioned all along. They were used as stakes, pounded into the rail bed just in front of the derailing

device to hold it in place when the force of the engine hit it. There was no easy way one man could have lifted and set the bar across the track. It would have required an accomplice. Each quad always had three of those at the ready. He took pictures of everything and emailed them to his email address. Then, he deleted them from his phone. The large piece had Zeke's imprint struck into it, but the pictures he tried to take didn't come out very well. He made a pencil and paper tracing, which turned out fine..

An hour after he had entered he was back down at the side door. One problem. Somebody had locked it.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

“You’d Make Beautiful Babies Together”

The beam from his flashlight didn’t cast a focused beam far enough to illuminate other walls so he made his way to the front of the building. There were three doors there, but they were also all locked. He moved to the far wall, thinking it might have a door in the same position as the one through which he had entered on the other side. He could see it, well before he reached it.

“Universe, it would really be good if that one is open.”

He pressed his body against it.

“Good going universe!”

His relief was short lived. The moment he moved through the door the flood lights came on. He ran along the side of the building to the rear, which stood six or so feet in from the fence. He made his way to the opposite side – the side from which he had entered. He peeked around the corner. Those lights were on also. He saw a man – a deputy he figured – walking toward the warehouse from the main building up front. He was speaking.

“Come here, pooch. Bad dog. Come here boy.”

After a minute or so the familiar little white dog emerged from the darkness and jumped up into the deputy’s arms. It was worth giggles to hear the big, tough, deputy speaking baby talk to the dog. It was worth even more to see him kiss the mutt on its nose.

They returned to the front building and the area soon grew dark again.

Jake had heard that in such frightening situations people often said their heart stopped. His most definitely had not stopped – it was pumping at a hundred miles an hour. He tried to ignore it, ran to his spot at the fence and was soon under and out into the darkness on the other side. Apparently, the motion sensors had been deactivated with the return of the dog. He texted called Cynthia so she wouldn’t worry about him being later than he thought he would be.

He set a trot toward her house – thinking it might help use up the increased adrenalin he had acquired during those

past ten minutes. He smiled thinking there would be a more pleasant way to use it up, but thought better than to share that. . . .

By the time he entered her room, it was going on eleven. They both had eight o'clock classes the next day, so, they just took time to make sure the emails had arrived and showed what they needed to show. It had been a very productive day for them and they saw to it that both were amply 'rewarded'.

Jake ate breakfast with her family and shared his findings. Cynthia's mother said she would set up a time for them to talk with the tow truck company – her high school boyfriend was running it. She arranged a meeting for one o'clock at the towing service. Cynthia's father said he'd take time to look over what they had written about Jerry and the car wreck. They hadn't mentioned the letter they had mailed not wanting to risk getting anybody else in trouble. They expected it would be delivered that morning. Even though there was no way it might be traced to them it seemed to have put them on edge. Outside, Jake explained his feeling to Cynthia.

"The pit of my stomach feels like it used to before a major algebra exam."

"Mine, too. Not really a good thing good going into my test this morning."

"You always do fine. And, with my expert tutoring two nights in a row you're well on your way to another 'A'."

"I will say I really appreciated your tutoring."

They shared a quick kiss. Jake headed to Old Main for his class and Cynthia to the hospital.

Jake's class was over at eleven. Cynthia's lasted until noon, so he walked to the hospital to wait for her. He learned from his professor that there was no statute of limitations on capital crimes – any of the several categories of murder. Rape would be impossible to prove given the problems with the DNA, and any good lawyer would make the case it was consensual given the long period during which the relationships had gone on. Anyway, Jake was determined to handle it without getting his mother involved in testimony or affidavits and such.

Cynthia felt good about the test. They jogged up the hill

to Benny's place. Jake had something on his mind.

"Not much time for small talk today, Grampa – I *love* saying that. We have a meeting with the Tow Truck guy at one."

"Got sliced ham upstairs for sandwiches while we talk."

"I've never been known to pass up a ham sandwich. Sure."

They moved up to his rooms.

"We found a fingerprint on Jerry's car . . ."

"You found his car? His yellow and red one. The original?"

"Yup. The problem is we need to know it's Jerry's print before we present our evidence and we don't have anything to compare it with."

"I guess I figured that, like DNA, the quad's finger prints would all be the same, too," Benny said.

"Interestingly, not. They are very similar, but can be distinguished from each other. One case where 'old tech' is still better than 'new tech'."

"You have a way to take a print if I can direct you to one?"

"I do if you have some powdered sugar and cellophane tape."

"I can manage that. How about the door handle on his car. It will be parked either inside or out in front of the garage behind the house. His plate is JERRY-M."

"How vain can he get?" Cynthia said.

"And thus, the name, vanity license plate," Jake offered unnecessarily.

While the young people ate, Benny slipped the needed materials into a brown paper sack.

"Can we borrow a plant mister with the finest spray you have?"

"Better than that, I have a micro-mist aerosol can. May I ask why?"

"Hard to find a good print on a hot surface. With just the hint of a mist, they pop right out."

"How does he know such things?" Cynthia asked directing it to the old gentleman."

"I gave up asking years ago. Your life will probably be

easier if you do, too. At nine he informed me I was using the words 'dreamed' and 'dreamt' wrong. How does a nine-year-old know such a thing?"

"What *is* the difference between them? I thought they were synonyms."

Benny nodded at Jake for the answer. It had to wait until he finished chewing and swallowing.

"Dreamed means fantasized about while awake. Dreamt means had sleep-time visions."

"Well, I'll be," Cynthia said. "Bet 95 percent of people don't know that."

"And," Jake continued, "if they can be meaningfully interchanged in common usage, does it really matter what the actual definitions are?"

She and Benny shared a special look. That was their guy!

Ten minutes later they were in the garage. It was cooler in there so Jake skipped the mist. He placed a small amount of the powdered sugar on his palm and gently blew it over the surface of the driver's side handle.

"I expect to get a good print," he said. "See the drip line around the car on the floor. It's just been washed. Should have cleaned up the handle leaving only the prints from when he drove it in here from out front where it was washed."

"What if it was hired help that washed it," Cynthia asked.

"The story is, Jerry has never let anybody else drive his cars. There, look at that beautiful thumb print. I'm pretty sure the print we have is a thumb also."

He saved the print on the sticky side of the tape. He also took a photograph of it. They left. In and out in under two minutes.

They dropped off the spray can and returned to Cynthia's to pick up the car. The towing company was several miles north of town. They pulled into its driveway at a few minutes before one.

Two men approached them with smiles and hands out.

"I think Ann Carls called. I'm Jake, in the Criminal Justice Program at the college and this Cynthia, Ann's daughter. I'm doing a project about the wreck that occurred

on the fourth of July some twenty years ago – the one on Logger’s Road. We understand you towed the car that went over the cliff.”

The older man spoke.

“Yes, we did. A terrible sight, I can tell you that. Much of it was burned to a crisp.”

“Anyway, to tell where the impact of the other car hit the one you towed?”

“Hit it on the right front.”

“You sound pretty sure of that. How, after it tumbled down the side of the cliff?”

“The left front headlight and assembly was missing and the sheriff’s men found it in the ditch up beside the road. It came out before the car went over the side.”

“I don’t suppose you remember anything about that light assembly, do you?”

“In fact, I do.”

“My dad never forgets details of accidents,” the younger man said. “It’s almost like a fetish for him. He’s kept written records for thirty years.”

“My. It seems we may have hit the jackpot here,” Jake said.

“Come inside. Let’s see what I have.”

In the loft above the service area, were dozens of cardboard boxes. After a few minutes, he handed one down to his son, then joined the three of them.

“This wreck kept my attention for a long time. First, no second car was ever located. Because of the disengaged headlight there had to have been another vehicle. Couldn’t have just been a case of running off the road. Also, two sets of skid marks cut into the gravel road that night – one coming down the hill and one going up. Here’s the head light. The sheriff wasn’t at all interested in pursuing it for some reason. In this envelope are paint scrapings I took off it. You can still see where some still remains, here and here. Canary yellow from a ford product – a mustang most likely.

“And that’s a BINGO, sir. Just what I suspected. You’ll hold onto that some longer won’t you?”

“My dad’s a pack rat, Jake. He fully intends to be buried with everything you see up there.”

The older man chuckled and nodded admitting to everything his son had said.

“We sure thank you, Sir. I may be in contact with you later for evidence to support the case I’m making in my report.”

“Oh, don’t leave yet, son. There’s more.”

He took out a second envelope.

“In here is a small section I cut off the front fender of the car we towed. The area of impact had apparently been repaired with body putty some time before and repainted to match the maroon color of the car. Looks like some red paint from the car going up the hill got scraped off onto that putty. The heat of the fire melted it right into the putty, preserving it.”

“Didn’t you share all this with the sheriff?”

“Offered to. He was an independent SOB – Rush Redding. Long gone now. He’d have none of it. He’d either solve it by himself or not at all. A pigheaded SOB, that’s what he was. Pardon my language, ma’am.”

“Okay, then. Any idea about the origin of that red paint?”

“It’s all mixed in with the putty so it would take a forensics lab to really determine that.”

“Wow! What a meeting. It’s like you’re writing my investigation for me. Thanks. I hope I can bother you at least one more time.”

“Any, and as many times as you need. I’ll leave the box down here for a while.”

Back in the car Jake couldn’t contain his joy.

“Can you believe that? Who’d have ever thought a seventy-year-old anal compulsive hoarder tow truck guy would hold the cincher in all this? I need pie.”

“Mom made one this morning.”

“I know. Had she made cake I would have said, ‘I need cake’.”

There was pie, there was milk, and soon, there were peanut butter sandwiches.

It was nearly two o’clock.

“Looks like we have Jerry for some level of murder,” Cynthia said.

“And we are close to nailing Adam for causing the train

wreck and a *handful of* murders in his case. Let's see what we have and determine what else we need. Need to take a look at those pictures I sent us from the sheriff's warehouse. I was thinking I saw something we might be able to use."

Cynthia opened the file where they had stored them.

"Okay, which one?"

"The shot I took of the brand – the striking – that didn't show it well enough to read."

"So we're going to look at the one that didn't show us anything we need?"

"Right. May have lucked onto something. Right here toward one end. We need to enlarge and enhance the heck out of that spot."

"Give me a minute."

She worked carefully, which, to Jake meant way too slowly. He waited.

"I see what you mean. Maybe another finger print. In fact, maybe two."

They examined them for some time, working with the computer to clarify the images even more.

"The best clarity I can get on these is still somehow unclear – smudgy – see? Doesn't look like a thumb print. Looks like a mark of some kind running top to bottom across it. Some sort of smudge, maybe."

"Let me dazzle and amaze you, my dear."

"You do both of those things regularly."

She administered a gently peck to his nose.

"Adam is or was an archer. The ends of an archer's index and second fingers become calloused over time from pulling on the bow string above and below the arrow. Those callouses might account for less distinct prints. There's more. What if that if that vertical line is not a smudge, but a scar? That would be like having found a double whammy."

"I am officially dazzled and amazed."

Jake presented his nose, pointing to it for further attention. It had been worth the effort. She missed his nose just to the south.

"Let's print those prints. Then move to the other end on the chance there might be some there – there should be. I'm thinking it was a severaltwo man job to lift that sucker,

especially after the two additional sections had been welded to it.”

While Jake examined the prints of the prints, Cynthia moved on.

“Maybe a partial, down there,” she said pointing.

Jake looked.

“Maybe. Blow it up.”

“Not as clear as the others and it is just a partial.”

“On that one you see what I think I see?”

“Probably not.”

Jake managed a quick smile.

“Here, compare it to what we took off Jerry’s car this noon.”

“Well, I’ll be. That’s Jerry’s print on the iron. Are we after the wrong quad?”

“Don’t think so. That’s a partial thumb, likely the right one the way it’s configured. I’d bet it was laid down the day Jerry helped Adam load it at Zeke’s place. I was so dumb. While we were in the Montgomery’s garage we should have taken prints from all four of their cars.”

“So, we just go back some other time,” she said.

“We really lucked out on Jerry’s – it just being washed. A door handle on a car will typically offer up a hodgepodge of overlying prints – probably none of them any good. Some may be from the two wives, even.”

“Which two are married?” she asked.

“Kyle and Ethan.”

“The alcoholic and the sociopath,” Cynthia said. “Wonder what those women think about their choices?”

“Focus,” Jake went on. “What do we know in Adam’s case? Between Zeke’s word on selling the iron and his strike on the bar at the sheriff’s, we have the evidence we need to get them for purchasing the iron pieces. Make a note we need to check that imprint number – easy to remember – a palindrome – 56T65. I wonder where he modified the triangular pieces and did the welding.”

“Doesn’t Benny do welding?”

“Good thought. Not sure how that helps other than give the Quads ready access to the torch. Do you think Benny would have helped?”

“Not at all sure. Maybe he’ll recall something or have thoughts about it.”

“What would be Adam’s motive – to kill all those people?” Cynthia asked.

“Probably the next thing we need to look into. I know from Benny that Adam was a tinkerer – an inventor of sorts his whole life. That seems to support the incriminating side of the iron evidence. What do we know about the official investigation into the train wreck?”

“Aside from that it happened, and the device that we believe caused it, virtually nothing.”

“How about asking Ethel to look into that for us?”

“Good idea. I’ll email her right now. Any directions?”

“As I recall the victims were the father/owner, his teen age daughter and a young man her age. Find out about *him* – the young man.”

Cynthia sent the email.

“Have another trek up to Benny’s in you today?” Jake asked.

“If it’s essential. I do have a lot of homework.”

“That’s fine. You do homework and I’ll pester Grampa.”

“Your face always lights up when you say that.”

“My whole being lights up. I guess it only sneaks out through my cheeks.”

They stood as Jake prepared to leave.

“Sure you don’t need any of my special kind of attention before I leave.”

“Need, no. Want, maybe. Reality, no time. Go see your grampa.”

“I’ll come back this evening after supper, then. I want to spend time with Ma in between.”

Benny was cleaning old clay pots. They had been soaking overnight in a large metal tub to help float out the harmful chemicals that tend to get set in them over time, leaching out from the soil, fertilizers and such. Unless they were then steel-bristle cleaned they never produced healthy plants the way he wanted them to be. It was one of those up to the elbows in dirty water tasks that he somehow seemed to enjoy. As a young boy, getting filthy was high on Jakes priority list, but once he discovered girls in the teen boy sense of the

experience, he tended to keep his distance from such tasks. He took the pots as Benny finished them and set them in the sun to dry.

“Do you know any connection between Adam and the people who were killed in the train wreck – the railroad owner, his daughter and another younger man?”

“Well, I do know they had been here on several occasions. Winthrop was a minority owner in the company. The father and his daughter had been here a half dozen times or so during the six months prior to the accident. Winthrop was threatening to sell his shares, which would disturb the power structure some way. I surmise that Winthrop voted with the owner. The Father was the ‘O’ in J&O Railroad – Owens, I think. From what Olivia overheard, Owens was dealing to obtain Winthrop’s shares on a pay-so-much-a-year basis. Apparently, Winthrop was milking it for all the concessions he could squeeze out of Owens. The young man wasn’t with them the first several times. Then he arrived as the girl’s boyfriend and the last time as her husband. Pretty young, I thought. It was my observation that she might have been pregnant the last time they came.”

“And *that* would bring us to the quads. Any one of them interested in her?”

“If it was female, they were all interested. Actually, early on, Adam went to Waynesville to visit her on at least two occasions that I recall.”

“So, the assumption is that she became pregnant from her boyfriend and they married early because of it? That’s a question in case it didn’t sound that way.”

“I’d say that’s a good assessment.”

“Do you know anything about the boyfriend/husband?”

“Again, just rumor. He supposedly came from the wrong side of the track, if I may use that somewhat humorous metaphor. Her parents never approved, but played it cool, I believe the saying is, and didn’t try to prohibit the relationship.”

“Where did they live?”

“The J&O is headquartered in Waynesville about a hundred miles east of here. It’s a small place completely dedicated to the J&O, like Rossville is to Montgomery Machine Parts.”

“Any family still left over there?”

“I really don’t know. The Railroad is still functioning. I do know they were on their way here for another meeting with Winthrop at the time of the accident.”

“Winthrop’s shares?”

“Again, I don’t know. If he had really decided to sell them, you can be sure he sold them. If it were just a ploy to gain some advantage, who knows how the accident might have affected that.”

“I see a field trip in our future,” Jake said – “Cynthia and I, not you and I although you’d be welcome you know.”

“I think I’ll pass. I will ask Olivia – your grandmother – if she knows anything more. Check back with me before you leave town.”

“Great. Tell her I love her.”

“Consider it done. I’m sure she’d say the same to you. Winthrop will be out of town all next week and we will plan some get acquainted get-togethers then.”

“Wonderful! We’ll probably make the trip tomorrow at noon. We both have morning classes. Oh, one more thing. About Adam. Are you aware of an injury to his right index finger?”

“June fourteenth, at 9:34 a.m. the year he was twelve. It had rained earlier in the day but the sun had come out.”

“Really?”

“Of course not. Four boys make forty fingers. Your question asks a lot of my old brain. . . . Actually, though, there is something about that. He was, in fact, about twelve at the time. A whittling accident as I recall – or at least that’s the story he told.”

Jake went through the whittling motion.

“Seems more likely that sort of cut would have come to a left finger – on the hand holding the wood for a right hander.”

“Great minds think alike. It’s what I’ve always thought as well. Like I’ve said, the four of them were terrible liars – meaning both that they lied a lot and that they were never very good at it. I suppose they didn’t have to be. Winthrop believed whatever they said.”

“One more, *one more* thing. Did any of the boys ever do welding with you?”

“Not with me, but Adam took shop in high school so I’m sure he had the basics in welding.”

“Here’s one that should tax your gray matter. Remember anytime it appeared that your welding equipment had been used while you were away? I’m thinking around the time of the railroad accident.”

“Sorry. Nothing comes to mind. He could have used the school’s equipment after hours, I suppose.”

“Okay. Just thought I needed to ask. I’ll stop by before we leave town tomorrow noon in case you have any more thoughts.”

That final hug always lingered on as if trying to make up for nineteen years of drought.

The time with his mother was wonderful. She seemed to be gaining strength day by day. She had put lipstick on by the time he entered their house. She hadn’t done that in years.

As they talked, the topic turned to ‘the mission’, of course.

“I guess Cynthia and I will be going to Waynesville to follow up on a lead – to seek out a lead, I guess, better put.”

Then as an afterthought.

“Do you want to ride along?”

“I’m probably not up to that yet, but a short ride into the country would be nice sometime.”

“This weekend, for sure, Ma. We can take a picnic up to lookout point like we used to.”

“That would be really nice. Why are you going to Waynesville? Nothing there but smelly old trains.”

“In a way it’s about the trains or the family that owned them back some twenty years ago.”

“The Owens’s?”

“Yes. Didn’t realize you’d know that.”

“Mr. Owens and his daughter visited the house several times while I was working there.”

“I didn’t realize they visited that long ago. It would have made the boys about fifteen or so?”

“Yes. I made up rooms for both of them – Mr. and the daughter. Involved one of the most embarrassing moment of my life.”

“Something to talk about?”

“Looking back, I’m not sure why it seemed so traumatizing. I went into her room about ten one morning to make up the bed, do towels and things. I knocked, but got no response. I went in, did the bed, picked up the room, and moved into the bathroom. There in the shower were the girl and Adam doing a whole lot more than bathing. Adam just looked at me and said, ‘Hurry up. Do your thing and get out,’ as if it wasn’t any big thing at all.”

“Interesting – not from a voyeuristic point of view, but from what it might add to our data pool. What if Adam is the one who eventually got the girl pregnant?”

“The boy who came with them later – she called him her boyfriend – eventually claimed to be the father. They got married.”

“And that could have been true; he *might* have been the father. I have no idea how it could play within what we are learning. But, interesting data. I suppose I should have guessed as much.”

“All that makes me remember other things that happened. The boy, I don’t remember his name, visited the house several times after that alone. I have no idea why. It was always a short stay – an hour or less. I don’t know who he saw. I do know the first time he was driving a Chevy. After that it was a Mercedes.”

“You are fantastic, Ma. Your memory.”

“It goes with being a maid. Part of a maid’s job description is to know everything that goes on within the walls.”

“You may just turn out to be our best informant.”

“Oh, I hope that’s so.”

“I brought you a new puzzle – I found out the library loans them out. Got it for two weeks.”

“And, speaking of puzzles, did you notice I’m *almost* finished?”

“Almost?” Jake said with a grin.

They moved to the puzzle table. Jake reached into his front jeans pocket and handed the final piece to his mother.

“Just for old time sakes, you understand.”

They pressed it in place together – like Ma’s and sons

should do things.

The following morning Jake and Cynthia made plans for the day.

“Okay, classes this morning and then a road trip over to Waynesville. I have to be back by six to work at the library this evening.”

“Mom fixed a lunch for us,” Cynthia said. “It’s in the fridge. You drive me to my class at the hospital, then take yourself to class. After that, check in with Benny. Then go pick up the lunch, come and pick me up at the hospital and we’ll get right on the road to Waynesville.”

“My, we are organized this morning.”

“And?”

“And I love you so much for having it all figured out.”

“I was sure that’s what you meant.”

They were on the highway east at 12:05. Jake drove that day – Cynthia’s car, of course.

“Benny said that Grandma – Olivia – had one memory to share. She recalled a time, several months before the train accident, while she was climbing the stairs to the third floor she overheard Adam and another male talking in Adam’s room. She recognized the voice as being the Owen’s girl’s boyfriend. From what she could figure out, the boy was telling Adam he had recorded the conversation between the two of them a month earlier in which Adam offered to pay him fifty thousand dollars to claim the baby was his – Adam was sure it was his. The purpose of the boy’s visit that day seemed to be to blackmail Adam – either make regular, sizeable payments, above and beyond the original amount, to him to keep quiet about it or he would give a copy of the recording to the girl’s father. That, apparently, would have been very bad for Adam in some unspecified way. Adam seemed to understand. That was all she heard. Just hearsay, probably, and not proof we can use.”

“At least it confirms your suspicion, Jay. That’s good news.”

Jake nodded.

“Speaking of good news,” she continued, beginning to open up the lunch.

“Ding Dongs and cheese?” he interrupted.

“No, silly. My test. I got an ‘A’.”

“Good going. See. All my special, late night tutoring really did help.”

She stuffed a baloney sandwich in his mouth.

“How are we going to go about our snooping today?” she asked, opening cans of pop and slipping them into the cup holders.”

“How about trying the newspaper?” Jake managed even though his mouth was otherwise engaged. “See if we can talk to a reporter that knows about the wreck.”

“Sounds promising. Let me google papers in Waynesville.”

Jake took a swig of his pop and held out his hand for more food. She opened a small bag of chips and held it up for him.

“I’m thinking a small paper, if we have a choice,” Jake said. “Probably a homier atmosphere – more helpful to a couple of kids working on a class assignment.”

“I’ve got it – the Waynesville Press: serving Buchanan County for eighty years. Circulation, 3,500. Waynesville has nearly 100,000 people so I’d think that would qualify as a small paper.”

“Good. Feed the GPS and we won’t have to use our heads to get us there. The hard part will be to prove the girl was pregnant by Adam rather than her boyfriend. That’s the only motivation we have to help us explain Adam’s involvement in the train wreck. With no baby, DNA can’t even be used to rule out the boyfriend as the father.”

“Do we need motivation with all the evidence you’ve found?”

“I’m thinking, yes, but we need to run that past your dad. Without a personal motive, Adam could claim he just purchased the iron for somebody else, or found he didn’t need it so sold it or it was stolen.”

“I see what you’re thinking.”

They drove on through the blistering heat. The AC was working poorly. Jake shed his shirt with Cynthia’s assistance.

“Need to check your Freon – well, the cars, although . . .”

Knuckles to his shoulder!

The newspaper office sat on the near side of the city.

“I think we could have found this without good old, ‘G’.”

Jake said.

“G? Oh, short for GPS. Ha! Ha! An acronym for an acronym. How lazy has our speech pattern become?”

“I guess lazier than J had realized, C.”

More knuckles – gentler – and the hint of a chuckle.

“Thank you, but perhaps a little more enthusiasm next time.”

They parked in the lot behind the old, three story, brick building. Rusted, iron, fire escapes clung to the rear. The windows were tall and narrow covered in years of grime. The back door was off a landing at the top of eight, cement steps – clearly not the handicapped access.

“Not the most affluent looking building in town,” Cynthia said as Jake slipped back into his shirt – she helped unroll it down his back.

“Do you think a building can actually be affluent?” he asked.

She ignored his musing and entered ahead of him while he held the door open for her.

“Most guys don’t do that anymore, you know?”

“What. Help their girl’s study for anatomy tests?”

“And yet, like most guys, mine also has a one track mind.”

He managed a quick peck to her lips before they moved forward in the building down a long, wide, dark, wood paneled hallway.

The lobby was, by contrast, bright and comfortable with yellow walls and green-draped windows. The ancient floor was carpeted – dark green. There were chairs and low tables with magazines, and, the front desk, which was their destination. It was manned – well, womaned – by an older woman with graying hair, dark rimmed glasses and a warm smile.

“How can I help you?”

Jake provided the story.

“We are college students working on a project – a research project. We’re looking into the train wreck that killed the owner of J&O railroad some years back. We got the idea

that, this being the headquarters of the railroad, one of your reporters may already have a large part of information we need. If such a person is available, could you point us in his or her direction?"

She nodded slowly.

"Charlie. Wrote a dozen articles about it. Wanted to continue, but the editor thought the story had been milked dry. Elevator to the third floor. First door on your right. I'll need you to sign in – a new security something or other. Next, they'll be making me get your fingerprints and hold your first born here with me until you leave."

"Well, we do have fingerprints, but no first born, yet."

"Yet? That means you're more than project pals. I knew it. Got a sense about such things. Go on up. I'm Madge, by the way."

The office door was ajar by several inches. Still, Jake knocked.

"Enter at your own risk," came a woman's, husky voice.

He pushed the door open revealing a large room that was . . . well, cluttered would have been extremely kind. Behind a huge, wooden desk that had seen at least the last dozen presidents, was an older, rugged appearing woman. She looked up and offered an inviting smile.

"Sorry to intrude. We are looking for Charlie."

"You found her. Long story. Not at all interesting. What can I do for you?"

"Madge said you are the premier authority in the entire universe on the train wreck that took the lives of Mr. Owens, the J&O owner, his daughter and her husband. We are researching for a school project."

She stood and motioned for them to follow her back behind the row of bookcases that separated her desk from the rest of the room. The walls were lined with shelves, many holding boxes, and many more holding piles of loose papers. In the space between were five large tables, most of which were piled high. Charlie moved directly to a shelf at the left rear of the area and removed a cardboard box. She set it on a table and indicated for them to take seats – one on each side of where she sat.

"The crime was never solved, you know?"

“That’s what we understand,” Jake said continuing to be the spokesperson.

“I’m Jake and this is Cynthia by the way. We’re from the college at Rossville,” he managed as they found chairs.

“Rossville?”

Charlie took time to study Jake’s face.

“You a Montgomery? You certainly look like those good for nothing Quadruplets did at your age – no offense.”

“No offense taken. Probably partly Montgomery. Probably partly relevant to why we’re here. Probably not to be revealed at our first meeting, however.”

“A man who sticks to the germane. I like that. You’d make a good reporter.”

She turned to Cynthia.

“If he frequents your bed, honey, keep him. It’s hard to find a straight shootin’, honest man. You two would make beautiful babies.”

Cynthia swallowed hard and managed a response.

“Thank you. Always happy for helpful advice.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Secret Box

Charlie continued about the case.

“The sheriff at the time was in old man Montgomery’s pocket. Can’t say that played any part in it, but to my way of thinking, the sheriff never made a sincere effort to investigate the crime. Have to wonder why. His official report says all sources dried up. No credible evidence to pursue. He had the remains of the gizmo used to derail the train for God’s sake! Had to have been made somewhere by someone out of material obtained by somebody! That had to leave a trail of pretty solid evidence. He’d never let me see it.”

“I’ve seen it. I have photographs of it, in fact,” Jake said.

“Really? Unbelievable. I always leaned toward it having been a tree trunk that was later burned – doing away with the evidence.”

“Ah! Like the ice knife used to stab the man in the heart, which then melted,” Jake said.

“The same genre, I suppose. Was I close?”

“Afraid not – two-inch iron bar, six feet long modified by welding to steer the engine off the track.”

“I hadn’t seen that coming. It means there had been a lot of forethought and planning involved. A person clever with his hands – building things, I mean.”

“And, we think we know who it was.”

“I have always leaned toward Winthrop, but he was all thumbs. Never could have envisioned it, let alone carried out such a thing.”

“You know Winthrop Montgomery?”

“His senior year in high school he got kicked out of the academy he was attending – raped an instructor, got a teacher pregnant was the story. I was a senior at Rossville that year. Most despicable human being I’ve ever known. I’m sure his father bought him his diploma because he never did a lick of work.”

“Does the girl’s boyfriend/husband have any relatives left in the area?”

“A half-brother – George Grable. Odd story about him.

A few months after his brother died, he purchased a very nice home, took over his brother's fancy car and has never worked a day in his life since then. You think there is some connection?"

"Enough to follow up on it. Where does he live, now?"

"That same place. On Willow. About the 4200 block I'd say. Large white brick place, white brick wall around it, set back from the street, two story center section with one floor wings on both sides. Can't miss it."

"Thanks. I think we'll go check him out."

"I'll keep the box here on the table. If you want to take a gander into it come by any time. Never lock my door so in case I'm not here help yourselves."

"You've been very helpful and kind," Cynthia said.

They left as Charlie continued to shuffle through the papers and clippings in the box as if reuniting with old friends.

Back in the car Cynthia fed the address into the GPS.

"Not having the actual address, the closest 'G' can give is the block – 2400, J. That's no fair – Jay and J sound alike. Ruins my extremely humorous offering."

Jake offered a smile.

"Charlie said we couldn't miss it. From her description, it sounds like one of a kind. We're not that far away the way it looks."

The house sat in the center of the block. The description had been spot on. There was a low, iron gate at the entrance to the driveway. It was open. Jake pulled in and stopped in front of the garage which sat well toward the rear of the lot and even with the rear of the house.

They got out.

"So, which door? We seem to have our choice – front, back or side."

"My favorite is always the back," Jake said.

"Because it's usually the kitchen with the possibility of food," Cynthia added playfully.

They rounded the corner of the house and were presented with a pool sitting in the center of a large back lawn. A man was swimming laps. Apparently, he did not see them. Jake approached and called out.

"Hello. Mr. Grable. Mr. Grable."

As the man reached the near end to turn he caught a glimpse of them and stopped, wiping the water from his face and waving. He waded to where Jake stood.

“You don’t know us, Mr. Grable.”

“You’re right. I don’t know you. You, however, seem to know me.”

“Know *about* you, sir. Not really *know* you.”

He stood at the edge, remaining in the water, his crossed arms draped up onto the concrete.

“Then I guess the ball’s in your court. Speak.”

His words were more playful than serious. They felt more at ease than they had assumed they would.

“I’m Jake – Jacob – Brown. This is Cynthia Carls. We are from Rossville – students at the college. She’s in nurses’ training and I’m in Criminal Justice. I’m working on a special project that involves the tragic train wreck some twenty years ago that took your brother’s life. Charlie from the paper headed us in your direction.”

“That old battlegon still around? I declare. Probably the best reporter the territory’s ever known.”

“That was our first impression,” Jake said. “Would you be willing to talk with us about the accident?”

“I will, but it wasn’t an accident. It was murder sure as I’m standing here.”

“You have a suspect?”

“Suspect, no. The murderer, yes.”

“I assume you have shared your evidence with the authorities.”

It was really a question.

“I tried. The sheriff at the time was inept at all things except kissing babies and riding next to beauty queens in open air cars during election year parades. Investigating wrongdoing just disturbed his life of ease. Anyway, he was one of Montgomery’s flunkies.”

“And the Montgomery connection is important, why?”

“It would be inappropriate for me to say further on the matter. What other things are on your minds?”

“We understand your brother and the Owens girl had been married for only a short time.”

“That’s correct – not quite three months. And as to

your next question, yes, she was pregnant – about four months.”

“So, you are saying . . . ?” Cynthia asked leaving it open ended.

“I’m saying the obvious. She was pregnant before they were married.”

“And it was her boyfriend – your brother – who impregnated her?”

“No way. My brother – stepbrother – was just three months younger than I. We were more like twins – we shared everything. They were not having relations. Jimmy – my brother – was sterile from an illness when he was ten. They planned to adopt after they had been married a year or so. Jimmy was being worked into a responsible position with the J&O. Eventually he would be the treasurer of the company. He was several years older than Margaret.

“And is it your opinion or knowledge that the actual father played a part in the accident – er, *murder* as you refer to it?”

“I would not deny that it is. I am in a difficult position that I can’t explain. You’ll have to take what pieces I have for you. Sorry, but that’s how it has to be.”

“Okay, then. That’s how it will be. How about just telling us what you can tell us?”

“Let’s take chairs,” he said hoisting himself out of the water. He was clearly in very good shape for his advanced years – about forty-two Jake figured.

He donned a white, terrycloth robe and continued.

“What I will tell you is, understand, a story – a tale, a fiction – that I have made up. Unless you agree to that stipulation I won’t be able to continue.”

“So, we all know what it really is, but we are to agree it is fantasy. I guess we can live with that. If ever asked, you told us a fictional story.”

Jake turned to Cynthia who shrugged her shoulders and nodded.

“A maid at the house where the man lived saw him and Margaret having sex on the day her gynecologist later estimated as the date of conception. She shared that with Jimmy. They had been a couple for less than four months at

that time. In fact, Jimmy and I were on a camping trip in Colorado for the two weeks on both sides of that date. Armed with the doctor's certificate and Jimmy's fanciful tale about what he falsely said the maid had sworn to in a fanciful affidavit, Jimmy confronted the man. They apparently had a frank discussion in which the man admitted the relationship, thinking it would be his word and his powerful attorneys against the maid's word. Likely, no contest, in his favor. It had been the story of his privileged life.

"Jimmy left that day, only to return several weeks later when he played a copy of the recording he had made of the previous conversation. Jimmy had guts. He extorted the man out of a sizeable amount of money upfront and monthly sums to continue for as long as the man lived. The man threatened to kill him and Margaret. How stupid can a man be to say a thing like that to a man he knew had already recorded him once. Jimmy had recorded that as well. Jimmy had received the initial payment of \$300,000 and the first two monthly payments of \$30,000 each at the time of the train wreck.

"I was unaware of any of that until after Jimmy's death. His will left everything to his wife, but in the event of her death, it all came to me. In a private letter to me he instructed me about receiving the continuing payments for his wife or, as it turned out, me. He included the key to a safety deposit box, which he had set up in both our names – an either/or arrangement. It contained the recordings and other necessary details for me about the arrangement."

Jake nodded and began speaking.

"That explains Jimmy's new Mercedes just months before his death and, I assume, this was the house he bought and it came to you in his will."

"That would certainly be one way to end the story, wouldn't it?" Mr. Grable said, smiling.

"And here would be a more complete way to end it," Jake said. "The mystery man in *your* story becomes Adam Montgomery in *our* story."

"My. My. Criminal Justice you say. Seems like your calling indeed."

He had in that way verified Jake's position without admitting to anything. Jake continued.

“I understand he will be brought to justice by an anonymous Vigilante – one I am sure you understand you would never reveal if you had any idea who it was.”

“Touché, young man. Should that Vigilante require copies of certain tapes, dated by the bad guy in his own voice during the recording, I have the idea they could be made available. They do not incriminate the man regarding the wreck, however. If they did he’d already be locked away forever.”

“*That* evidence has been found. It was the *motivation* that has been missing.”

“Nice meeting you two. More than mere acquaintances, I assume.”

“Oh yes. Soulmates forever.”

“You are so fortunate. Me, I’m far too selfish to allow such a relationship. Good for you.”

“As this case moves forward, it seems that *somebody* stands to lose a great deal of money, Sir, Cynthia said.

“You let that somebody worry about that. He would give everything he has to bring the offender to justice.”

They stood, shook his hand and returned to the car. Cynthia drove knowing Jake would be deep in thought and deep thought had a way of blotting out little things like stop signs, red lights and speed limits.

“We really have him, you know,” he said. “Two down, two to go. We’ll need to do like we did for Jerry – set it all out in logical form and have your dad look it over.”

“We’ll have you back by five so you can get to work,” Cynthia said.

“Let me off at my place. I can see Ma for a few minutes and grab a bite to eat. I promised her a picnic this weekend – up at Lookout Point. You game?”

“Of course. It’ll be hot mid-day. How about late? Say seven. It will still be light for several hours and the sun will be going down in the west – the way the point faces.”

“Sounds fine. I’ll run it past her.”

“Shall I see what I can do with the summary of what we have on Adam? Then when you come over after work we can finalize it. Okay?”

“Good. It will be a little after ten. You know how eager

I always am to 'finalize' things with you."

"And you just keep proving my maiden Aunt Sally correct."

"I do what? Maiden who?"

"When she visited us a few years back and I was leaving to be with you, she made an observation – very Aunt Sallyish: 'I know Jake is a nice boy, but at his age all boy's heads are never more than a smile away from their placket'."

"She said that, did she? Probably a sage observation. Only one fault with it."

"One fault?"

"Yes, I don't intend to be wearing a placket for very long after I arrive tonight."

"Once again, you proved her point."

"And you wouldn't have it any other way!"

Jake smiled and shrugged. Cynthia would have to think about that.

She dropped, Jake ate, Jake worked, Cynthia wrote, Jake's placket remained in place until well after midnight. By any measure it had been a productive day ending on an up note.

At breakfast, they handed their summary to Cynthia's father. He in turn handed the Jerry summary back to them with a few notes, but nothing major.

"I was impressed. Don't know why I expected anything less. The State's Attorney can take this and keep Jerry's behind in prison for a long, long, time. Vehicular homicide, conspiring to conceal evidence, leaving the scene of an accident, it will go on from there."

"This one contains what we can prove against Adam – relative to the train wreck," Cynthia said. "May also indicate negligence on the part of the sheriff back then."

"He's long gone to his reward or whatever. But the department and the prosecutor's office could still be held liable in certain cases. I'm eager to see what you have."

It was Thursday – the final day of classes that week. Jake worked from noon to five. They agreed to meet at the Carls' home for supper and spend the evening beginning to work on Kyle's list of wrong doings.

After supper they shoed her parents into the living

room and did up the dishes. Jake was used to helping around the house. For years at his place, if it got down, it was because he did it. The fact there was half a peach pie left on the counter had nothing to do with his willingness to be in the kitchen.

“Let me review what I learned from Wes. He seemed to have the most information about Kyle. Girls didn’t like Kyle back in school. One of them paid attention to him for some reason – felt sorry for him maybe. Unimportant. When they were about fifteen, I’m thinking because he wasn’t driving, but he was dating, the girl’s older brother drove them to and from a school dance. At some point after that Kyle asked her to go steady with him – become a couple – and she said no because she and Freddie had committed to each other. He apparently became infuriated – not so much at her as at Freddie.

“According to a girl Wes was with at one of the quad’s all night orgies in the woods, she told him that Kyle had told her he had pushed Freddie off the cliff into the gravel pit – Freddie had died from the fall. Wes’s source was not the best because she was well on her way to being drunk. I have her name though, Doris Mitchel. Wes thinks she still lives in Alma. She was married later, but got divorced so he’s not sure by what last name she goes now.

“She said Kyle told her he had lured Freddie to the top of the cliff – didn’t say what the excuse was. Then he tied the boy wrists and ankles while he forced him to drink some sort of alcohol – something Freddie did not normally do. I’m thinking Kyle had a swig or two along the way as well. When Freddie was either passed out or too drunk to defend himself, Kyle pushed him over the cliff.

“Wes is sure the investigation report says there were ligature marks on the wrists and ankles and that he had an extremely high blood alcohol level. This one may be hard to prove unless we can get the Doris person to give us something more than we currently have.”

“Road trip in the morning?” Cynthia asked.

“I’d say so. Let’s call Ethel and see what she might know about the Doris person. It might help us plan our itinerary for tomorrow.”

Ethel knew the woman and reported that she had gone back to her maiden name – Doris Mitchel. She had worked for years as a clerk in a locally owned grocery store. Gossip was she drank herself to sleep every night, but never missed work. The additional rumor was that she had been one of the Quad’s regular overnight pals when they were in high school.

“People who can’t sleep without booze usually have some terrible secret that won’t let them sleep,” Jake said.

“But Ethel said it was just gossip.”

“We know all about small town gossip,” Jake said. “How often is it really very far off the mark?”

“I suppose you’re right – especially the kind that’s been around twenty or so years.”

“It suggests at least the possibility that Wes was onto the facts of the matter. It’s hard for me to see him as one of the quads’ friends.”

“Remember Aunt Sally!”

Jake offered a sheepish grin and nodded. Cynthia offered a sincere question.

“Do all boys that age frequent orgies like those we’re led to believe the Quad’s held?”

“No. Always a few, I suppose with the prospect of free booze and loose girls. My friends and I managed to keep our orgy participation to our individual nighttime imaginationsfantasies. I tell myself they were every bit as good if not better.”

He smiled and repeatedly raised his eyebrows.

Cynthia trusted what he said and that would be the end of it.

Kyle was the alcoholic, right?”

“Right – from fourth grade or so according to both Wes and Grampa.”

“What a mess he was.”

“Still is, if local rumors are correct.”

* * *

They were on the road by eight the next morning. Ethel had given them an address and even arranged a meeting at nine at the woman’s house. She said she had to be at work by ten.

“Doris, we are so pleased you would see us. Ethel said

she gave you the brief edition of what we are doing.”

It was Cynthia who began the conversation. They had talked it over and decided woman to woman might be the most comfortable way to get things underway.

“Yes. She is a dear old soul. I will help, but I’m not sure anything I have to say will stand the test of authenticity. It has been a long time ago and I wasn’t in the best condition at the times.”

“Times – plural?” Cynthia asked.

“Yes – three occasions to the best of my recollection. Once both Jean Marie I were present – in his room.”

“Tell us what you remember about what he said. I assume you thought it was true and not just teen boy bragging.”

“Yes. That’s right. He told the story almost exactly the same each time – different words, of course, but the same details. He said he asked Freddie to meet him up above the gravel pit to discuss a money-making proposition. Kyle and Freddie really didn’t know each other very well. Maybe Freddie didn’t know his bad side – hard to believe that, but the promise of money does strange things to people. Kyle said he had a hand gun and forced Freddie to undress. Then he tied him up – hands behind his back and ankles together. He took some pleasure in describing how the ropes were so tight they dug into his skin and bled.”

“Why did he make him disrobe?”

“To humiliate him – part of the torture. He rubbed some sort of hot ointment on his privates and that made him scream out in pain. He apparently kept it up for the better part of an hour. Nobody could hear from up there. He said he forced him to drink scotch – a lot of it. He said he’d beat him for a while and then make him drink for a while. He really wanted to make it all very painful. Once he passed out and he couldn’t revive him, he removed the ropes, stood him up at the edge of the cliff and pushed him over. He was disappointed that Freddie didn’t scream on the way down – not sure how he expected the boy to scream if he was unconscious. I have terrible night terrors about the story to this day. It’s like I’m right there watching it all take place. I’ve even taken to drinking some nights so I can sleep.”

“He just told you as if you’d never tell anybody?”

“Jean Marie had gotten pregnant by one of the Quads and Kyle bought her an abortion in the City. She was Catholic and back then if it had become known she’d have not only been disowned by her family, but by the church. He threatened to tell if either of us ever told. She was my best friend. I wasn’t about to tell.”

“Where is Jean Marie, now?” Cynthia asked.

Doris began to sob and shake her head.

“Poor girl just couldn’t live with the shame of it and she took her life ten years ago. It was planned. She had written me a long letter trying to justify what she was going to do. In it she blamed Kyle and detailed the Freddie story I just related. She took pills, then went to stay the night with Kyle. As per her plan, she undoubtedly died in his bed – at least that’s what I assume happened.

“Her body was found in the back yard of her home the next morning. I was just too terrified of Kyle to mention anything about it.”

“Do you have the letter?”

“Yes and no. I put it in a zip lock bag and then in a small metal box and I buried it up on the hill over the gravel pit. Where I figured it all had taken place.”

“Can you help us locate it?”

She stood and walked to her desk. She removed an envelope and handed it to Cynthia.

“Exact directions – a treasure map at this point, I suppose.”

“The letter was in her handwriting?”

“Yes. She was always proud of the fact she had the pretest handwriting in our class.”

“We assume you will stipulate all of this to the authorities if the case is adjudicated against Kyle,” Jake said as the two of them stood.

“I’ll put the noose around his neck, pull the lever, and dance on his grave.”

“This may seem odd,” Jake said, “but may I take a short video of you getting the envelope from the desk and handing it to Cynthia – documenting the chain of evidence. I see it is also addressed to you by hand – her writing?”

“Yes.”

“Show that side up and then open it and remove the letter just long enough to show that it’s there. Hold it steady so I can get the first page in the video. Will you do that for us?”

“Of course. Shall I say what it is?”

“An excellent idea. Just like you did to us - be natural.”

Jake got the video with all the details. They shook hands and turned to leave. Doris had one more thing to say.

“I don’t know if this is important or not, but Kyle showed us Freddie’s class ring. Apparently, Kyle took it off his finger that night. He had some ghastly plan to send it to the girl that was central to the whole thing – Martha Mansfield. She and her family moved away immediately and I have no idea where.”

“Yes. Good to know. Anything special about it?”

“Just the usual Rossville High ring – like the ones you are wearing. The gold panther inlay in black onyx with the student’s initials on each side of the setting. Been that same ring design for generations, I guess.”

“Thanks again, Doris. We’ll keep you up to date if you want.”

“Yes. Please. I’ll need to have my dancing shoes ready for the big event. Oddly, I feel better than I’ve felt in twenty years. Thank you. Thank you for including me in this.”

“May we drop you at the store?” Cynthia asked.

“Thanks, but no. For the first time in ages I really feel like walking, breathing in fresh air, feeling the sunshine on my arms.”

They left and hurried to the car. There were many things to talk about.

“No report that I’ve hear about indicated the body was nude, you?” Jake said.

“It was to be my first question as well.”

Cynthia’s phone rang. It was Ethel.

“Cheese cakes – one for you and me and one for that hunk with which you keep company.”

“Be right there. How did you know when to call?”

“Doris called to say you had just left and to say how good she was feeling.”

Jake was asking the question as they entered the house.

“What do you remember about what the official reports said about the condition of Freddie’s body when it was found?”

“Just what you’d expect after having fallen a hundred and twenty five feet onto huge, sharp rocks. There were deep ligature marks around the wrists and ankles but no ropes on the body. Coroner said it was probably plastic clothesline rope because it dug in so deeply and tore the skin.”

“How do you remember such things?” Jake asked.

“I cheat. I downloaded copies of the reports earlier in the week. I also have found two dozen Attorneys whose initials match those in the ads.”

“You’ve been a busy girl,” Cynthia said.

“It’s been so good to be busy doing something important. The girls at the bridge club think I’ve become snooty because I’ve begged off twice now. Perhaps I have.”

Chocolate cheesecake with coffee for Ethel and Jake, and milk for Cynthia. Jake ate. Cynthia talked.

“Do any of the reports speak of things that might have been missing from the body?”

“Like ears? I don’t understand.”

“We have reason to believe Doris and her friend and Kyle know two things that they could not have learned from the official reports – had to be firsthand knowledge. First, the body was nude and second his class ring was missing. You didn’t find any mention of such things, right?”

“Right. No. Neither of those things.”

“Jake says that often the authorities don’t release some of the information so they can use somebody’s knowledge of it as incriminating evidence.”

“I see. And Kyle knew?”

“He not only knew, but all quite stupidly he told Doris and her friend under threat of revealing damning information about them. It is all contained in a written document the other girl buried. We’re on our way to find it now.”

“You need a pick and shovel,” Ethel asked.

“I do. You have them?”

“I do.”

I now pronounce you School Marm and Hunk until

cheese cake do you part," Cynthia said.

It only got fleeting smiles, which was probably more than it deserved, Cynthia figured upon reflection.

"Our only problem is we probably don't have enough video time left on our phones to make a record of our search and find."

"Would a digital camera help?"

"You have one?"

"Sure do. Photography was my husband's hobby. He has lots of things like that. I have it all in a trunk on the sun porch out back."

Jake found just what they needed and a new, unused, card for the camera.

"This baby should do an hour easily."

"Wilbur would be happy to know he was able to help."

She put her hands on her waist and looked at Cynthia.

"The boy actually ate that *whole* cheese cake. What's his secret to keeping his girlish figure?"

"Believe me, Ethel. There is nothing girlish to it," Cynthia said. "Pardon that. It was inappropriate, Ethel."

"Honey, I couldn't have birthed three sons if I hadn't known the difference between a girlish and a hunkish figure. No need to apologize."

Cynthia drove on their way back to Rossville. The gravel pit was north west of town between the Montgomery Mansion and Logger's Road. It was noon by the time they arrived.

They drove to the base of the back side of the hill that overlooked the gravel pit to the north and hiked their way to the top. Jake carried the spade and pick and Cynthia the camera bag. The soil was a rocky mix that did well supporting tall, wild grasses. At the top, they moved close to the cliff and looked down.

"Gives me the Willies," Cynthia said. "Let me get out the map. There are two main markers that we can work from. One is an Oak tree among all the pines and the other is that boulder, I'm thinking – round on this side and flat on the other – see?"

"Good. This thing *is* like a treasure map. Due west from the boulder ten feet. Then a right angle turn north for

three feet. We will only really get a good approximation of the position if she estimated the distance.”

“See how she put ‘feet’ in single quote marks,” Cynthia said, pointing to the directions. “What do you suppose?”

“Well, feet really only has two references; a measurement of length and the human foot and you know what I’m thinking.”

“That she means the length of her foot. I suppose we could call and ask. She probably forgot she did it that way. You walk it off using your foot length and see where that gets us.”

Jake began taking the video.

“It gets us to more tall grass.”

He handed the camera to Cynthia.

“Let me skim it off with the spade and see about digging.”

“It says 24” across the bottom of the sheet.”

“Depth, maybe. The parenthesis *can* mean inches. She really didn’t remember important details she needed to give us. Let me get at it, here.”

He shed his shirt and went to work. With the spade he marked out an area about eighteen inches square. He would pick a while and then remove the loose dirt and gravel with the spade. It was more taxing than they had thought. After the first foot the pick proved useless because of the angle, so he struggled against the rocky soil with the spade.

“I’d say you’re close to two feet, there. Better go easier. Don’t want to puncture the metal box.”

“And just in the nick of time, my beauty with brains. Let me pull the dirt away. Looks to be the top of a box some six inches by ten maybe.”

He lay down on the ground and dropped his arm into the hole just able to reach the box. He used his fingers to remove more dirt and gravel from around its edges. After some time and a good deal of skin scuffing effort, he raised the box out of the hole.

“Your fingers are raw. You should have worn gloves.”

“My first inclination is to respond by saying this is probably not the best moment on the timeline to have suggested that but, not wanting to sound sarcastic to the love

of my life, I will refrain from that. I'm sure a lengthy, passionate kiss would take the pain right away."

Cynthia put her finger to her lips. At first Jake thought it was an invitation. *That* lasted only a moment.

"Something moved out among the trees," Cynthia whispered.

"Yeah!" Jake said following her lead with a whisper. "From the sound, it is a large something. Surely Kyle had no way of knowing we'd be up here – did he?"

Jake pointed the camera toward the trees ready to press record in case whatever it was moved out into the clearing.

CHAPTER NINE

Jake Couldn't Stop Smiling

As if an automatic reaction, Jake squatted and pulled Cynthia down with him. They leaned low in the direction of the sounds. It offered absolutely no protection, but seemed better than just standing there fully exposed.

The noise seemed to be working its way toward them more in a casual, hit and miss way than a determined fashion. Cynthia clutched Jake's arm. He decided being between the woods and the edge of the cliff was not a good situation. As he pointed, directing them to move in the direction from which they had come, the intruder stuck its head into the little clearing.

"Oh! A deer," Cynthia whispered her tension melting.

They remained quiet. The deer looked them over and sniffed the air. Presently, it turned back into the trees and left. Apparently, it saw no redeeming characteristics between the two of them.

"Well, *that* was a rush," Jake said patting Cynthia's hand.

"Rush to the tenth power, I'd say."

"At your convenience, best girlfriend in the universe, I will appreciate your allowing blood to again circulate through my left arm into my hand."

She released her grip with a shrug and nervous giggle.

"So, we open the box here or take it with us and wait?" Jake asked, really thinking out loud.

"You know you couldn't get ten feet from this spot without looking inside. Open it!"

Jake shrugged. She was right. She was usually right when it came to him. He had decided long before that was more of a good thing than a bad thing.

The box, once red with an overall white filigree design, was covered in rust, securely bonding the slipover lid tightly to the bottom section. Inserting the blade of his pocket knife under the lip of the lid Jake soon worked it free and was able to work it off. As promised, it contained a large plastic bag,

folded several times. Jake held the box and kept the camera running while Cynthia removed the bag.

She flattened it with her hands exhibiting far more care and tenderness than Jake – or any male – would have believed necessary. He had learned much earlier in their relationship that was just how it was so he remained quiet if not entirely patient.

She held it open and Jake slid out the contents with his left hand. It looked to be a half dozen sheets of typing paper with writing, in ink, on one side of each. He held the pages so they could both look at them. It was clearly just what they had been told it would be.

“Better than we expected. Look. At the bottom of the last page. She had it notarized.”

“But that means the notary had to read it,” Cynthia said.

“No, it really doesn’t. The notary only certifies the legitimacy of the signature not the content. Lots of people have that wrong.”

“I learn new things from you just about every day, my sweet Brainiac.”

“I’ve been thinking about some new things to try much later tonight.”

“Men! Praise them and they find ways to . . .”

“Now, don’t tell me you’re not interested.”

Again, she shrugged and answered his quickly produced, eyes closed, pucker with a quick kiss.”

Having documented the events (with the box), he turned off the camera.

Jake removed a plastic shopping bag from his rear pocket and they slid the box inside.

“Let’s treat the zip bag like it has finger prints in case we need to prove it was handled by Doris and the other girl, another way to prove chain of possession.”

They made their way down the hill. By the time they reached the car Jake’s index and middle finger on his right hand were bloody, throbbing and beginning to swell.

“You drive? Me drive?” Cynthia asked.

Jake held up his fingers.

“I think it will be you this trip.”

“Oh, Jay. We need to clean those out and get your

hand into a bucket of ice.”

“And while I’m recovering, a full body massage with warm oil while I sip mint juleps would be nice.”

“And interrupt our investigation?” she said feigning surprise. “And anyway, you don’t even know what a mint julep is.”

He shrugged figuring it had been worth a shot.

Back at her house Cynthia cared for his fingers. The dirt had been forced into the abrasions and it was less than a pleasant undertaking for either of them. Once cleaned, she poured alcohol over it as he laid it in a shallow pan and left it to soak. His eyes teared from the discomfort. Fifteen minutes later it was packed in ice and wrapped in gauze.

Up in her room they got back to the letter. Cynthia read it aloud. It was sad. It was infuriating. It probably *would* become the noose around Kyle’s neck just the way Doris had envisioned it.

“You’d think everybody would have somebody close to them who would see the signs and rush in to prevent such a tragic end to a young life,” Cynthia said.

Jake nodded. She had said it.

“We all have our secrets that I think would surprise even the people we’re closest to,” he said.

Cynthia looked at him, both understanding the truth in his words and wondering whether she’d ever know his. She’d never press him and she knew he would never press her. Knowing another’s secrets was often not a good thing.

They heard her mother enter through the front door. She called up to them.

“Subs and chips. Get em’ while they’re more or less semi-warm.”

They filled her in on their morning adventure.

“It’s a wonder either of you two lived past ten, the reckless things you have done.”

“And we’re glad to see you, as well,” Jake said chiding her.

“I remember when that girl was found dead in her back yard. An overdose, was the rumor for sure. It sent this community into a tailspin. According to your information it seems that the Montgomery boy moved the body.”

“That’s how it looks,” Cynthia said.

“We’ll be eager to hear what Mr. Carls thinks about the evidence we have – no conclusive eye witness stuff, but I’d think all the bits and pieces we do have should be pretty conclusive.”

“It seems that way to me, too,” she said, “but remember the sad reality Larry regularly reminds us about – often, the court system is less about justice and more about who can afford the best lawyer, and in all these cases the Montgomerys will have the very best money can buy.”

“My intention is to keep them very busy – bing, bing, bing, one case right after the other.”

“Not all at once?” Ann asked.

“No. I figure the local prosecutor has limited help and I don’t want to overwhelm his resources. He needs to present the most thorough and professional prosecution possible for each case.”

“Good thinking,” she said.

“Jake’s been known to do that, sometimes,” Cynthia said delivering a quick peck to his lips.”

With lunch over, her mother was on her way back to the courthouse and they continued working on the summery of the evidence for her father to look over that evening.

“On to Ethan, I guess,” Jake said at last. “Wes Kenny and his wife will testify to her rape by Ethan and to the fact Ethan threatened to kill their siblings if they ever mentioned it. I doubt if that’s going to be enough to send him away at this late date. Hearsay, I imagine.”

“Even with Wes as an eye witness?” she asked.

“We can ask your father, but Wes being her husband and all, I don’t know. I’d really like to find something else.”

That evening Mr. Carls went over each of the four cases as Jake and Cynthia had put them down in writing. Aside from making changes in a few technical terms he deemed them well organized, compelling, well documented, arguments against each of the boys. He agreed with Jake that what they had against Ethan was the flimsiest, but even so, should put him away for a number of years. Jake, of course wanted more than that.

Upstairs, they composed a second letter to Judge

Madison. It was short and to the point.”

There will be four cases presented to your court during the next several months, each alleging and offering indisputable proof of despicable crimes perpetrated by each of the four Montgomery Quadruplets. Unlike your record of protecting them in the past, you will conduct the trials with the utmost honesty, sincerity and thoroughness, and render just verdicts and sentences. You are only asked to weigh the evidence in the way any upright and conscientious judge should. Do this and I will consider not having charges brought against you for the favors you offered Attorneys from the city in the past. If you agree, post the following ad in the June 22nd edition of the Alma Observer (nine days away). 'Mrs. Rattison: Your garment is ready'. If it is not printed, my packets of information about those events during your tenure will be sent to the Prosecutors' Offices in Rossville and the City, and to the Attorney General of the State.

I. V.

Again, their plan was to print it from the computer in the Geography Department at the college and take the necessary steps to control fingerprints and tracking. They arranged to mail it to Ethel in a large envelope and instructed her not to leave prints as she mailed it there in Alma. She was pleased to help.

“I guess all we have to do now is to wait and see if Madison responds,” Cynthia said propping herself back against several pillows at the backboard of her bed.

“Well, I can think of a way to fill a good portion of that time,” Jake said lying down beside her – close beside her – close enough to nibble at her earlobes beside her.

“Well, I’m at a loss as to what you mean, my dear. I

suppose you will have to demonstrate.”

As it turned out, Jake was an able, persistent and conscientious demonstrator.

* * *

It was five a.m. on the 22nd. Jake had been waiting on Main Street since 4:30 for the truck that delivered the Observer to the newsstand in Rossville. He opened his copy to the want ads.

“Yes!”

He took off at a full trot toward the Carls’ house. He let himself in quietly so as to not wake her parents, and took the steps two at a time to Cynthia’s room.

He sat beside her on the bed and brushed her hair back. She managed a smile, although had clearly not committed herself to wakefulness.

“It’s in the paper – Madison’s response. It’s right here.”

She turned over onto her side and urged her eyes open.

“Wonderful. Let me see.”

She managed herself into a sitting position beside him. He held out the paper opened to the proper page and pointed

She nodded and administered a quick peck to his cheek.

“How did you arrive at the wording for that ad, by the way? I never asked.”

“Just tried to make sure it would be something nobody else would run and yet would not seem so out of place as to cause undue interest.”

“I think you nailed it, then. Did I ever tell you how smart you are?”

“You have, but I love to watch those words flow across your very kissable lips.”

She let him occupy them for the next few minutes proving that her lips were, indeed, kissable.

“Enough of that for the moment. Do we mail the ‘Jerry Packet’ to the Prosecutor today?”

“That will put in on his desk first thing Monday morning. A good way for him to start his week, I’m thinking. We’ll prompt your mom at breakfast to keep her court house ear out for any information about it.”

“How will that work. Will the prosecutor engage the Sheriff to collect all the evidence we’ve described for him?”

“I imagine. Your dad will know.”

“Well, it’s all ready to drop in the mail box in front of the Post Office,” Cynthia said.

“Later this morning, I guess. In the mean time we need to find some way of entertaining ourselves. Any ideas?”

“I, for one have practicum at the hospital from seven ‘til noon, remember? My entertainment will be a shower and breakfast.”

“I volunteer to help with both.”

“Very kind. But, why don’t you go set the table for breakfast. Mom will be up any minute to fix it.”

“I assume that really wasn’t a question – the *why don’t you* part.”

Cynthia stood and pushed Jake back onto the bed and left for her bathroom.

After breakfast, Jake drove her to the hospital, mailed the packet, and dropped back at his house to see his mother. They made plans for the picnic the next evening. She already had made potato salad and slaw and had chicken frying. Jake loved cold fried chicken and they had always taken it on picnics. On Sunday morning, she planned to bake a chocolate pound cake – another of her boy’s favorites.

“It seems like the more I do the better I feel. Nobody could have sold that idea to me even a month ago. At my doctor’s appointment this week, I’m going to ask him if I can cut back on the antidepressant pills. It’s on Friday so you can stay with me. I know he’ll want to talk with you privately. You’ll come in with me, won’t you?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for anything. I am just amazed at how well you are doing. I can only imagine the effort it has taken.”

“There’s been a new sort of strength inside me ever since I found out about your *mission*, I think you called it. I trust it’s going well.”

“So, well, it is now on automatic pilot. We just need to mostly sit back and watch things unfold. I only hope we haven’t missed anything.”

“I finished *my* new puzzle. This week why don’t you pick out a *book* for me as well as a puzzle? I’m having trouble

filling my time – if you can believe that. Those day-time TV shows I've been watching all these years are nothing but crap – pardon my French.”

Jake smiled, so pleased to see her spunk returning.

“I get worried you are wearing yourself out, Ma.”

“Believe me, Jake, if anybody knows how to rest it's me. Been practicing that for most of your life. I feel so bad about that.”

“I also feel bad about that, but I'm fairly sure our reasons are quite different.”

She pulled him close to her side and leaned her head against his.

“I'm amazed you're all grown up. I remember the first time you didn't have to stand on a chair to hold our heads together like this – eighth grade I think – and look at you now; you have to lean down.”

“Have you eaten?” he asked.

“Yes and took both my pills. You had breakfast?”

“Yeah. At Cynthia's. She works at the hospital this morning.”

His mother nodded.

“Oh, let me see your fingers – the ones you scraped. How they doing?”

“Virtually healed. I remember you used to say that my cuts healed fast because I inherited that from you. Thank you for that, in case I have not yet said it.”

“You are welcome. Wish I could have given you so much more, you know.”

“Ma.” His tone became serious, almost stern. “Let's get one thing straight. *You gave me life*. There is no greater gift than that. I love being alive – being a person – breathing, growing, learning. I am not going to squander a single day of this life you have provided for me.”

His mother began to cry and turned to embrace him. She laid her head on his shoulder and they stood there together for a long time. He patted her back recognizing it was not a time for words. It was a time for understanding and appreciation and love. He fully understood that was a significant moment in their lives and he would not rush it.

* * *

It was all that a picnic should have been, with good food, good conversation, wonder-filled memories and cheek moistening laughter. His mother always enjoyed it when Cynthia would ask questions about how Jake had been as a little boy. Cynthia would share her secrets about Jake clearly crafted to embarrass him. He always took that in good humor. His mother had encouraged him to always be *who he was* and nobody else. Those secrets were part of who he was so there was no awkwardness about them. He enjoyed hearing his mother and Cynthia talk girl stuff together.

He was reminded again of the four things he loved the most in the entire universe: his mother, his wife to be, himself, and life. He figured that had the makings for a grand future.

* * *

Jerry was arrested and charged on the last day of June. His trial began on August 30th. He was convicted on all counts on September 15th.

Adam was arrested and charged on September 20th. His trial began on October 14th. He was convicted on all charges on November 5th.

Kyle was arrested and charged on November 10th. The authorities had found Freddie's ring in his jewelry box – rich, perhaps; savvy, not! His trial began on December 1st. He was convicted on all charges on December 21st.

Jake and Cynthia postponed sending the packet on Ethan until after New Year's Day. They were still dissatisfied with the case they had against him. Larry had shared their information – anonymously – with a friend who was a criminal lawyer. He thought it was sufficient for a conviction, but that it would probably only result in a sentence of between four to seven years.

As much as Jake wanted the man put away forever, he did not want him to be treated more severely than the evidence warranted. After all, his whole mission had been based on achieving *justice* in its highest sense.

As they lay in bed together on the night of Kyle's conviction, Jake shared a quandary with Cynthia.

"I thought with each conviction I would sense some demonstrable positive feeling – some life changing or life defining moment – some sort of deep down satisfaction.

That's not the way it has been. Oh, there's been a nebulous feeling of accomplishment, but I can't determine if what I feel represents a happy little part of me coming to life or a sad little part of me dying. I had just assumed it would be the first of those. I believe it is more a sickening feeling than one representing any degree of elation. It is unnerving to have to live with results about which I have no definitive judgment.

"I had not anticipated anything like that. I can tell that Ma feels good about how it is going – she has said as much and thanked me for pursuing it. Maybe with time it will become clearer to me."

"You're not unhappy we pursued it are you?"

"Oh, no. Not at all. My philosophy is that if a guy proves he's beyond rehabilitation, the courts should give him the shaft – I may state that slightly differently in my memoirs. Maybe once the Ethan case gets over and I have the big picture to examine I'll be able to get my head around it better."

"I don't think it's your head that is the basis for the puzzlement," Cynthia said. "I think it's your heart – your emotional center. If it were something your brain could work out it would have already been solved to your complete satisfaction. Emotions are another matter. Logic and common sense just muddies the waters, there."

"You are so wise. Let's get married and make a baby."

"You know that would not be good for the baby or for us. Two years, by definition, is not an eternity. It will slip by fast."

"See. There you go again being wise. I love you so much."

"And *you* know I love you. You've done a good thing here. You'll get it all settled into place eventually. That's what you've always done. Your assignment for this week is to think back on your life and see what I mean by that."

"Yes teacher."

* * *

In the middle of the night, they were awakened by sirens.

"Those are both police and fire sirens," Jake said. "I hope it's nothing too serious."

They let it go and rearranged themselves into that

middle-of-the-night sort of re-comforting most folks seek and were soon back asleep.

The next morning, they dressed and went down to breakfast. Ann had the small TV on in the kitchen – a rare occurrence in that conversation-based family.

“What’s up,” Jake asked.

“There was apparently a shooting here in Rossville in the middle of the night.”

“We heard the sirens. Anybody we know?”

Larry entered the kitchen from the living room where he’d also been watching.

“I’m afraid it’s two ‘anybodys’ and we do know them, kids. The local channel is reporting that Judge Madison was shot and his house set on fire. He’s just holding onto life at the hospital.”

“Goodness! They catch the guy?” Cynthia asked.

“The police arrested Ethan Montgomery at the scene. He was reportedly drunk as a goose. Between threatening to kill the police and firefighters, and cursing at our citizens in general, he spilled the beans on how the judge had been going off script for decades – that Wilbur had paid him lots of money over the years to smooth things over for the family – even offering examples of long suspected arrangements. He made no secret that he had been out to even the score over the judge’s recent judgments regarding his brothers.

“My best assessment of things is that Ethan will certainly be convicted of several accounts of attempted murder. The judge’s wife and son were also severely injured in the fire. And, when the dust settles, Wilbur will do many years for tampering with the courts.”

Jake sighed:

“It seems Ethan took care of putting himself away for us, and relieved us of a huge decision about how to handle Judge Madison after all the years he has been disrespecting the court system. Don’t get me wrong, I am not happy with how things worked out, but the fact is it takes huge responsibilities off our shoulders.”

* * *

Judge Madison had left an ‘open only in the case of my death’ envelope, which he instructed his attorney to hand over

when he realized his death might be imminent. In it he apparently listed nearly 100 misapplications of justice, paid for by Wilbur Montgomery. Apparently, the judge had some sense of decency after all. Wilbur would never see the light of day again.

When Olivia had married Wilbur, he insisted on a prenuptial agreement. Olivia had seen that it included clauses that also offered her protection, notably, that if Wilbur became unable to run the company for whatever reason, it became hers to do with as *she pleased* and that at such a time he would grant her an immediate and uncontested divorce. *She pleased* to sell it for about a gazillion dollars.

Newlyweds, Grandma Olivia and Grampa Benny were last seen sailing off to the islands of the Caribbean to learn about tropical plants and experience all the things that could be done in hammocks made for two.

The Owens family, owners of the railroad, had, years before set aside and invested a sizeable sum to reward the person having information that led to the arrest and conviction of the person responsible for the deaths in the train wreck. Over the years, it had grown considerably. Cynthia's father became the financial manager of that sum for Jake – they figured they might be able to struggle along on \$500,000 for a few years. And then there was the additional fact that Jake would eventually become the sole heir of Olivia and Benny. Still, they continued with their education. Pursuing a life of non-productive ease held no appeal for either of them. Wedding bells were set for mid-august.

Out of the 'blue', Ethel received news of a trust fund, payable to her from an unspecified distant relative. '*Distant*, as in hunky and ungirlish,' she said to herself. Out of respect for the 'youngster's' clear wishes, she would never bring it up although cheesecakes became more frequent, and from then on she was known to supply the ice cream as well as the warm chocolate cake.

Without a doubt, for Jake, the best outcome was his mother's renewed vigor and commitment to living. It was both humorous and heartening to Jake that she began making frequent excuses to go to the bank – always waiting until Dan Jackson could wait on her. Just possibly, in addition to a new

Grandpa and Grandma, there might be a new daddy in his future. He couldn't stop smiling.

The end

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