

*Suddenly alone in the
Zuch struggles to build a*

Replacement Kid
David Drake



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(updated edition)

**A novel for ten to fourteen-year olds
(and adults who enjoy reading about them!)**

By
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CHAPTER ONE

When a late November breeze chances to blow gently south from Carlton through the hollows and across the meadows, the chiming of each passing hour from the steeple atop the ancient, gray stone, Community Church can be heard, if only faintly, as far into the country as the equally ancient, gray stone, County Home. It was just such an evening as the bell dutifully tolled nine o'clock.

Old Rob, as the children at the orphanage called its white-bearded handyman, looked out through the uncurtained, time yellowed window of his long-time, fully sufficient and ever comfortable attic room. A sprinkling of snowflakes swirled playfully, softly filtering the moonlight. Their free-spirited dance impishly ignored the slow, deliberate, totally predictable cadence of the distant bell and seemed relieved when, at last, its intrusion into the peaceful, cold, crisp night fell silent. The old gentleman smiled in recognition that they and he had much in common.

Rob's lingering amusement at the comically cavorting flakes was interrupted by the unexpected appearance of distant headlights winding their way toward the home from the North. That cracked and pitted, one lane blacktop slab was seldom traveled, even in broad daylight, as it served only the orphanage and a small farm a mile or so further South.

It could mean only one thing: a new resident was about to arrive. What a terrible time of day for a youngster to be plunked down in such a strange, forbidding place, Rob thought to himself, remembering for a moment his own identical experience of some sixty-five years earlier. On second

thought, he acknowledged to himself that there was probably no good time of day for such an event. He continued to watch, looking down through the growing curtain of snow as his own old fears and anxieties welled up in the pit of his stomach, attuning him to those of the child in the approaching vehicle.

Although helping with the admission of new residents would not be found in his job description - recently revised in meticulous fashion by Miss Fitz, the new Administer - Rob made it his responsibility to be available at such times in case he could be of help. It wasn't that he was pushy or that he felt the need to stick his nose into things that were none of his business. He was just quietly helpful and compassionate by nature - two traits he and the children had yet to encounter in the recently arrived Miss Fitz.

The car slowed and a single, blinking, amber light signaled its imminent turn onto the expansive circular drive in front of the large, old, three-story building. To Rob's surprise it was a shiny, white Sheriff's car rather than the customary older model sedan driven by Mrs. Elliott, the county's juvenile caseworker. His question about the unusual change in routine had hardly been formulated before it was answered.

Two burly deputies emerged. One of them opened the back door of the car - the one facing the building - and motioned emphatically with his arm for its occupant to step out. No one appeared. He bent down, apparently saying something to the youngster inside. Still, no one appeared.

He shook his finger in exasperation. The opening remained vacant. Rob found himself smiling and rooting for the kid. With his interest mounting, he raised the window a crack hoping to hear what was being said.

The larger of the two men then stooped inside. With no small amount of effort, he began to physically remove a struggling young man who was by then screaming profanities in new and creative combinations Rob was quite sure he had never heard before. The boy appeared to be eleven or twelve, although through his wild gyrations it was difficult to be certain. If accurate, it would make him older by several years than any of the current residents.

The extraction was in no way an easy one. The lad

clung to the seat, then to the doorframe and, in a final gesture of resistance, flailed his forearms against the deputy's chest. Finally, with one man securely attached to each armpit, the boy was air-lifted, kicking and screaming, up the wide, time worn, stone-slab steps to the front door, making - as Miss Fitz would later enter into his file - "A most unruly spectacle of himself."

Rob was at once tickled and saddened: tickled to see such spunk and willingness to stick up for what the lad had obviously felt were his rights; and saddened at the realization that no better place could be found for him than the orphanage. Rob made his way down the three flights of stairs, which opened into the large, stark, dark wood paneled entry hall. Nearing the bottom, he slowed his pace and entered the scene casually, as if coming upon it unexpectedly.

For an instant, his eyes met those of Miss Fitz, whose gaze reflected the distinct feeling that whatever she was about to do would most certainly meet with the old man's disapproval. More than that, a toss of her head signaled she didn't care. Through his terror, the boy witnessed the interchange and looked back over his shoulder at the old man with the paunchy belly and the full white beard. He winked at the lad. Miss Fitz tightened her lips and cocked her head in silent but obvious disapproval, moving to block the boy's gaze as she ushered the trio into her office.

Rob would not listen at the door. He was resigned to the fact that whatever she was saying was entirely inappropriate and he didn't want to have any specifics to awaken his anger and to force themselves into discomforting reruns as he would attempt to drift off to sleep later on. There would be plenty of time to hear all the details the next day. Besides, he feared some of the younger children might have been awakened by the ruckus, so he quietly made his way to their hall on the second floor to calm any fears the affair might have brought on.

In her office, Miss Fitz, in her navy blue, tailored, suit, positioned herself standing, arms folded, behind her huge, neatly arranged, mahogany desk. She removed her gold-framed half-rim glasses and let them dangle from the black cord to which they were attached around her neck. Arms on

his shoulders, the deputies squashed the boy into the brown leather, wingback chair facing her. The instant of reassurance that had been telegraphed to him through Rob's wink allowed him to settle into the chair and ready himself for the next unwelcome volley in his rapidly deteriorating evening.

"Your name?" Miss Fitz asked.

"Zach," he replied, looking at the floor.

"You will look at me when I speak to you, Zachary!" she snapped.

He took her at her word and, flipping his long, sandy hair out of his eyes, he looked daggers into her pale, stern face. "My name ain't Zachary. You deaf or something. I said it was Zach."

"Insolence will only make your stay here more difficult," she said, beginning to pace. Her folded arms began to grab at each other displaying her growing displeasure.

Zach had no idea what the word 'insolence' meant but he did understand the tone of her voice. Once again, he was under the thumb of a rule spewing, kid hating, holier than thou, old maid. It was the last thing he wanted and, it seemed to him, the last thing he needed. How could a system run by supposedly intelligent adults, make so little sense?

For the most part, the rest of that initial conversation - an affected monologue perhaps describes it more accurately - moved on without Zach's mental participation. He was deep into his own thoughts about the loss of his mother in a hit and run accident a few months earlier and the four foster home placements which he had methodically, and to his way of thinking, ingeniously destroyed since then. That brought a smile to his heart if not to his face. He wasn't totally sure what he had been trying to accomplish for the long run but felt quite certain this was not it. The inner smile faded.

Even through his own intense preoccupation, this cold woman's lack of compassion, nasal monotone and power-protecting demeanor did register just enough to be cataloged into his growing picture of who she was.

He was far more interested in feeling out the white-haired old guy on the stairs. He was too old to be an orphan and Miss Fitz had not seemed to treat him with the respect due an employee. Just how did he fit into things around

there?

Securing the boy's shoulder as he shrugged, promising to behave himself, the deputies left and Zach followed Miss Fitz to his new room on the third floor. It was just off the staircase and unbeknown to him at that moment, directly under the one Rob occupied in the attic.

"This will be your room. We don't allow you to lock the door. The boy's bathroom is at the end of the hall. You'll find a bathtub and showers there. I expect you to bathe daily. We don't allow dawdling in there. Do your business and get out. There aren't any other older boy's living here now so you have the whole corridor to yourself. Don't take advantage of that situation. Your alarm clock is on the nightstand beside the bed. Do you know how to set one?"

Not waiting for an answer, she plunged on.

"Yes, I suppose at your age you do. Breakfast is at seven am on weekdays and eight am Saturday and Sunday. The school bus stops at eight. Don't be late. Don't open the window. It lets out too much heat on a cold night like this. Heat is money around here. There are pajamas that should fit you in the bottom drawer of the dresser and extra blankets in the top of the closet."

With one final glance around the room, her gaze came to rest on Zach.

"Behave yourself and you'll fit in just fine around here. Make trouble and you'll regret it, Mister."

She turned and left the room.

Hesitating only a moment, Zach stepped into the hall and leveled one final salvo after her. "I sleep naked!"

At that, her face broke into what was, for her, a full-blown smile. Zach, of course, had no way of knowing that, as he watched her wind her way down the shadowy, unfamiliar stair well.

"Do this. Don't do that," he said under his breath as he slammed the door behind him. His first two acts would have been quite predictable to Rob, had he heard the earlier conversation. With dramatic flair, Zach clicked the lock on the door and opened the window as wide as possible.

It wasn't enough. His rage, which had been under control for most of an hour at that point, burst onto the room

with a ferocity that, later, would amaze even Zach, himself. He smashed the window with a chair. He kicked the bottom panels out of the door. He swung the pillow at the light hanging from the ceiling and in a rain of falling glass, his room went dark.

Zach flung himself onto the bed and began sobbing.

As he was returning to his own room, Rob heard the sounds of crashing glass and splintering wood. He detoured onto the third floor and stood quietly in the hall outside Zach's room. He heard the boy crying. He saw the damaged door. He felt the lad's pain.

He knocked lightly on the door, repeating it several times before Zach growled at the intruder. "Get the hell out of my hall, Fitzy, and stay the hell out of my life. You're ruining it, you know! And don't come in. I'm naked, remember!"

Rob cleared his throat and responded.

"The last time I looked I was not Miss Fitz and I have no intention of trying to ruin your life. As to your nakedness, I could care less."

The sobbing stopped abruptly. Rob heard the sound of glass crackling under shoe leather, signaling Zach's approach. Presently a tear-streaked face, topped by a mop of unkempt, sandy hair, peered up at him from one of the recently opened, splintered holes in the lower section of the door.

"So?" Rob said, spreading his arms as if to demonstrate he carried no weapons. "Am I right? Do I look like Miss Fitz?"

"You're the old guy on the stairs," came Zach's confirmation that Rob was indeed not who he had been expecting.

"What do you want?" Zach asked, attempting to act oblivious to any problem.

"I always like to say hi to new kids when they arrive. Any problem with that?"

Ignoring Rob's answer, Zach asked, "What do you do around here, anyway?"

"I guess you could call me the handyman. I fix things, take care of the yard, drive the van, things like that."

The face disappeared and the lock clicked, but the door remained unopened. Rob waited.

"Door's open," came Zach's response after a long moment.

"I don't enter anyone's room unless I'm invited," Rob explained.

"I said it was open."

"But you didn't ask me in," Rob said, reinforcing his previous statement.

The tarnished brass knob turned slowly and the door opened a crack. Rob was given a long once over - head to toe and back again.

"I guess it's okay - since you work here - but don't try pulling any funny stuff."

Those few words spoke a volume about the young man's all too difficult life.

"Looks like you need some light in here. There should be a lamp on the table beside the closet."

Rob felt his way through the darkened room, now faintly lit from the hall, and clicked on a blaze of light from the tall table lamp. Shielding his eyes with his right hand, he looked around the room. Zach was sitting cross-legged on the bed.

"I suspect that you're going to be a might cold in here tonight, seeing as the window seems to have got broken somehow. Maybe you'd be more comfortable on the couch up in my room."

"I'll be just fine here and it didn't get broken somehow - I broke it with that chair."

"I see. Well, it's your decision, of course, but I was thinking that it won't just be the cold."

"No?"

"No, with the door panels out like that you won't have any real privacy in here either, will you?"

"I said I'll be fine," Zach reiterated as he scrunched himself into a far corner of his bed, covering his lap with the pillow and folding his arms in defiance.

A growing swirl of snowflakes persisted in their endeavor to make their way into the room and onto the bed beside him.

"Well, like I said, it's up to you. By the way, my name is Rob," he added as he moved gently toward the boy, his hand extended in friendship. Taken by surprise, Zach somewhat

awkwardly clasped the man's hand and shook it, adding, "I'm Zach."

Rob surmised that may well have been the first time the boy had ever been offered a hand shake. Zach quickly withdrew his arm, a bewildered look growing on his face. What gave with this guy, anyway? He's just destroyed the room and the man - the handyman, no less - hadn't even mentioned it.

Rob moved to the door, turning before leaving the room and pointing up the stair- case.

"My place is the green door at the top of the stairs. I'll leave the door open and a light on just in case you change your mind. I'll see that there's a blanket on the couch. Oh, something else."

"What's that?"

"Remember not to walk around this room in your bare feet until you get that shattered bulb cleaned up. I'd hate to see you get hurt. Have a good night."

Upon entering his own room, Rob took a blanket from the closet and placed it on the arm of the couch. He clicked a reading lamp onto its lowest setting, turned off the ceiling light and made ready for bed. The next day promised to be an interesting one.

Rob was flirting with that twilight zone between wakefulness and sleep when he was suddenly roused by the not unanticipated opening of his hall door. Remaining quiet he listened for the telltale sounds of a blanket being shaken open and a small body sinking its way into the creaky old, inner-spring sofa. They each fell asleep wondering what the future held for their relationship.

CHAPTER TWO

The next morning, as was his custom, Rob awoke with the birds. He was amused and touched as he surveyed the still sleeping figure on his sofa. At once, it defined both angelic and fetal position. The blanket had long since been lost to the cold, drafty floor. Rob gathered it up and lovingly draped it over his young visitor, figuring he could well use another thirty minutes of peace before having to re-awaken to the stark reality of his frightening new life. It appeared that Zach had at least been truthful about one thing - his sleeping attire!

As Rob was attempting to coerce one last wayward whisk of his full white beard to flatten itself against his tanned, old, leathery face, he heard Zach begin to stir.

"Morning, Pal," Rob called softly through the door of his small but private bathroom.

"I'm not your pal, Old Man, and I didn't come up here 'cause I was scared, neither."

"I figured it was probably just because it got so chilly down there," Rob replied, trying to temper the lad's defensive start to the day.

"Just so you understand," Zach added, only a little less defiant in his manner.

By the time Rob entered the living room, Zach was gone - blanket and all. Apparently, his immodest rebellion of the previous night had mellowed with the revealing light of day. Rob chuckled to himself.

It was Saturday morning so breakfast wasn't served

until eight o'clock. As Rob entered the dining room the children rushed to greet him. Those lucky enough to have arrived first got to actually hug and be hugged. The rest layered themselves around the old man like bees, swarming around their queen.

In due time, each child had received a lingering one on one greeting from the ever-tender, soft-spoken old gentleman and they went back to their seats around the table. They were permanent seat assignments now, newly charted by Miss Fitz to bring, as she had said, "Order out of the chaos she found most everywhere."

Zach was nowhere to be seen. Either he had missed the word about breakfast time or he had decided not to bless the group with his presence. Perhaps he preferred to be coaxed. Perhaps he was just plain scared. Rob assumed it might have been a blend of all those things.

Presently Miss Fitz arrived, collar uncharacteristically askew and glasses in hand, their broken black cord flopping along in her fist. Rob sensed a physical encounter with Zach but waited to hear it from her. Moving her shoulders front to back and twisting her head from side to side, she was obviously trying to regain her composure. She motioned Rob to her side and, in hushed, exasperated tones, asked him to (no, told him to - Miss Fitz never asked), "Go get that young monster the authorities visited upon me last night."

Rob strained to mold a serious expression as his heart exploded in the chuckle of all chuckles. He excused himself, suggesting that the rest go ahead and fill their plates while he went to see what was keeping the new boy.

Perhaps he should have predicted it. At least it was of no surprise to find that Zach had barricaded himself in his room. The back of his dresser showed through the missing door panels.

'The boy sure has spirit. I'll give him that,' Rob thought to himself.

Rob valued spirit in a new arrival. He realized that children without it gave up and allowed themselves to become passive, often depressed pawns of the system. Miss Fitz, on the other hand, believed the first task of the orphanage staff was to break a child's spirit so he would begin fitting himself

into the routine and behaving himself properly.

Rob knocked gently but firmly on the door.

"Go away! I hate you and I hate this place. I just want to go home."

"I didn't realize you had a home to go to, Zach. I'll sure try to help you get back there just as soon as possible," Rob replied.

Surprised to hear Rob's voice, Zach was moved to speak again.

"I thought you was Old Lady Fitzenheimer."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Rob said. "It's just me - Old man Robenheimer."

Silence set in on both sides of the door. Rob smiled as he waited patiently. Zach spoke first, apparently less comfortable with being left alone than he had indicated.

Well, I don't really have no home to go to no more."

"But I used to," he added forcefully, as if to seize whatever bit of status or security that former state of affairs might bring to the table.

Rob chose not to respond. Presently Zach shared a little more.

"Mom and me had it pretty good together, ya know, until that damn kid ran her down with his car."

"I'm sorry, Zach. I didn't know the circumstance that brought you to us."

"You sure don't talk like any frickin' janitor I ever knew before."

"I suppose not," Rob said. "You got me there. Pretty sharp ears on that head of yours. I'll explain later, if you want."

Again, things fell silent. After a few tenuous starts and stops, the dresser slowly began moving to one side. Zach's face appeared through the opening in the bottom of the door.

"So, what you want, Old Man?" came Zach's question.

"I noticed you weren't at breakfast and I figured maybe we hadn't made it clear to you that it was at eight o'clock on Saturdays."

"Ain't hungry."

"I see. Well I am, so unless you need something I guess I'll be on my way back to the dining room."

Rob turned and began moving toward the stairs.

"Hey, Old Man!"

Rob turned back toward the door. It opened. Zach was standing there with the rumpled blanket held against his chest and draped to the floor.

"This is yours."

"You're welcome," Rob said, in an attempt to suggest something had been missing from Zach's statement. Once again, he turned and started toward the stair well.

"Oh, yeah. Thank you," Zach stammered. "Don't ya want it back?"

Rob turned and walked back toward the door.

"Yes, I'll need to have it back. Thanks for asking. How about I help you fold it?"

Not waiting for an answer, Rob reached out, fumbling to locate two edges of one side. Shaking the blanket a bit, he brought the corners together and nodded for Zach to do the same. Zach followed suite, glancing several times at Rob's end for guidance. Then Rob folded it over - bottom to top. Zach did the same. In seconds, they had it folded into a rather neat eighteen-inch square. It remained resting on Zach's outstretched arms.

"Looks good," Rob said, surveying their joint accomplishment. "Folding things like that is one thing my wife and I were never able to do together. I'd go one way and she'd go the other."

He chuckled.

"Where is she? You divorced?"

"No, she died a few years ago."

"Sorry."

"Thank you, Zach. Life has to go on, you know."

Uncomfortable with the personal turn in the conversation, Zach held out the blanket, as if asking Rob to take it.

"Would you mind running it up to my sofa for me. I think your strong young legs have a lot more spring in them this early in the day than mine do."

Zach looked puzzled. Nevertheless, he accepted the proposition and, as if to prove the old man right, bounded up the stairs two at a time, reappearing a moment later, the

faintest hint of a smile creeping onto his face.

"Thanks a lot, Zach. Watching you dart up the stairs that way made me even hungrier. Let's eat."

Rob turned for a final time toward the staircase, never looking back. As he descended the stairs, he could detect no activity behind him. 'If the lad would rather starve than eat I suppose that's his choice,' he thought.

By the time Rob paused just outside the dining room door, he felt the warmth of Zach's presence only inches behind. Rob leaned his head to the side and addressed the boy without ever looking at him directly.

"I'll fill my plate first. You do what I do and we'll get you through this first meal just fine. Oh, one more thing. The other kids are expecting me to introduce you to them. It won't take but a second and all you have to do is nod or wave or something like that. Whatever you do, don't give them the finger or Fitzenheimer will hang you over her desk as a trophy."

It was the unexpected duet of muffled giggles - bass and soprano - coming from the hall that tipped off the kids to Rob and Zach's upcoming entrance. Maudie, the cook, bustled to her station behind the counter, readying what was left of the food for the late arrivals.

"Big breath," Rob suggested as they stepped through the door.

"Maudie, kids, I'd like you to meet our newest family member. This is Zach."

"Hi, Zach!" came the well-practiced, sing-songy response. The girls giggled behind their cupped hands. The boys returned to stuffing their mouths.

"Hi kids, Maudie," Zach replied, mimicking Rob's lead and nodding slightly toward each as he spoke. For a split-second, his eyes met those of Miss Fitz. His face flushed. She nodded politely. He responded in kind, not at all sure why he had done it.

Maudie took over the conversation as she immediately got down to brass tacks (as was her style). Ignoring Rob, she addressed Zach.

"I wasn't sure what you'd want so I made extra of everything - oatmeal, toast, pancakes, hash browns and

scrambled eggs. If you'd rather have your eggs some other way, I'll be glad to fix 'em for you. You bein' the biggest guy here I figured you'd have an appetite to match. Don't disappoint me, now."

Zach glanced up at Rob, the first full-faced grin they had exchanged.

"Well, tell her what you want Pally. When Maudie speaks, she means business."

He shrugged his shoulders as if a bit embarrassed by the attention.

"Some of everything, I guess."

"Now that's what I like to hear," came Maudie's enthusiastic response.

"Leave some for the Old Man," Rob joked.

Zach looked up at him. His eyes said, "I'm sorry about that 'Old Man' stuff." Rob winked down at him. They fully understood each other.

Miss Fitz eyed the pair as they finished their meal. It was obvious to her that Rob had a way with the kids that she could never have. Although she would not openly admit it was a good thing, deep down she harbored a growing jealousy of it and too often, that translated itself into resentment.

With breakfast over, Miss Fitz asked, "Whose turn is it to help with the dishes this morning?"

A predictable group groan went up from the young assemblage. Zach looked at Rob. Rob winked and nodded.

"Me and Rob, we'll do 'em this morning - if that's ok?" Zach announced, apparently attaching some special importance to it all.

Before Miss Fitz had time to respond, the kids, whooping and hollering, made a beeline for the closest exit. Reluctantly giving in to the chaos of the moment, Miss Fitz put down the duty roster and nodded her silent approval toward Zach. Flashing an unexplainable look of disapproval at Rob, she turned on a dime and made her way toward the door.

She and Rob both knew that such situations were - well, she would say 'his fault,' and he would say, 'largely due to his positive influence.' Rob fully believed kids should have every opportunity just to be kids. Miss Fitz appeared to abhor the idea. Although there was little chance that the two of them

would ever see eye to eye on the issue, they each did each understand the other's position.

"That was another sumptuous repast, Maudie," Rob told her, bending down to meet her tittering, squat figure and planting a peck squarely on her ever-reddening cheek.

"Oh, Mr. Rob. You do go on," she said with a coy wave of her stubby hands.

Then, turning to Zach, she explained in a most confidential manner as if Rob were not within easy earshot.

"Sometimes Mr. Rob's edgytation gets in the way of his tongue. You just have to understand he means well."

Quieting his tone to match hers, Zach leaned close and agreed.

"I already noticed that. Do you think we can help him get over it?"

"I heard that, you two rapsCALLIONS - and I'll be glad to provide you with a dictionary if you'd like to look up that one."

Conversation was never hard to come by when Maudie was around and so it was as they gathered, scraped, washed and dried their way through sixteen sets of egg-caked, syrup sticky, breakfast dishes. Rob took a backseat and let Maudie lead the way. She was genuine in every sense of the word and would be a good cornerstone for Zach in his new surroundings.

With the dishes stacked back on the shelves and the dishcloths hung to dry beside the old, black cook stove, Zach said, "Well, I guess that's it, huh?"

"Well, that's it if you're of a mind to leave without sweeping the floor," came Maudie's reply, as she cheerfully thrust a broom in the lad's direction.

He grinned from ear-to-ear, shaking his head as his eyes caught Rob's. Playfully, he passed it on to Rob. Equally as playfully, Maudie settled another one into his only momentarily empty hand. The guys winked at each other and began to work sweeping up the crumbs and chunks of bread crust that littered the floor around the edge of the huge oval table.

Finished at last, Zach asked Maudie what was on the menu for lunch.

"I thought you weren't hungry," Rob said, chiding the

boy.

"Us rapsCALLIONS is always up to another scrumptious repast," came his exaggerated, mischievous response.

Rob was impressed and it showed on his face, much to the half-hidden delight of the boy. Not only had he remembered the new and plainly foreign terms, but he had - considerably later - all quite intentionally used them correctly. The lad was full of surprises. Rob had to wonder if he had crossed paths with a diamond in the rough.

"So, what goes on around this dump on Saturdays?" Zach asked as he followed Rob out into the hall.

"If I remember correctly, there's still the matter of a broken window, a busted door and a smashed light fixture that needs your undivided attention," Rob replied, walking on ahead as if it were all up to Zach.

"I don't know how to fix none of that stuff. I thought that was your job."

"I take care of things that break under normal wear and tear. I doubt if that disaster in your room would qualify as normal wear and tear, do you?"

"I don't have no tools."

"I'll get you some."

"I don't have no window glass."

"I'll show where I keep it down in the basement."

"What about the light and the door. Honest, Rob, I don't know how to fix none of that stuff."

"It seems you're up a creek without a paddle, then. When that happens, what does the fisherman have to do next?"

"Find a paddle, I guess."

"Or in your case?"

Zach nodded and hung his head for just a moment.

"Learn how to fix all that stuff, I guess."

Rob kept walking toward the stairs.

"So?" Came Zach's response to it all.

"So, what?"

"So, you gonna help me learn or what?"

"I guess I didn't hear you ask. Did I miss that?"

"Ok! Ok!! Will you show me how to do it?"

Silence.

"Please!!!"

"Sure. I'll be glad to. You ever use tools before?"

"I just don't get you, Old - er - Rob."

"both you and Miss Fitzenheimer," Rob said with a wink. "Bet you never would have thought you and she could have so much in common."

That momentarily broke Zach's tortured expression even if it didn't rate a full-blown smile.

"Now, like I asked. You ever use tools before?"

"Some. Me and my friend built a go cart last summer."

"Sounds promising," Rob said. "I'll tell you what. I have to take care of a couple of things right now, so how about you go clean up the mess in your room. Then we'll get to work. There are brooms, dustpans and a vacuum cleaner in the hall closet beside the bathroom. When you're finished, meet me in the basement. My workshop is down there. Just follow the stairs until you run out of them. You can't miss it."

Zach began at the broom closet, jerking the door open, banging its contents around noisily and then slamming the door after making his selections. He got some pleasure from driving the vacuum cleaner down the hall as if it were an Indy car.

Upon opening his door, the full extent of the problem rushed upon him. There was glass everywhere - light bulb glass, glass from the ceiling fixture and splinters from the windowpane. His bed was littered with it. The desktop and chair were covered. It looked hopeless.

Just as he was about to give into the urge to forget the whole thing, he heard the nasal tones of Miss Fitz behind him in the doorway.

"Glad to see you're getting after this mess, Zach. Since you didn't bring much with you last night, I thought a young man your age would probably be missing his radio. I found this one in the storeroom and figured you might as well put it to good use. I'll have Rob take you into Carlton after you get your room in order and get you some clothes. You're too big for anything we have left around here."

She handed him the radio and squeezed out the merest of smiles. She turned and left the room.

If Zach had been baffled by Rob's behavior, he was

stupefied by hers. He thought he had it all figured out. Rob was supposed to be the easy touch and Fitz the hard nose. The last ten minutes had sure blown that theory to kingdom come.

The prospect of new clothes and the strains of his own familiar music soon had his spirits raised and most of the glass swept, vacuumed, brushed and gingerly handpicked from every surface in the room. He even moved his bed from in front of the window and removed the rest of the glass from the frame. He had just positioned himself on the floor in front of his door to begin removing the splintered paneling when Rob appeared.

"I thought you'd dug a hole and pulled it in after you," Rob said, giving the room a once over and a long steady nod of approval.

"What ya mean?" Zach asked, getting to his feet.

"You been up here over an hour, Zach."

"An hour? It hardly seems like it's been anytime at all."

"You've done a mighty fine job in here. Maybe we can get you on as a maid at the Pink Elephant Motel in town."

Zach threw a half-hearted punch at Rob, grazing his shoulder. That led to a few moments of playful sparring, each taking turns landing gentle blows as if choreographed to end in a draw. Under different circumstances, it could have ended in a hug, but it didn't. It was, however, the first time the boy had wanted - or at least sought out - physical contact. Rob took that as a sign of progress.

"I brought up the window pane. It's just outside in the hall. Can you bring it in? I'm sure I don't need to remind you that it is cutting sharp around the edges."

"This sucker is heavy, Dude," came Zach's assessment a moment later. "I was looking at the window. Seems to me you're gonna have to climb up a ladder and put it in from the outside. See the lip, here," Zach said, pointing to the window. "The glass has to go on the outside, don't it?"

"That was a good observation but can you just see me, a sixty-nine-year-old "Dude" climbing two and a half stories up a ladder carrying a pane of glass?"

Zach smiled at the mental picture Rob had just painted.

"I see what you mean, but I ain't goin' up no ladder. I'll

tell you that for darn sure."

"I'll share one of my greatest handyman secrets with you. Here's how we do this. We'll carefully remove this molding here on the inside. Then we can bring the whole wooden window inside and put the new glass in it. Once that's done we simple place it back into the frame and tack back the molding."

"Pretty sharp, Old er Rob. What DO I call you, anyway? It seems like I should be calling you Mr. Somebody."

"My name is Rob. Lots of the kids like to call me Old Rob or Grampa Rob. Any of those are fine with me. I don't particularly like mister. I wore that one for too many years."

"How about Old Man?"

"Old Man would be fine with me, but if I were you, I wouldn't let Miss Fitz hear you saying it. She'd think it was disrespectful."

"Oh, no! I don't mean it that way. Well, I did sort of mean it that way before, but that was before, well . . ."

His voice trailed off as he saw he was digging himself into a bottomless pit.

"How about sticking to Rob in public and whatever feels comfortable when we're alone? And you? What do you want me to call you - Rapsallion?"

Zach grinned. "I guess just Zach. Mom used to call me Zachy. I asked her not to do that when my friends were around. Now I kind of miss it, you know?"

"Yes, I know how it is to miss something like that. My wife always called me Robby - we had known each other since we were little kids and she just never gave it up."

Before long the window was fixed and re-hung, the door panel had a temporary privacy patch, and a light fixture, borrowed from a nearby, empty room was hanging down from the ceiling. Rob had seen to it that Zach had done virtually all of the work. The boy even seemed to enjoy the activities. He had talented hands and a creative bent that delighted Rob. They weren't a bad team. Who knew what the future might bring?

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CHAPTER THREE

Zach was bounding up the stairs just as Rob was on his way down. "Fitzenheimer - er, Miss Fitz - said you were going to take me to town to get some clothes."

"That's right. We'll go right after lunch. Billy needs shoes so we'll take him along, too."

The idea of an intruder into the relationship between him and the old man triggered a set of strange, frightening feelings for Zach. He had just assumed Rob was his own personal property. The sudden realization that he would have to share him ushered in a new wave of emptiness.

Rob continued.

"Billy thinks you're the best thing to come along out here since apple pie. He's always talking about how he wants to be adopted into a family with a big brother."

Zach's response was slowly deliberate and to the point: "I ain't about to be no little twirp's big brother and I sure as h...heck, ain't gonna adopt him."

Surprisingly, even his emphatic public denial of those possibilities did little to quell the unfamiliar hint of warmth Rob's remark had sparked inside him. Ignoring the disclaimer, Rob made a suggestion.

"We have a half hour or so before lunch. Let's take a look around the place. I'll show you where things are."

It wasn't a part of Zach's plan to stay around long enough to need to know much about the "Chicky Pen" - as the town kids called the home. It was their perverted acronym for the equally terrible official name of the place - County Home for Indigent Children or CHIC in the shorthand of the social

service network. Further consideration, however, held the possibility that such a tour might uncover potential escape routes or places to hide when he got into trouble. He joined in with less reluctance than had been his first inclination. First, they walked the hall on the second floor where the younger kids lived, two or three to each spacious, surprisingly bright and pleasant room.

"There sure are lots of empty rooms down here," Zach observed. "How come each kid don't get his own place like I got?"

"They can have one if they want one," Rob explained. "Nights are a lot less scary around here for little kids if they have others close by."

"I hadn't thought of that."

The fact that Zach was moved to respond at all impressed Rob.

"If you had seen the place four months ago - before Miss Fitz took over - there would have been nearly twice as many kids on this hall," Rob offered as they peeked inside a room full of giggling six year olds playing dress up.

"What happed? Fitzenheimer eat 'em for supper?"

Rob smiled faintly recognizing the attempt at humor.

"No, actually she has been very successful at getting our children placed out in good foster homes and many even adopted."

"Foster homes! There ain't no such a thing as a good foster home. They'd be better off staying right here."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I been in four of 'em since Mom - well, they just ain't no good. Every last one of 'em kicked me out. You should hear what they expect you to do in them places."

"Sorry to hear that. I guess our kids have had lots better luck than you had."

"Probably 'cause they're such cute little twirps, that's why."

Though the fact that his biting review had not produced the sympathy he had hoped for, Rob's message seemed somehow reassuring. He had little time to think about that however, for at that moment a red headed, freckled-faced ball of energy named Billy came speeding down the hall to greet

them. Zach thought he was a dead ringer for the kid in Family Affair reruns. Falling flat on his face no more than five feet in front of them, he quickly picked himself up and, holding out his five-year-old hand toward Zach, introduced himself.

"I'm Billy and you're Zach. And, oh yeah, I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance."

He even sounded like the rerun kid.

Rob watched as Zach shook the lad's hand.

"Yeah. I'm Zach. Rob told me about you, kid."

Billy turned his attention from Zach to plant a full-body hug around Rob's left leg. Looking up at Zach he said, "Old Rob's my very best friend in the whole, wide world. We're best buddies, aren't we, Rob."

It was a mixed message for Zach. If the kid already had a best friend, then Zach might not have to be hooked into a relationship with him. That would be good. But, if it were true, then Rob might not have time for Zach. 'Who cares. I'm not planning to stay around here very long anyway,' he thought to himself.

Rob interrupted Zach's inner monologue.

"You want to tell Billy about our secret mission after lunch?"

"Secret mission?" Zach said, sending a bewildered, brow-furrowed look back toward Rob.

"After lunch, in the truck, you know," Rob prompted.

"Oh, yeah. Yeah! Me and Rob are going into Carlton this afternoon to get me some new clothes and some shoes for you."

"I hate to go shopping, Zach, but since you're going, I will, too."

Billy beamed from ear-to-ear and transferred his strangle hold over to Zach's leg. Zach raised his arms out of the young intruder's way as if to avoid touching him at all costs. Again, he looked in Rob's direction as if to ask, "Now what?"

Rob reached down and ruffled Billy's hair for a few seconds before withdrawing his hand. Zach took his cue and followed suite, though with no little hesitation. Once underway the hair thing didn't seem so bad and he visibly relaxed.

"You scoot along now and get that room of yours

straightened up before our trip," Rob said to Billy, administering a love pat to the youngster's posterior.

Rob and Zach moved on down the hall toward the outside door. As they approached the corner, a familiar, high pitched, enthusiastic voice rang out behind them.

"Thanks for coming to be my big brother, Zach!"

Zach turned and waved a tentative acknowledgement. It was, however, no match for the exuberant gyrations of the elated little boy at the other end of the hall.

"You gotta do something about that little kid, Rob."

"Oh. Like what?"

"Get him off my back."

"Looked to me like he was on your leg."

Rob's feeble attempt at humor was overlooked.

"I mean it. I don't want nothing to do with him - or nobody else for that matter."

"You don't like Billy?"

"It ain't that, yeah know, but just between you and me I ain't planning to stick around here all that long, so it wouldn't be healthy for a that little shrimp to get attached to me. Yeah know what I'm saying? I mean, I'll be gone and then he'll be all alone again. It's bad for a kid when folks run off on 'em. It's really hard."

Rob understood. The degree of compassion Zach demonstrated was a welcome though unexpected surprise.

"We'll work something out. I think it's great that you have the strength, just now, to be concerned about others that way."

Zach was not at all sure what that meant but he kept quiet. Rob opened the door onto the back porch and a silent Zach stepped through first. It was a huge glassed in area spanning the entire backside of the building. Earlier, the morning sun had warmed the stone wall and cement floor, providing continued heat even as the noon hour approached.

"We call that the back forty," Rob said, pointing to the acres of closely trimmed back yard, green again after the morning sun had dispatched the flurries of the night before. That's the gardening shed where I keep the shovels, rakes and the riding lawn mowers - things like that.

Zach perked up at the mention of the riding mowers.

"There at the back is the ball field," Rob pointed. The backstop behind the plate needs a lot of repairs before spring. I love to watch these little kids play ball. I usually get drafted to pitch for both sides. Throwing a ball in a straight line isn't generally one of their better skills.

"I'm a pretty good pitcher," Zach said and then slid again into silence.

"I'll bet you are. You're a well-coordinated young man. I noticed that watching you handle the tools. If you stick around long enough, I'm sure they'll want you to play."

Rob's complement drew a glance of acknowledgement but nothing more. They walked to the south end of the porch.

"That's the orchard - apples, cherries, pears. It hasn't been taken care of very well the past few years. Almost too much to do around here for one old guy, you know."

Rob took a seat at one end of the oversized porch swing. Zach made a move toward the swing, but then chose to sit on the floor, back against the wall facing the windows.

Zach maintained his gaze in the general direction of the orchard.

"You have any kids, Old Man?"

The tone of his voice qualified it as a far more important question than the words themselves implied.

"Yes. I was lucky enough to have one fine son," Rob answered, already uneasy about the inevitable question to follow.

"Where is he now?"

"He . . . passed away a few years ago?"

"Aw. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"Of course, you should have asked. It was a natural question."

"I didn't mean to make you feel bad."

"You didn't. In fact, I suppose I should thank you for having asked."

Zach turned toward Rob.

"Why would you say that?"

Well, when people ask about him, it gives me another chance to remember all the great times he and I had together."

"Don't you miss him?"

"Oh, yes. I miss him very much," came Rob's most serious reply.

"Don't that make you feel bad?"

Zach, I decided long ago that I could choose to have one of two kinds of feelings when I thought about my wife and son. I could dwell on my loss and feel miserable and lonely, or I could think about the wonderful years we had together and feel good."

"And you choosed to think about the good times, huh?"

"That's right."

A long silence followed, broken eventually by Zach's question.

"How do you do that - just think about the good times? Every time I think about what happened to mom, I get mad and start crying and wrecking everything I can get my hands on."

In a moment of bravery, Zach allowed a single tear to make its way down his face. He made no effort to wipe it away, as he looked Rob straight in the eyes and repeated his question. "How do you do that?"

"At first I couldn't. I felt like you, I guess - really mad - mad and sad at the same time. I even thought about suicide a few times."

Zach got to his feet and moved to the other end of the swing, perching, cross-legged, facing Rob. Rob continued: "It all seemed pretty unfair. I'll bet you understand that feeling, too, don't you?"

Zach nodded - more tears beginning to flow.

"I was miserable, partly, I guess, because I thought that's how I was supposed to feel," Rob continued. "Then one day a good friend dropped by my house and laid it on the line with me. 'You're making us all unhappy, you know - you moping around like the end of the World has already happened. If you're going to be content to just grow into a bitter old man, you're going to have to do it alone. Your friends won't help. It's time for you get off your rear end and start building the happy new life you deserve, and that your wife and son would want for you. Look at yourself. Is this the way they'd want to see you?'"

"Wow - he said that to you?"

"He was a good friend. I wouldn't have taken it from just anyone, you know. It was just the kick in the pants I needed."

Zach switched positions, dangling his feet over the front of the swing and making the first feeble attempt at drying his eyes with the back of his hands. Rob offered a hanky. Zach accepted it with a nod. Both understood that meant, "Thanks."

It had been the first of many conversations the two of them would have about the meaning of life and picking up the pieces and getting on with things. For a moment, Zach was moved to ask Rob not to tell anybody he'd been crying, but immediately realized such things would always remain private where Rob was concerned. Rob was someone people trusted. Maybe someday, Zach would trust him, too.

* * *

With a sputter and a jolt and a shudder or two, the old Ford truck groaned to life and was soon rattling its way down the narrow one lane road to Carlton. Billy looked much like a blue cocoon in his head to foot snow suit as he sat between the other two. Rob wore his brown plaid winter jacket and his hat with flopping earflaps. Since a jacket was on the list for Zach, Rob had loaned him one of his own for the trip. Zach swam in it of course, and from the outset, the boy made it clear it would come off before he showed himself in public. The slick material in Billy's outfit rubbing against the slick seat cover led the lad to slip through his seat belt and onto the floor. The first time it was funny and got big laughs. The second-time Billy seemed to help it along. The third-time Zach picked up the wayward passenger and plopped him down on his own lap for safekeeping. It wasn't strictly legal, of course, but Rob surmised the gesture on Zach's part outweighed the law at that moment. That kind of decision was always hard for Rob.

Presently, they pulled into the parking lot behind the Community Church.

"What's this?" Zach asked.

"Yeah, what's this?" Billy repeated, mimicking his new hero.

"The church has a second-hand clothing store in the basement. We'll start here and see what we can find," Rob

explained.

Zach looked disappointed, but didn't say anything. Rob's heart went out to him. He hadn't mentioned the place earlier for fear Zach might refuse to make the trip. Once inside, the helpful ladies pointed Zach toward the racks of young men's things while Rob and Billy pawed through the large cardboard box of children's shoes. In a matter of minutes, they had selected a nearly new pair. Billy's only concern had been to make sure they weren't 'girl's shoes. Once reassured they were just like the ones the big boys wore he was happy to leave them on. One of the ladies guided him to the toy corner so Rob could get back to Zach.

"Actually, some of this stuff ain't half bad," Zach announced as Rob approached. "Lots of it has never even been worn. How much can I get?"

Rob took out the list Miss Fitz had prepared. (Miss Fitz had lists for every occasion.)

"Says here five shirts for school and three for play; five pair of jeans; eight sets of underwear and socks; one coat and one pair of gloves."

"Okay, Fitzenheimer!" Zach said enthusiastically, attempting to high-five Rob who was not prepared and missed the boy's hand entirely.

"Guess we gotta work on that, Old Man," Zach said, suddenly in the best frame of mind Rob had yet witnessed.

It took the greater part of an hour to make the selections. Zach seemed to have a preference for shirts with purple in them. Rob couldn't be sure if that was because he really liked the color or because he knew that Miss Fitz detested it.

In the end, they found everything except the coat. The two that fit him were just "too Chicky" in Zach's terms. They looked second hand and were five years out of style. As Zach struggled to choose between the two, Rob came to the rescue.

"Tell you what. Since you were able to find everything else here, why don't we go down to Wilson's Clothing Store and see if we can't find a nice new jacket for you there."

"Really?"

"Sure. Seems like that's the best solution to me."

With the appropriate thank you to the church ladies and the sacks of precious merchandise safely stowed behind the seat of the truck, they were off to Wilson's. Billy had conned the ladies out of a fire truck so the journey was made to the accompaniment of energetic, top of the lung, siren noises.

Wilson's wasn't the most expensive clothing store in town, or was it the least expensive - it was the only clothing store in the small town. Zach took it as a good sign that Mr. Wilson and the Old Man seemed to know each other rather well. Rob explained the general nature of their business and then Zach got down to the specifics of what he wanted.

"I think I may just have exactly what you're looking for young man," the owner said, leading the way to the rear of the men's section. Zach was openly excited. Rob's old eyes sparkled.

It was blue wool with sued insets on the sleeves. It came just low enough below his waist, had slit side pockets for his hands, and a band around the bottom to keep it tight against his body. The zipper was well covered with material - like the ones the rich kids wore - Zach thought. Being zippered and not buttoned had been an important part of Zach's initial description. The collar laid flat but could be turned up for protection on the chill-to-the-bone, snow-blowing days, which would soon be upon them.

Zach admired himself in the 3-way mirror. Noticing the price tag hanging from the sleeve, he took a peek. His shoulders drooped and he began peeling it off.

"It's way too expensive, Rob. We better look at something else."

Rob gave a nod in the owner's direction.

Mr. Wilson stepped in and, taking hold of the jacket at the shoulders repositioned it back on the boy.

"That's just the price for tourists," he said in a hushed tone. "Rob always gets the reduced, old timer's price."

Zach looked at Rob.

"If that's the coat you want, that's the coat you'll get," Rob said.

"I'll even throw in a new hat for free," Mr. Wilson added, pointing to a huge basket, filled to overflowing with them. You pick one out while Rob and I settle up."

There's nothing like a shopping trip to pick up a boy's spirits (and an old man's, for that matter). After a quick stop at the grocery store where Rob bought out the bin of red twisters, they were off toward The Home. Billy chattered the whole way about things that were only really important to five-year-old boys: the snowman he was going to build that would really walk; the bonfire he was going to build when they went ice skating; the worms (unless he could find a snake) that he planned to put in Sara's bed - just the usual five-year old guy stuff.

* * *

Her first words were all quite unexpected.

"My, my, don't you look like a million dollars," Miss Fitz said eyeing Zach from top to bottom as she met the trio at the front door.

"Me too?" Bill asked turning around so as to give her the total view of his pencil like physique.

"Especially, you," she said, leaning down to feel the new shoes, making sure there was proper toe room. Giving a nod of approval (as if she hadn't really believed Rob would know how to do it), she scooted him off in the direction of his room. Zach gathered his sacks and flew up the stairs - his usual two at a time.

* * *

It was a proud and happy young Zach carefully putting away his new clothes Rob found as he peeked into the lad's room reminding him it was time for supper.

"You may want to take your jacket off before you wash up," Rob joked.

Zach ran his hand up and down the soft sued sleeves, still finding it hard to believe it was really his. Slipping out of it, he careful hung it on a hanger beside his neatly arranged jeans and shirts.

"How does laundry work around here?" Zach asked as they made their way to the dining room. "I don't want some dork ruining my stuff."

"Well, I suppose you and I could do ours together if you'd think that would be safer."

"Good plan, Old Man. When?"

"I usually do mine early Sunday morning."

"How early is early?"

Zach could see his one sleeping-in morning going down the tubes."

"Five thirty."

"Five thirty!"

"Well, I suppose the exact time is negotiable. I just like to get in and out of the laundry before anyone else needs it. We'll work something out."

With that reassurance, Zach felt pretty good. It wasn't the life he wanted, but then, he'd never really had that anyway. He had never known his dad and wasn't entirely sure that his mother even knew who he was. He couldn't let that be his mother's fault, so he blamed the man and, because of that, had always found it hard to trust men in general.

The places he and his mother had called home had been the best an undereducated fast food worker could afford. They usually had taken the form of a single room and shared bathroom in an ancient, rundown apartment buildings with failing plumbing and dangerously old wiring. Between evictions for late rent, and building condemnations, they had moved often. Zach had been in a dozen different schools in seven years.

Through it all, Zach knew he was loved. He had great plans about how, someday, he would buy his mother a house with a lawn and a place for her to grow the flowers she loved so much.

Although he didn't like school, he went and he tried his best, because it was important to her. Math came easy. Reading and subjects requiring it were difficult. He dreaded starting another new school but he'd don his well-practiced thick skin and run the unpleasant new kid in school gauntlet that seemed to be standard wherever he went.

But, he still had the evening and all day Sunday before having to worry about that. Zach had become an expert at relegating worrisome things into tightly sealed compartment inside his mind. That way they would not bother him until absolutely necessary. It prevented him from planning ahead about them, of course, but the uncontrolled outcomes seemed worth the momentary peace of mind.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Even though it was Sunday morning - the national day of sleeping-in - Rob awakened, as usual, shortly after five A M. Although he had not heard Zach arrive the night before, he wasn't really surprised to see him curled up and shivering on the couch. Rob replaced the blanket before putting on a pot of coffee. He then went into the bathroom to prepare for the day.

When he returned to the room, about twenty minutes later, all traces of Zach had disappeared. The clothes, which had been in a heap on the floor, were gone. The blanket was neatly folded and back on the arm of the sofa where it began. Rob filled a glass with water and proceeded to give his several potted plants their morning drink.

As he was pouring his first mug of coffee there was a knock on the door.

"Come on in. It's open," he called in his quiet, deep voice. Again, it was no surprise to see Zach appear in the doorway.

"Um-m! Coffee! Smells great," he said as he closed the door and approached Rob.

"Good morning, Zach," Rob said. "Does that mean you want some - coffee? I don't have cream, but could probably dig up some sugar if you like."

"Sugar's fine," Zach replied, already at the sink rinsing out a second mug he found there.

Rob searched through his top dresser drawer and found a handful of sugar packets. He handed them to Zach and then moved to the big window looking out and taking stock of the new day.

"Looks like a pretty one, out there, Zach."

"A pretty what?"

"A pretty day."

Rob sipped the steaming coffee, watching Zach out of the corner of his eye. After the sixth packet had been emptied into his coffee, Rob was moved to chuckle.

"What's so funny," Zach asked, unaware that he had been under surveillance.

"I see you take a little coffee with your sugar."

A quick, faint smile broke across the boy's face.

"Mom always said that. She said all the sugar made me hyper."

"Does it?"

"I don't know. Yeah, I suppose it does. I like that feeling. It's like I'm revving inside."

The coffee sweetened to his liking, Zach joined Rob at the window.

"So, Zach began, "Did you sleep good last night?"

It was an obvious fishing trip to determine if Rob had spied him on the couch.

"I slept great! How about you?"

"Yeah. Me, too."

Short of a direct question, which he would have answered truthfully, Rob had no intention of saying any more about the nighttime visit.

"I still hate this place, you know."

"Well, I wasn't sure. You appeared to be rather comfortable last evening after supper."

"A guy can be comfortable and still hate a place, can't he?"

"I suppose so. I had never thought about it that way before," Rob answered.

"So, we gonna do laundry now?" Zach asked.

"Well, that's my plan. I didn't think you'd have any to do."

"A little. My old stuff. I'll do up what I have. I got it all ready in my pillow case in my room."

"My, aren't you the organized young man."

After the coffee was finished, Rob washed out the mugs and replaced them on the back of the sink. He

transferred his dirty clothes from the dresser drawer where he kept them into an old duffel bag.

Zach spoke as they made their way down the three flights of stairs toward the basement laundry room.

"I was figuring that with all the clothes I have now, I'll only have to do wash once a week. I never had so much stuff before. But don't worry, when I take off, I'll only take what's on my back."

Rob wondered if Zach heard the inconsistency in his words. Things were better than before but he was going to leave it all behind. He was going to run away and yet he was making plans to only need to wash once a week. He wondered how all-encompassing the lad's confusion was.

After a time, the laundry was finished. Zach had obviously had a good teacher. He sorted whites from colors, used the energy saving settings and accurately measured the detergent. Zach gave advice freely, that was becoming clear. He had, on several occasions, pointed out to Rob how he could improve his laundering technique - at least that was Rob's interpretation. Most onlookers would have just seen the boy, all quite bluntly, telling Rob what he was doing wrong.

Zach was as impatient as Rob was patient. The boy was built with a hands-on approach to life. Rob was more of a talker and thinker (perhaps, not the best qualifications for a handyman!). Zach lived his life according to correlation - when one thing followed another, he saw the first as having caused the second whether or not it made logical or scientific sense. Rob took a more systematic, cause and effect approach to things. Zach had no respect for accumulated knowledge (school learning). Rob revered it, studied it, and, when possible, contributed to it.

If opposites truly attract, these two were destined for a very close relationship.

With the clothes sorted into the three old dryers, Rob Asked: "Would you mind watching things and taking them out when they're dry? Miss Fitz asked me to drop by her office early this morning. It shouldn't take long."

"What's it about? You in trouble?"

"It's probably none of your business, my friend. Will you look after things here?"

"Sure. I can handle it. You're not going to rat on me, are you?"

"Rat on you? I didn't know you had done anything wrong."

"Gee! I guess I ain't. How about that?"

* * *

She stood behind her desk as Rob made himself comfortable in one of the big, brown, leather chairs.

"It's hard for me to believe you found Zach's Jacket in the Church Basement," she began, as if giving an indirect order for Rob to come clean.

"It would be hard for me to believe that as well," Rob replied, having no intention of sharing any more than was required.

"Billy said you visited Wilson's," she added much like a cool, confident, prosecuting attorney setting up a hostile witness for the kill.

"Well, Billy's a truthful young man, I'll give him that." Rob replied, obviously enjoying the cat and mouse game.

"You know our budget won't allow for an expensive new coat."

"Yes. I'm certainly well aware of that."

"Perhaps if we weren't paying a full-time handyman we could do some things like that, but as long as the Board insists on keeping you on, it's a whole different story."

"I'm sorry you feel that way about me, Miss Fitz. I'll be turning 70 in a few months and then, according to my contract, I'll be out of your hair for good."

"Yes. But in the meantime, understand this: You are not to bankrupt us by spending our limited funds so frivolously!"

Rob fumbled in his shirt pocket and presently produced a receipt from Wilson's Store. It was marked: "Paid in full. Personal check 1997 from Rob Franklin." He handed it to Miss Fitz with no comment.

"Oh. I see. You paid for it yourself," Miss Fitz managed, haltingly. Then, looking directly at Rob she continued: "You are the most exasperating man I've ever known! Why did you let me go on like that when you knew I was . . . "

"I suppose it's because you do such a good job of going on like that before you gather the facts."

She turned three shades of purple.

"That remark shows blatant insubordination."

"Oh, excuse me. I thought when you asked me a question you wanted my truthful answer."

"You coddle these children all the time."

"Thank you for noticing. It seems to me they deserve some coddling from someone."

"Why do you twist everything I say?"

"I suppose it's because you just make it so easy. . . Is there anything else on your mind just now?"

She paused and took her seat behind the big desk. Folding her hands, she responded slowly.

"I suppose if I answered 'No' you'd say something like, 'That's what I figured.'"

"Miss Fitz, you're a mind reader."

The faint smile that flashed across her face would have seemed quite out of place to anyone who didn't understand the true, though too often hidden good nature of her soul. Rob took it as a sign of progress. Miss Fitz saw it as momentarily letting her guard down.

In weak moments, Miss Fitz realized she was jealous of Rob. It had to do with how easily he related to the children and how lovingly they responded to him. Relating well with others had never been one of her skills. She wasn't sure why. Rob openly admired Miss Fitz for her ability to keep things organized, to provide excellent services for the kids within the limited budget and for her tireless efforts at getting these hard to place children into loving homes.

Although they approached the moment to moment operation of the home from vastly different perspectives, their war was only on the surface - a fact lost on most observers.

No sooner had Rob exited the office than his newly acquired young shadow appeared at his heels.

"Why'd you go and do that?" Zach asked cryptically.

"I could answer your question more easily if I understood what you were talking about."

"The coat."

"You were eavesdropping?"

"I'm always eavesdropping. That's how I've survived this long."

"I see," Rob said, tickled at the forthright truthfulness in lad's comment. "I still need a better formulated question before I can adequately answer you."

"There you go talking like some uppity, English teacher again. I just meant you shouldn't have used your money to buy me that coat. Now I gotta pay you back and I ain't got no money."

"It's a gift, Zach. It's a gift from me to you. People don't pay people back for gifts. Don't go on so about it all. It's something I really wanted to do."

"I don't get you, Old Man. I don't get you at all. Were you ever going to get around to telling me you bought it?"

"Probably not."

"You're just plain weird. Why weren't you going to tell me?"

"Oh, somehow I had this weird idea that if you knew you might get all bent out of shape or something."

The remark was met with a grin of understanding and a few moments of silence.

"I guess you were right, huh?"

Rob winked at the boy and turned to start up the stairs toward his room. Zach followed.

"What's the fun in giving somebody something if they don't know it was from you? I don't get it."

"The only way to find the answer to that one, Zach, is to try it and see what happens in here."

Rob pointed to his chest.

Zach bounded the final four steps to the landing and opened the door to Rob's room.

"Thank you, Sir," Rob said, entering first. Zach remained outside, hands on his hips.

"Aren't you coming in?" Rob asked perplexed about what the boy was up to.

"I don't enter someone's room unless I'm invited," Zach responded in as deep a voice as he could muster - plainly mimicking Rob from the night before.

Rob bowed from the waist and with a sweeping gesture of his arm said, "Will Master Zachary do me the extreme honor

of visiting my humble abode?"

"I'll guess that means, 'come in'."

"Seems you understand snooty-English-teacher pretty well."

"You could say I've spent lots of private time with them after school."

"I take it English is not your favorite subject," Rob said, sitting down in his large, old, overstuffed chair.

"I hate it, if that's what you mean," Zach said.

He sprawled back on the couch.

"And I hate everybody that teaches it!" he added as an obviously important footnote.

"Were you a teacher?"

"I'm afraid that's one of the things I've been during my lifetime. Hope that doesn't put me on your blacklist."

"Only if you was a English teacher. You wasn't was you?"

"Well . . ." Rob began, leaving it hanging as a tease.

"Well, what?"

"Well I wasn't an English teacher but I did teach it once in a while."

Ignoring that information, Zach continued, "So what did you teach?"

"Biology and shop, mostly."

Zach perked up more than a little, sitting up, back against the arm of the couch. "Biology. That's about sex and stuff isn't it."

"More about stuff than sex," Rob answered, tickled at Zach's take on it. "It's about all living things from germs and weeds to humans and petunias."

"Oh. But it's about sex, too, huh?"

"Well, yes I suppose so in a manner of speaking."

"I know all about sex, you know," Zach said folding his arms in front of him.

"Is that so? Well, I guess you won't need any of my information on the subject, then will you?"

Zach ignored the question.

"You keep changing the topic, Old Man."

"I do?"

"Yeah. We were talking about my jacket."

"I thought we had finished that one," Rob said.

"N-o-o-o!" Zach said emphatically, scooting back down into a reclining position.

"Go. What else, then?" Rob urged.

"Well, when somebody finds out that it was you that gave them something, then do you let them thank you?"

What an interesting excursion into values and philosophy this was becoming, Rob thought.

"Sure, but a thank you is always up to the other guy."

"Mom always made me say thank you. That didn't really leave it up to me. I'd get my butt burned good if I didn't."

"I always figured saying it and meaning it were two different things," Rob said.

"Yeah. Me too. It was like she was forcing me to lie. Mom never got that."

"Maybe she did, but just thought if you practiced it often enough you'd start meaning it."

"Ya think?"

"It's something to consider at least. Most parents mean well by what they say, even if it turns out to be wrong or even hurtful."

Rob had long ago learned that giving unsolicited advice was a prelude to disaster so he pounced on an opportunity like that. Rob's comment led to a few moments of silence. Rob had no problem with quiet times between people, but had observed such lulls made many folks uncomfortable. That didn't seem to be the case with Zach and the old man was pleased. Presently Zach spoke.

"Well, I thought it over like you said to do."

Rob was intrigued at the boy's interpretation of his comments. Perhaps through all of his belligerence he was searching for a new authority figure. Rob just listened as Zach repositioned himself so he was again sitting up, back against the arm of the sofa. He looked directly into Rob's face.

"I really do want to thank you for the jacket. It's the greatest coat I've ever had. I still feel pretty funny about taking it, though. I mean how much can a handyman earn in a dump like this?"

Although it didn't call for one, Rob chose to answer.

"Apparently, enough to buy an occasional gift for

people who are special to him," he said, each word pre-measured to express his response precisely.

It garnered a long, eye-to-eye with the boy. Zach's mind was reconnoitering. His interpretations of many things were quickly restructuring themselves. In some ways it seemed to Zach that in those few moments his whole, guarded, angry outlook on life had been tossed into the air and landed loosely assembled into a new and unfamiliar - scary - pattern.

He bounded off the sofa, walked too deliberately to the window and began removing dead leaves from several plants, struggling there in clay pots. He collected the pickings in his left palm and then, looking for a wastebasket followed Rob's lead as he pointed to the cabinet door under the small corner sink. Zach returned to the window, straining to see as far away as possible. At last, he said what was on his mind.

"Part of me says I should just say thanks and let it go - like that's all that's ever needed. Another part of me says I should either pay you for it or give it back so I won't owe you any favors - ya know?"

That time there was nothing rhetorical about it.

Rob responded, hoping to provide a course of action that would satisfy several of the lad's concerns.

"For what it may be worth, here's how I deal with nice things that others do for me."

Zach slipped down into a cross-legged sitting position on the floor facing Rob.

"Go!" he said, offering both permission and an eagerness to listen.

"Well, first I tell myself how wonderful it is that there are nice people in my world who enjoy making my life more pleasant. That provides me with a grand, warm feeling of safety, I suppose. Then, I promise myself that someday, when I'm able, I'll pass that same kindness on twofold."

"Twofold?" Zach asked, not wanting to misunderstand a single syllable.

"It means twice or in this case to two other people."

"Oh. Okay."

Zach nodded in understanding and leaned forward as if that might improve his chance of understanding what was still

to come.

"And," he urged, twirling his right hand impatiently.

"And, that's about it, I guess," Rob said.

"But what if there are strings attached?"

"If I don't agree to the strings in the first place - ahead of time - I don't accept them in the second place. I don't believe any true act of kindness ever has strings attached - if it does, it's not true - it's self-serving."

"Self-serving?"

"Like the person who is acting nice is really only doing so to get something for himself."

"Like Jimmy," Zach said, his tone and nodding head suggesting that he fully understood.

Now it was Rob's turn for a one-word question.

"Jimmy?"

"Yeah. He was one of Mom's boyfriends. He took me places and bought me stuff but as soon as he found out Mom wouldn't . . . er, get cozy with him, he stopped coming around. He thought if Mom saw him pretending to like me so much, she'd want to . . . what's the word I want . . . she'd want to encourage him in order to keep him there for me."

"I'm sorry about Jimmy," Rob said. "That must have been a gigantic disappointment to you. I wish I could tell you there aren't any more Jimmy's out there, but we both know there are. What you have to remember is that what they do, only says things about them and not about you."

"You mean I'm not a pile of crap just because he treated me that way."

"With all my snooty, English teacher, high class words, I couldn't have put it better, Zach."

Zach got to his feet.

"I've never talked about stuff like this with nobody before - not even Mom. I think she'd be okay about it, though. Next Sunday morning let's talk about love."

Rob assumed that signaled two things: the conversation was over for the day and that he planned to stick around for at least one more week. At the same time, he doubted if the next conversation would actually wait an entire week.

"You know, Old Man, you really take awful care of your

plants. Me and Mom grew great plants. We'd always try to get a place with a big south window. Plants like lots of sun. I doubt if these God forsaken things have ever even seen any. You water them way too much. See these brown spots at the end of the leaves."

He continued examining them, proceeding to turn a pot upside down and shake the soil ball out into his hand.

"See these roots. They're slimy and rotting from all the water. They ain't fish, you know."

He took the dislodged plant over to Rob for closer instruction. Rob nodded that he saw the plight of the plant.

"Soak 'em once a week and let 'em be. Houseplant roots need to dry out and breath. If you was growing rice, it'd be different."

He slipped the plant back into its pot and shook his head in disgust as he examined the others.

Rob was amazed and pleased.

"Looks like you can be a lot of help to me around here."

"Help?"

"Sure. You've seen all the plants around here that need an expert's touch."

"An expert?"

"Sounds like you're the closest thing to an plant expert this "dump" has ever had. Everybody has his jobs to do around here. I'll see if Miss Fitz will make the plants your responsibility, if you want."

"Okay. That sounds okay I guess, but remember, I don't plan to stick around here all that long."

"So you've said," Rob acknowledged, stroking his beard. "Maybe you should teach me how to care for them then, so after you've left, I can do a better job."

"I can do that, but you'll have to listen close."

"Why, Zach. You almost sound like a t-e-a-c-h-e-r." Rob spelled it out as if it were a bad word.

Zach got the message but was deep into wondering if he really was some kind of expert - even if maybe just a junior expert. He had certainly never thought of himself in that way. He doubted if anyone else ever had either. Most of his contacts with grownups had delivered put down after put down. It wasn't that a lot of them hadn't probably been

deserved. He knew he had often been a rotten kid. It was just that no one other than his mom - on her good days - had ever taken time to notice his socially redeeming characteristics.

"We better get a hie on, if we're going to get any breakfast," Rob said after glancing at his watch.

"Hie means like quickness, huh?"

"It does."

"Yeah. Okay then. I'm starved," Zach agreed.

CHAPTER FIVE

As Zach was conning Maudie into filling his plate to overflowing, Miss Fitz motioned Rob to the side of the room.

"I have located a foster family that might be interested in taking Zach. They will be here at one to meet him. You seem to have some power over the boy. Do what you can to see that he's on his best behavior - if he has best behavior."

Rob was both impressed at her efficiency and alarmed by the suddenness of this move.

"It's so soon. Are you sure it's wise to upend him again so soon?"

"Sooner the better. He's not yet attached to this place. It will be easier for him this way," came her terse reply.

"I'm, really not sure it's a very good idea. You don't know the lad like I do." Rob's tone was far more assertive than usual.

"And what would a janitor know about such things? Tell him!"

"Oh, no." If he's to be told, I'll not be a party to it. I'm just a janitor. I'd undoubtedly mess it all up. I ask you one more time to wait a little longer."

Miss Fitz raged within. It showed in the stiffening of her posture and the red welt that sprung up on her forehead in such times of stress.

"More insubordination?" she snapped with a toss of her head.

"Oh, no, ma'am. Just bowing to your superior understanding of such things."

The welt spread down both cheeks. She moved away

from Rob and toward Zach. With a strained smile set in place, she approached him. He had just seated himself and was arranging his silver ware, dishes and glass of juice in what he felt were their proper, most easy to eat from, positions in front of him.

Rob cringed when he heard her addressing him.

"Good morning, Zachary," she began.

"I told you my name ain't Zachary."

"Your name isn't Zachary," she corrected.

"Glad you finally agree," came his still rather pleasant response. He gave no other acknowledgement of her presence.

Standing at one side of him, she continued.

"At one o'clock this afternoon your new foster parents are coming to meet you. They come highly recommended. I have used them before in short-term situations. They do an adequate job."

It sounded more like a recommendation for a carpet cleaner than for foster parents. Realistically, however, phrases that were more appropriate would have done nothing to quell the pending outburst.

Rob moved back. Zach flipped over his plate, picked up his juice and threw it in the face of the unsuspecting, Miss Fitz.

"I ain't goin' to no more frickin' foster homes."

He stormed out of the room, turning occasionally to make unfriendly, though dramatically pointed hand gestures in her direction. The two other children at the table clasped their hands over their mouths, attempting to muffle their glee. Still dripping, Miss Fitz turned and strode to the door as if nothing had happened.

Rob went to the table and spent a few minutes assuring the two little girls that things would be fine. Maudie joined him, taking over and motioning to him that it was okay to leave and go find Zach.

He was not in his room. He was not in the bathroom. He was not in the laundry or on the porch. Rob made his way up the stairs to his own place. Although the door was ajar, there was no Zach in sight. Rob's next thought was that the boy may have just run away into the cold November morning.

He went to the window and scanned the horizon. Zach was nowhere to be seen.

Then, Rob heard it - the soft sobbing of his young friend. It was coming from the bathroom. Relieved that he was there and safe, and realizing it was not the time for a confrontation, Rob went through the motions of putting on a fresh pot of coffee. He clanked the lid, ran the water harder than necessary and moved about with just enough commotion to let Zach know he was there.

Five minutes later the sputtering of the percolator had ceased. From the chair, where Rob had gone to wait things out, he announced in his usually calm, clear voice, "Coffee's ready if you'd like some."

Silence continued for a few moments. "I ain't been cryin' if that's what you're thinking," came his voice, still quivering with emotion.

"Doesn't matter. The coffee's still ready," Rob repeated.

The door squeaked open. Rob didn't turn to look. Presently he heard a mug being filled and then a second.

"Sugar for you, this time?" Zach asked quietly.

"No thanks. Black is fine."

The spoon tinkled against the inside of one mug - a sign Zach wasn't giving up his sugar.

"It's hot," Zach cautioned handing a mug to Rob. He slid onto the floor, his back against the side of the sofa. Eventually he spoke, in soft contemplation.

"Yeah know what sucks?"

"New born kittens?" Rob quipped, hoping to lighten the situation.

Zach's brow furrowed, at first not grasping the old man's response. A momentary, one-cheeked, smile and a shake of his head suggested his delayed understanding, but he was in no mood for the likes of it.

"I'm sorry, Zach. I didn't mean to make light of your feelings. What sucks?"

"I really hate this place but I don't want to leave it - well, not yet. I'm still going to run away."

Silence ensued as they sipped at their coffee. "I was wondering," Rob began slowly, "Is it's really this place you

hate or is it the idea that you have to be here? That's not a question you have to answer. I understand it's a private thing. I was just sitting here wondering."

More silence. More sipping. A half a mug and four teaspoons of sugar later, Zach began speaking, apparently taking to heart Rob's comment about private thoughts.

"I slept up here again last night."

"You're always welcome."

"You probably knew, huh?"

"Yes, I knew."

"Why didn't you say nothing?"

"What was there to say?"

"Oh, yeah."

Rob put his empty mug on the small table beside his chair and leaned forward toward Zach, hands clasped, arms resting on his knees.

"If you're dead set against another foster home, you should probably be thinking about ways to fix up your room here, so you'll at least feel a little more comfortable."

"So, what do you think about these foster geeks old Fitzenheimer has dug up?"

"Their last name is Thompson. They've had several foster children for short stays. I've never talked to a kid who didn't like them."

"I've heard that before, but once I get there, they'll hate me. That's what always happens. They treat me like they're my boss or something."

Rob let that pass, hoping Zach had heard the absurdity nestled in his comment.

"You think I should try it, huh?"

"Zach, I can't tell you what you should do. I can only tell you I would have given anything to have a real family around me while I was growing up. But, that was me and not you."

Zach again shifted gears, as if relegating that interchange to another mental compartment.

"That was quite a mess I made in the dining room, huh?"

"Is!" Rob corrected.

"What?"

"It still is quite a mess."

Zach waited to be told he had to go clean it up. That time, Rob changed gears.

"If you aren't going to meet the Thompsons, I suppose we should give them a call so they won't come all the way out here from Carlton for nothing."

"They'd be doing that either way."

The boy's response puzzled Rob. "I don't understand."

"Even if I met 'em, they'd be coming for nothing - me. I'm nothing - don't you get it."

Rob's heart bled for the boy. It was not a response he had anticipated, though it showed a good deal of personal insight by the lad. Rob tried to improvise.

"You're telling me the boy who picked flowers for his mother was a big bunch of nothing? You're saying the boy who helped me do my laundry is just nothing? You're saying that a person who's been through all you've been through and still hasn't given up trying to survive is worthless? You sure have a different picture of yourself than I do."

Tears burst onto Zach's face. He jumped up and went to the window, facing away from Rob. Though hiding his tears, he couldn't hide the heavy heaving of his chest.

Rob joined him, putting a big arm securely around the boy's shoulders. With not a second's hesitation, Zach turned and melted into the old man's arms. It was a silent but important few minutes that followed.

The hug had happened too soon in their relationship. Rob was aware of that. He feared Zach would see it as a sign of weakness - a signal that he really did need someone else in his life. Rob only hoped it wouldn't be a long-term set back.

Minutes passed. The heaving subsided. Eventually there was a huge sigh. Zach pulled away, slowly and gave a short sheepish glance up toward Rob. He turned back toward the window.

"I ain't a scared. I'm brave."

Rob felt he needed to respond.

"The way I see it, brave means you have the guts to go ahead and do things, even though you are scared."

Zach gave no visible response. Rob took that as a good sign. Several minutes passed. Zach fiddled with the

plants. Rob straightened books in the tall, narrow bookcase beside the window.

"They got any kids?" Zach asked at last.

"The Thompsons? No. They had a son but he died a few years ago."

"So at least they know something about kids, then."

"Yes, I'd say they do," Rob said.

"They know all about me, I suppose."

"I suppose."

Without the slightest change in expression Zach continued, "I guess that makes them brave, huh?"

"I think you're right. It's bound to be scary for them, too."

Upon hearing that final, "too," Zach flashed an immediate and disapproving glance at Rob, but had no comment.

"I guess I better get my mess cleaned up down stairs, huh?"

"I'm sure it's still waiting for you."

He started for the door, then stopped and turned. "What about Fitz?"

Without thinking Rob quipped, "I'm afraid she's one mess you can't clean up."

Zach smiled. Rob wished he could retract his disrespectful comment. Sometimes he got caught up in the possible humor of a situation before he thought things through.

"I gotta apologize, huh?"

"Gotta?" I thought we covered that territory. If you think what you did to her was wrong, then, yes, you apologize."

Zach nodded, thinking it through. At last, he spoke his thoughts.

"A nothing kid wouldn't need to. A something kid would. I guess I better do that first."

He turned and left. Rob's face was soon awash in a sea of tears. Some were sad tears. Some were happy tears. Mostly, they were tears of pride."

As much as he wanted to help the boy at that moment, he realized it had to be strictly up to Zach. What words would

he choose? Could he keep his cool when Miss Fitz predictably reacted with all of the wrong words? Either way, there was another important lesson about to take place.

Ten minutes passed. There had been no quaking of the building's old timbers. There had been no interesting strings of four-letter words wafting up the stair well. There had been no red-faced, puffing and snorting Zach (or Fitz, for that matter) come bursting into his room. Rob's quieted heart regained its regular beat. His stilled breathing resumed. Perhaps Fitz was right, he thought: "I'm just too old for this!"

He heard a car in the driveway. That would Reverend Roberts and his wife. He was a long since retired minister. Every Sunday morning, they came to the home and held a Sunday School class for the children. Rob went down stairs to greet them. In the lower hall, he met Miss Fitz. Uncharacteristically, instead of turning to avoid him, she approached him.

"Zach came in and apologized. We had an interesting conversation about apologizing, bravery and such. I gave him cleanup detail in the kitchen for a week."

She started to leave but stopped a half turn away. Without actually looking at Rob, she said, "Perhaps I was wrong. You may serve some useful function around her, after all."

She entered her office. Rob held the front door for the visitors.

"The dining room may be a bit messed up this morning - a new lad exerting his anger - you know the story. Would you mind using the living room today?"

The Roberts were exceptional people. They held very conservative religious beliefs themselves, but were quite open and accepting of other people's right to hold their own points of view. Something the Reverend had said many, many years before had stuck with Rob. "I'm a Nazarene because I was born a Nazarene. If I had been born a Catholic or a Buddhist or a Hindu, my beliefs would be very different. I just do the best with what I have and hope that others will be able to do the same."

The children loved the Roberts. Once they heard their voices, the hall was inundated with excited youngsters. There

was spontaneous clapping and double hugs all around.

Long before the bumping and tugging herd of humanity had made its way into the Living Room, each child had related his or her own version of the most recent 'Zachisode'.

Presently, the children were settled into a three-deep, semi-circle on the floor, eagerly awaiting the story from Mrs. Roberts. The colorful big book was open, but before she could begin reading, Zach entered the room. A dozen wide-eyed, drop-jawed children turned their heads in his direction.

"Excuse me. I have something to say to the kids. I'm sorry about this morning. Nobody should act that way so don't get any big ideas about trying it yourself."

He nodded his head as if to emphasize the latter part of his remark. He glanced at Rob, who, arms at his sides managed a subtle, thumbs up and a wink. Zach left. The story began. Rob waited until he felt sure the children had quieted down and then slipped out into the hall.

Zach was nowhere in sight. He was not in the dining room. He was not in Rob's room. He was not in his own room. Rob went to a third-floor window to look out at the back forty. On his way to a west window, Rob passed the bathroom. There was no doubt about it. Those less than dulcet tones emerging from the shower were Zach's full voiced rendition of some song that Rob was certain he wouldn't have recognized even if he had known it.

The old man smiled, partly at the humorous situation and partly out of sheer relief that Zach was still around. He walked back down the hall and sat to wait on the top step just outside Zach's room. Presently, a still drenched, drip trailing, almost towel clad Zach made his way back to his room. He spotted Rob and detoured to greet him. Standing above him, Zach shook his head, doggy style, sprinkling water everywhere, giggling the whole time.

"I grow quite well without watering, thank you," Rob said, playfully attempting to dodge the drops.

Zach sat down and re-draped his towel.

"Tell me about the Thompson people."

"Well, I'd say they are about forty."

"Forty! That's almost dead. They could be my grandparents."

"To be your grandparents they would have had to have had your mother when they were fourteen and she would have had to have had you when she was fourteen."

"Oh. I guess forty's about right then. My Mom was thirty when she . . ."

"My wife was fifty when she died. I guess it doesn't matter how old they were - we still miss them. Don't we?"

Zach remained silent and leaned forward, elbows on his legs, resting his chin in his hands.

"When will I get over missing her so?"

"Do you really want to get over missing her?"

"Well . . . sure . . . No . . . I don't know. I thought I did. What do you mean?"

He sat back against the railing and looked at Rob.

"Tell me again how you got over it."

"Zach, when you lose loved ones, like we have, I don't think you ever get over it. You just learn how to live with it."

"I guess I'm not doing so good at that, huh?"

"We all have to find our own way, Zach. It may take a while longer for you. Remember that I said I choose to remember the good times."

"What other ways are there?"

"Well, Miss Fitz, for example, does it by working hard and following all the rules. That seems to give her the security she needs."

Zach's face clouded.

"Miss Fitz. Did somebody go and die on her, too?"

"As I understand it, her fiancée died in a hunting accident a week before they were to be married."

Zach was again overtaken by silence. Rob continued.

"And the Thompsons - they lost their ten-year-old son a few years ago. He died of leukemia - that's a kind blood cancer."

Zach flashed a glance at Rob that said thanks for explaining that big word without my having to ask.

"I'm sure the Thompsons loved their son very much - so much, I suppose, that they want to find another one to whom they can show that same kind of love. They asked for you, you know. Out of all the kids here, they are only interested in you."

Zach pulled his gaping towel closer around himself.

"I better get dressed. It'll soon be lunchtime. Come with me. You can tell me some more about these guys while I get ready."

Rob followed Zach to his room and sat in the chair by the east window.

"So, tell me more."

"I don't know a great deal more. Mr. Thompson - Bill - is a software designer for computers and Mary is an artist. They live in a huge house on an acreage just north of Carlton."

"You mean they're rich?" Zach said more than asked.

"I suppose you might say that. Bill's big into sports. He coaches little league, exercises and jogs every day - things like that."

"Do you think I'd have a room of my own like I do here?"

"I'm sure of it."

"I've never really had a room of my own before - except at the foster homes. They kept making me close my door at night. I didn't like that. I kept telling them, but they said they wanted me to have my privacy. Seemed to me more like they wanted their privacy from me."

"I suppose that's something you would need to get straight with the Thompsons right off the bat."

Zach nodded as he pulled on his socks.

"So you think I should meet them then, don't you."

"Zach, I can't tell you what you should or shouldn't do. This is your life we're talking about."

"You're a strange duck, you know that, Old Man?"

"I've been called worse," Rob said, the comment bringing a modest smile to his face.

"Everybody in the world thinks they're my boss except you. I can't figure you out. What do you want from me?"

"Want? Well, I suppose most of all, I'd like to have your friendship."

"Friendship's nothing I give away," Zach snapped.

Each word was like a brick in a wall, quickly laid up between him and Rob. He recoiled at the very mention of the word.

"Friends don't stick around, you know? Every time I

moved, I'd lose 'em all. And now Mom!"

His brow furrowed. He cocked his head. Rob felt sure that Zach had missed the revelation wrapped up in that statement, but he remained silent. The boy was blaming those he had to keep leaving behind, for deserting him. His solution was to keep from getting close to anyone. It minimized short-term pain, but it prevented long term joy and comfort.

At last Zach was dressed - new shirt, new jeans, new everything. Rob had been amazed and touched watching the boy with his new clothes. He smelled each piece before slipping into it. New clothes were obviously a rarity in his life. He hadn't experienced that smell of new very often.

"You look really nice, Zach!" Rob said as the boy finished tying his shoes and stood up.

Zach twirled around, mimicking - badly - the movements of a model. "Handsome, even!" Zach added, planting a satisfied grin on his face.

Rob smiled. "Yes. Handsome even." It was no stretch of the truth. Zach was a handsome lad.

He stood before the dresser, comb in hand, gazing into the big mirror that hung there on the wall. With a few swipes through his too-long-from-a-barber's-chair sandy locks, he seemed easily satisfied that he was presentable.

"Lunch first, then the Thompsons, I guess," Zach said, motioning Rob toward the door.

"Lunch, clean up duty, then the Thompson I believe, Zacho," Rob corrected.

Another grin followed by a shrug and sigh.

"Lunch, clean up duty, then the Thompson," he repeated, with no malice in his tone.

It was the first solid indication that Zach was going to go ahead with the meeting. Rob knew, however, that agreeing to the get-together in no way guaranteed its success.

At lunch, Rob sat next to Miss Fitz and made small talk - something they did often, meticulously avoiding any issues about which they might disagree. It was a wonder they found anything at all to speak about. Zach pulled in beside Billy, who had been waving his arms wildly to attract his new 'big brother's' attention. Billy did most of the talking. Zach was

polite and listened, answering the occasional questions with a yes or no or maybe. All things considered, lunch went well.

CHAPTER SIX

"I think this is them," Zach said, standing in front of Rob's window and looking down the narrow road toward town. "It's a red Corvette. Wow! What a car!"

Rob joined him at the window as the car entered the driveway and came to a stop in front of the steps. From the strange angle, Zach found it difficult to look inside the car.

"Get out. Get out!" he said impatiently.

Mr. Thompson got out first and went around the car to open the door for his wife. Zach nodded his approval.

"I gotta take a whiz," Zach announced all quite unceremoniously. That accomplished, they went down stairs.

Rob was intrigued that Zach had voiced no questions about what to do or what to say. Perhaps he had done this so often it was just second nature. Perhaps he had already scripted it. The latter would later prove to be the case.

The Thompsons were waiting in the Living Room by the fireplace. Miss Fitz, her hand on Zach's lower back, escorted him into the room.

"Zachary, these are the Thompsons - Mary and William."

Under other circumstances Zach would have launched a protest about his name, but thinking better of it, he settled for a fiery glance of disapproval directed at her emotionless face.

Bill extended his hand and Zach followed suit. Zach spoke first, wanting to have the stage set properly.

"I've never met foster parents I liked. Just thought you oughta know that up-front."

Miss Fitz gasped. Bill responded.

"I guess a foster home can't work unless everybody wants it to. Let's sit down and get to know each other."

Zach looked over his shoulder toward the door where Rob had remained in the hall. Rob gave his nondescript thumbs up, winked, and then moved on. Miss Fitz spoke.

"Well, unless there is something I can do, I'll just leave you alone. I'll be across the hall should you need me. Zachary, make us proud."

She turned and closed the door behind her.

Zach quickly determined that to do those things that would make her proud was probably not in the picture.

Bill took up on the phrase.

"Make her proud? What was that all about?"

Taking the honest route - probably the overly honest route - Zach tried to explain.

"I have a tendency to destroy everything in my path when I get upset. If I just don't do that, I think she'll settle for it."

It was an uneasy beginning but that soon gave way to relatively easygoing conversation. They chatted about this and that. It seemed like a whole lot of talk about nothing to Zach so he broke the cycle by getting down to what was on his mind.

"I'm not a replacement kid, you know."

The Thompsons gave each other a bewildered look.

"Replacement kid?" Mary said, her inflection making it a question.

"Yeah, you know, a replacement kid."

Seeing that what he had thought would be a crystal clear description had escaped them totally, he explained.

"I'm really sorry about your son - dying and all - I really am. I know how hard it is to lose somebody that way. But, I'm not going to be his replacement. I'm me. Zach. I'm an original, not a replacement. You see what I'm saying?"

They both nodded. Mary's eyes teared. Bill took his wife's hand and patted it. Neither knew how to respond.

"I didn't mean to make you feel bad," Zach said, surprise in his tone.

"Oh, no. It's okay," Bill stammered. "I guess it's still

just hard for us to talk about Billy."

"Sorry. I just wanted to get it all straight up front, like I said, you know?"

"Sure," Bill said. "We can appreciate that, can't we, Dear?"

Mary nodded, dabbing at the inner corners of her eyes with a lacy handkerchief. Ignoring the emotions and taking them at their word that his line of conversation was appropriate, Zach plodded ahead.

"Are you lookin' to adopt a kid or just shopping for a short termer?"

He had no easy questions on his mind. There was no immediate response. Zach chalked that up as a bad sign. Again, it was Bill who finally spoke.

"Well, Zach, we would very much like to have another son someday, if everything would work out just right."

Zach interpreted that proviso to mean: "Kid, you'll really have to prove yourself and frankly, we're not at all sure we like you." He had heard it all before. He had heard it from teachers and principals, from his mother's boyfriends and from a string of foster parents. If they were going to begin the relationship on that kind of a note, he'd show them who it was that really had to prove themselves.

"I like to leave the door to my room open at night and I sleep naked. Hope that won't bother you. I need help with my English and Social Studies every night and I hate having to get started on it. I don't like sissy movies. My bedtime is ten o'clock and I'm an early riser. I sing really loud in the shower and I'm a terrible singer. I don't eat broccoli, Brussels sprouts or pinto beans. I like hamburgers, tacos and vanilla swirl ice cream - well, any kind of ice cream, really. I hate rules. And, oh, yeah, there's one thing I have to have - a dog."

He folded his arms as if in defiance and waited for a response.

By the time Zach's monologue was over, Bill had regained his composure.

"It sounds like you know your own mind, all right."

"Yes Sir," Zach snapped, sounding like an angry cadet replying to his over demanding first sergeant.

Bill continued.

"Most of that seems pretty reasonable to us, doesn't it, Dear."

Mary nodded, more than a little hesitantly, as Bill began again.

"None of us like unreasonable rule, I suppose, but all families have to have some, and we're no different. There will be some rules at our place."

Although he couldn't immediately put his finger on it, that statement brought Zach a sense of relief - security perhaps described it better. He thought it was worth pursuing further.

"I don't want your Billy's old room. That just wouldn't work out for us, you know?"

Mary nodded again and that time she responded.

"I think you're right about that, Zachary. You would have a different room that you could fix up anyway you wanted - within reason, of course."

Zach wondered if centerfold ladies on the wall would be considered 'within reason,' but he didn't press it.

"My name is Zach, by the way. Miss Fitz never got that straight yet. It's on my birth certificate plain as can be - Z-a-c-h-period."

"Zach. Oh. That's a great name for a guy," Bill said in what seemed to Zach a most sincere fashion.

With the major posturing out of the way, the rest of the conversation proceeded along more cordial lines. Did Zach like crafts? Did Bill and Mary take vacations? Did Zach like sports? Was Mary a good cook? Did Zach have a girl friend? (A question Zach interpreted as meaning those centerfolds just might be allowed.) Did Bill like to fish?

Suddenly, the three of them were nowhere to be found.

"What has that ragamuffin done with them?" Miss Fitz wondered out loud, as she found the Living Room empty.

"I think you'll find them out on the back porch," Rob said, arriving from the other end of the hall. He seems to be conducting a tour and giving a botanical lecture on the local plants, trees and flowers."

"Are you saying things went well?" she asked hesitantly, disbelief in her tone.

"I'll put it this way. I see no signs of bloodshed and his

loud voice hushed soon after we left the room."

"Why Rob, you were spying," Miss Fitz said, clearly surprised.

"Just damage control, I'd call it."

"I don't understand," she said.

"Well, since I'm the guy who has to fix broken windows and holes in the walls, I figured I'd stick close by in case someone needed to intervene."

Miss Fitz actually smiled. Her cheeks filled out and the corners of her mouth turned up. It was, indeed, an undeniable, genuine smile.

The door to the porch swung open at the far end of the hall. Rob and Miss Fitz turned to look. The sounds of laughter proceeded the trio's entry. A glance - one of those that said, "Well just maybe this thing has a chance at that," - passed between Rob and Miss Fitz.

Zach led the way. He approached Miss Fitz and announced, "I'm taking them out for supper - they call it dinner - and Bill's paying."

Of course, he hadn't asked permission. It was against all of her instincts to let a child dictate procedure. To her credit, however, she bit her tongue and responded with, "That's great, Zachary - er, Zach - I'm pleased to see you are getting along so well."

Zach shadow boxed in Rob's direction, tapping him lightly on the shoulder - the kind of things guys do when it seems inappropriate to say what's really on their minds. The fact was, Zach wasn't entirely sure what was on his mind. For the past few days, Rob had been his refuge and only friend. He'd never really known a person like Rob. It was hard to trust somebody who just seemed to accept you for what you were. In Zach's experience, that had not happened before. It was both intriguing and a little scary.

Nevertheless, it was Rob who held the promise of becoming his protector and go to guy. He recognized the wisdom the old man had to offer and sensed that was something he needed. In short, Rob was the most comfortable guy he'd ever known. Zach didn't want to risk losing that relationship.

On the other hand, the prospect of having a home with

a room of his own - not to mention a mother and a father - was like a dream come true. Unless Bill and Mary could prove their metal in no uncertain terms, it would be a very difficult choice to make. (Zach assumed he actually had the choice between the Thompsons and the Old Man, which was probably not realistic considering Rob was soon to retire from the home and was certainly too old to adopt the boy.)

* * *

It was after eight O'clock. Rob had returned to his room and was reading - well reading and periodically glancing out the window watching for the headlights that would signal Zach's safe return. Truthfully, as the evening wore on there had probably been more glancing than reading.

Sixty seconds after the lights turned into the driveway, Rob heard the unmistakable clamor of Zach bounding up the stairs toward the attic. He knocked but couldn't wait the five seconds it would take for Rob to respond. He turned the knob and stuck his head inside.

"You decent in here?" he called.

Again, not waiting for a reply, he was immediately inside. Zach babbled on for the next two hours.

"They wanted to take me to a fancy restaurant but I was afraid - you know - I'd never been to one. So, I talked them into Jake's Diner. They didn't want to talk about Billy - that was their son's name - but I figured we needed to wash that laundry up front. It seemed like it might have been the first time in a long time that they had done that."

"They got a speed boat and Bill says he'll teach me all about it. He's a sports nut. Billy was too. I told them I wasn't. I couldn't tell how they really took that. They said it was no big deal, but I have to wonder, ya know."

"I told them I wasn't just a new model of their old Billy. Maybe it wasn't a kind thing to say but I'm me - not him - and they need to get that straight."

"Mary asked if I'd be willing to eat at a fancy place with them the next time. I told her I didn't know how. It really surprised me that I admitted that, you know, but it seemed okay. She said she'd love to help me learn. She said from what she could see, I'd already do just fine. Can you imagine that - old Zach doing fine in a fancy restaurant? I mean I was

sort of on my best manners, you know, and I didn't eat anything with my fingers except the roll."

Just as suddenly as the monologue had begun, it stopped.

"I'm bushed, Rob. Guess I'll hit the hay."

He walked to the door where he turned and hesitated, as if rehearsing his next words.

"You okay with this?"

"I'm delighted for both you and for the Thompsons. Did you set up a weekend visit?"

"Not yet. I wanted to kick back and think it all out, ya know? It's a really big decision. Maybe they won't want me to come after they kick back and think about it. I was probably pretty rough on them."

"Well, time will tell. I think you are wise in giving yourself time to do some thinking. This whole thing entered your life in a pretty big hurry."

"Yeah. Thanks. Good night."

"Goodnight, Zach. I'll see you at breakfast."

* * *

After breakfast, Zach asked Rob to come and see what he'd done to his room.

"You'll love it," he said as he opened the door and urged Rob to enter.

The place was spotless. There were new posters up on the walls - two he said he had brought with him and two the Thompsons had bought for him the day before. He had rearranged the furniture. His clothes were neatly arranged in his closet. He even opened his sock drawer to show how they were lined up in little balls.

"They sort of look like mushrooms all huddled together, don't you think," he said, closing the drawer.

Rob didn't know what to think. It appeared the lad had decided to settle in and stick around - a 180 degrees from the way things sounded the night before.

"It looks great, Zach. I really like the way you've changed things around. Looks more like you somehow - more like home I guess."

"Yeah. That's what I'm going for - a place that looks like me. I want some plants. Mom and I always had plants. Can I

take some starts from the ones downstairs?"

"Sure. I have pots in the basement," Rob answered.

'Great! After school, then?"

"Fine. After school."

"I gotta go. Can't keep the bus driver waiting. She gets pretty testy after two minutes."

Rob had to wonder what made that morning so different from all the rest when keeping her waiting hadn't seemed to bother him in the least.

Zach quickly changed his shirt, inspected himself in the big mirror and was on his way.

"By the way," he called back over his shoulder, "I'll be needing a book bag to bring my home work in. Hope you're good in social studies."

There had been no mention of Bill and Mary or the night before. It was as if it had never happened and yet something clearly had happened. Rob assumed it was related to his 'big decision' as Zach had called it. Just how it was related, escaped him.

* * *

The day had passed rapidly for Rob and he knew that if he was going to keep his promise to Zach he needed to get into the basement before school was out. The smaller flowerpots were high on some ancient shelves in a far corner of the unfinished part of the basement. Rob situated a wooden box so he could stand high enough to reach them. It wasn't tall enough so he placed a second, smaller box on top of the first. He climbed the makeshift ladder and found a half dozen pots in assorted sizes right where he thought they'd be. He nestled them inside one another and carefully tucked them under his arm.

As he turned to step down, the bottom box gave way. Rob lost his balance and fell to the floor. On the way down, he reached out to grab hold of the shelf. It came tumbling down on top of him. So, did the dozens and dozens of heavy old flowerpots. They crashed against his legs, his hip, his chest and his head.

Rob lay alone and unconscious for several hours. Miss Fitz had become alarmed at his absence and began looking for him. She engaged the help of Maudie. They looked in his

room and out in the shed. They looked on the front porch and on the back porch. Rob was nowhere to be found. Maudie became frantic. Miss Fitz had no idea what to do next.

The school bus pulled into the drive just as she was preparing to call the sheriff's office.

"Zach," she called as he rounded the corner heading for the stairs. "Did Rob say anything to you about going anywhere today?"

Zach put his books on a step and moved toward the office door.

"No. Not to me. Why? Is something wrong?"

Panic had invaded his tone.

"Well, he's missing. We just can't find him and it's not like him to leave without letting someone know."

"You look in his room?" Zach asked, more thinking out loud than expecting a response. "And out back - did you look in the shed?"

It soon became obvious to him that they had looked everywhere Rob usually busied himself.

"Everywhere but in the basement," Zach said out of the blue.

"Well, no. You're right. But why would he be down there?"

"Flower pots."

Miss Fitz's brow furrowed. Zach ran to the cellar door and was soon descending the bare wood steps two and three at a time calling out Rob's name. The basement was cold and damp and poorly lit.

By the time the others arrived, Zach had removed his jacket and draped it over Rob's chest. The old man was on his side and still unconscious. The huge old wooden cupboard was pinning his legs to the floor. It took all three of them to stand it back up.

"How will we ever get him upstairs?" Maudie asked, wringing her hands.

"We won't," Zach snapped. "Somebody call 911 - Maudie you do that - and get them here in a hurry. We shouldn't move him until after the paramedics have looked him over. Fitz, you go get two blankets and a pillow. Get a wash cloth and water, too."

Although Miss Fitz was offended at having been addressed as 'Fitz' and was disturbed that Zach was giving her orders, she complied and rushed up the stairs. Zach had taken command!

"They'll need more light when they get here," he said as Maudie returned, reporting in. "You stay with Rob. Put a pillow under his head but don't move any other part of him. I'll go get some lamps from the living room and an extension cord. I can't see an outlet down here. Look around for one, okay."

Within minutes Rob was pillowed, covered and well lighted. Maudie bathed the cuts and bruises on his face and hands. Zach had positioned himself at the end of the driveway by the road to wait for the ambulance. As happens when one is worried, he didn't notice how cold it was as the late afternoon wind picked up from the north and whipped against his face and bare arms. It did, however, seem to be taking forever for the paramedics to arrive. A smile almost broke across the lad's face as he thought to himself that if three medics happened to arrive in the ambulance, Rob would have made some smart remark about them being a trio-a-medics rather than a par-a-medics.

The ten-minute wait seemed like an hour but once there, they worked with lightning speed. In another ten, they had him in the ambulance, on oxygen and some sort of liquid dripping down a tube into his arm. He still had not regained consciousness.

Zach insisted on riding in the back with Rob. The fire in the boy's eyes told the driver he better just let it happen and not question its wisdom. Miss Fitz followed in her car. Under other circumstances, the seventy-mile an hour ride in a siren-screaming, bright red, ambulance would have been an exciting treat to Zach. Not so that day. He reached out to put his hand on Rob's arm, looking as if for permission from the attendant. She nodded her head, not understanding the special relationship but fully comprehending the concern and compassion.

An hour later, at the hospital, the verdict was in. Rob's right hip and wrist were broken and his ribs badly bruised - one partially torn away from the breastbone. The wrist could

be set. It had been a clean break and should be as good as new in three or four weeks. The ribs would be wrapped and should be fine in time. Breathing would be painful as would moving his arms and shoulders.

The hip, however, was a different story. It would require surgery. Special metal screws would need to be inserted. Then the doctor delivered the worst news of all. Miss Fitz and Zach listened to the details.

"At his age, he may never walk again - at best it will probably be with crutches."

The doctor shook his head as if he felt as bad about it as the other two. It seemed a strange reaction from a doctor.

Zach and Miss Fitz had held it together as long as they could. Giving each other a look that said, "Hey, what the heck," Zach slumped into her long-unpracticed embrace. Zach sobbed openly. Miss Fitz cried quietly, gradually warming to the closeness and pulling the boy to her.

"Well now," she said at last. "We need a plan of action, don't we?" Amazed at her own next words, she continued. "I'm sure you want to stay here with Rob, so let me arrange that with the head nurse. If you'll be okay here, I'll go back to the home and help the children through it all. Does that sound okay to you?"

Zach sighed and released himself from her arms - as if surprised to find himself there. He sensed the slightest reluctance on Miss Fitz's part to let him go. That, he certainly did not understand. He looked her in the face and nodded, attempting to dry his face with the tail of his T-shirt.

They went to the desk and were greeted by the head nurse. Arrangements were made and the nurse handed Zach a towel and washcloth and directed him to a rest room down the hall. When he returned, Miss Fitz was gone, but Rose, the nurse, had been well prepared for any 'Zach-eventuality.'

"I understand Rob's a pretty good friend of yours, Zach."

"My best friend. Can I see him now? I promise I won't cry anymore."

"Goodness, there's nothing wrong with shedding a few tears when your best friend is hurt. I'll tell you what we're going to do. It's not really according to the rules for someone

your age to stay around, but I've fixed it with the Chief of Staff."

Zach didn't understand the chain of command but a chief of anything sounded important and the arrangements were sounding promising. It made him feel important that a hospital would break its rules for him. He relaxed a bit.

"Rob is in surgery now, so I thought you and I could go get his room ready for him. Will you help me do that?"

"Sure. Anything. Does he need blood? I've got lots of blood."

"The doctors have that under control. Let's see. We need to pick a room. Do you think he'd like a corner room with windows on two sides?"

"He'd love that."

This nurse seemed to know her stuff. Zach began having some confidence that they were really going to do right by his old friend. As Rose made up the bed, Zach moved the chair closer to the head of the bed so he would be nearer to Rob when he arrived. The room appeared to be far larger than the ones they had passed while coming down the hall.

Rose kept the conversation alive.

"I hear you really took command of things back at the Home."

"Huh?"

"The lady - what was her name?"

"Fitz. Miss Fitz."

"Well, Miss Fitz told me you just took over and saw to it that everything got done just right at the scene of the accident."

Zach shrugged his shoulders, not knowing how to respond. He hadn't had time to think back on it all.

"I went to a couple of scout meeting before they threw me out. They were doing the first aid badge thing. I must have learned something."

"I'd say so," Rose said emphatically. "Well, that about does it in here, I think. You may stay in here if you like or you can come out the nurse's station with me."

"I'll wait here. How long will it be?"

"It may be quite a while?"

"How long's 'quite a while?'

Rose smiled.

"It may be two or three more hours. You look beat, Zach. Why don't you tip back the recliner and take a nap. Time will pass faster and that way you'll be at your best when he finally gets here."

The nap idea was sounding like she thought he was some kind of little kid. But that part about getting rested so he could be at his best later, made him change his mind.

"You'll wake me up before they bring him in, won't you? I don't want him to catch me napping. What would he think?"

"Probably just that you are the tired young hero that you are, Zach."

Rose left. Her words echoed through Zach's mind. "Young hero!" He wondered if he really was a hero. Sleep came quickly.

* * *

It was a quiet voice that awakened him.

"Zach. Zach!"

It was Rose, her gentle hand on his shoulder rousing him from his deep sleep.

"Huh?"

He opened his eyes. The peacefulness of his dream world was suddenly replaced by the frightening reality of the day.

"They are bringing Mr. Franklin up from recovery, now. You said you wanted to be awakened."

"Oh, Yeah. Thanks Rose. Thanks. How is he?"

"Pretty good, I'm told. There's a washcloth in the bathroom if you want to wash the sleep out your eyes," she suggested.

It was the same thing his mother used to say. He nodded and soon discovered a set of newly tear-stained cheeks reflected in the mirror. He hadn't remembered crying since he had last washed up. Perhaps the relaxation of sleep had released them. He washed and dried, and felt better. That Rosie was okay.

He stood by the door looking up and down the hall. The elevator doors opened and a white draped gurney appeared bearing his precious friend. Zach went inside to await his arrival. He stood back by the window so he would

be out of the way.

Even through the fog of the slowly departing anesthetic, Rob spotted Zach immediately.

"Hey, Kid."

"Hey, Old Man. How yeah. . . " Zach let his voice trail off as soon as he realized it would have been a really dumb question. He switched gears. "Good to see you smiling."

Zach had to look away as the four large orderlies moved him onto the bed. Rob cringed in pain and moaned with every slight change of position. The orderlies left and Rose took charge.

"Well, Mr. . . . "

Zach interrupted in a hushed voice. "He just likes to be called Rob."

"Okay. Zach here says you prefer to be called Rob. Okay if that's what I call you?"

"A pretty face like yours can call me anything she wants to."

Rob managed a second faint smile.

"Well, thank you kind Sir. Do you remember what happened? Do you know why you're here at Franklin Memorial Hospital?"

"I fell into a flower pot, I think."

Zach muffled a chuckle with his hand. He and Rose exchanged winks. Obviously old Rob's head wasn't fully clear, yet.

"You fell in the basement back at the Home and hurt yourself," Rose tried to clarify Rob's previous image.

"Hurt myself? I'd have never guessed!"

He raised his left arm and beckoned Zach to his side.

"Shouldn't you be in school?"

"It's evening now, Old Man. It's okay. Miss Fitz and Rosie, here, fixed it up with the chief so I could stay with you."

"Sounds like Rosie carries a big stick around here."

"No. Just a stethoscope, mostly," Zach replied quite seriously, not at all sure to what he had been referring.

Rose broke in.

"Rob, here's your situation. You have a broken right wrist. It was a clean break and the doctor says it should be as good as new in about a month."

"Maybe only three weeks," Zach added doing his best to make things sound better.

"Sure feels like more than a broken wrist to me," Rob said.

"Well, it is," Rose continued. "You also have bruised and torn ribs, two sprained ankles, and a broken right hip."

"Sounds like I did it up right," Rob said, trying to inject some feeble humor into the situation.

Zach jumped in again.

"You've been in surgery for over three hours while the doctors screwed your hip back together."

Rob looked directly into Rose's eyes.

"How did it go?"

"The report says it went well. Dr. Taylor will be in after your head clears a little more to explain everything to you."

"I've always wanted to meet someone who could explain everything to me. Suppose he can tell me why most everybody hates dandelions so? I've always thought they were beautiful."

Another smile, that one less faint than the others. Zach took that as a good sign.

"So, what's the verdict? How long do I get to stay in this fabulous resort? Which hospital is it, again? I don't remember what you said.

"Franklin Memorial in Bloomington," Rose answered.

That brought the biggest and most sustained smile yet.

"Pretty cool to stay in a hospital with your same last name, huh, Rob?" Zach added, trying to stay in the conversation.

"Yeah, Zach. I'd say that's pretty cool."

Rose went through the routine of how to use the various buttons, phone and TV.

"You can have pain killers every two hours for a few days, but you have to ask for them. Don't try to play the hero and be brave about it. Ask!" she said much like a first sergeant.

"Speaking of such things, they tell me Zach here was the hero of the day out at the home. Apparently, he took charge and saw to it you that were cared for just right until the paramedics got there. The driver said that he had threatened

the staff with a 2 x 4 when they wanted to move you. That undoubtedly made the difference between your never walking again and the chance that you just may be able to now."

Rob turned his gaze to Zach who was still standing as close to the bed as possible without actually being in it. Rob ruffled Zach's hair with his left hand.

"A hero, you say, Rose? Well, I'm not in the least surprised. Zach's a great kid and a very good friend. Did you really threaten them with a 2 X 4?"

"Well, just a little, maybe. Until they came to their senses."

Initially his look was partly sheepish - partly proud. Soon he was beaming uncontrollably, suddenly not knowing what to do with his hands. Rose put her arm around him and administered a motherly squeeze. Six eyes moistened.

"Time for Rob to rest, now. Zach, why don't you come to the nurse's station and call Miss Fitz to tell her the good news."

As they turned to leave, Rob had one more question.

"How did old Fitzenheimer take all this, Zach?"

"She really done okay, you know. She's not half bad. You go to sleep now like Rosie says. I'll make the call and then I'll come back to take care of you."

They left. Five seconds later, Zach was back, his head in the door.

"I'll talk to Billy on the phone myself. Fitz might mess it up."

Rob smiled. It appeared he was in very good hands. He'd have to make a list of things needing to be done at the home. Zach could do most of them. It would keep him busy. Rob had the idea, however, that it was Zach's plan not to budge from the hospital until he was released. Putting him in charge of the handyman things would probably help change that. Rob was soon asleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The ten days at Franklin Memorial finally dragged to an end for Rob. The day of discharge had arrived. He would be going home. What a wonderful feeling. Zach insisted on missing school for the event and Miss Fitz had reluctantly arranged it - some out of compassion for Zach and some out of terror at the prospect of what he might do if it weren't allowed.

Zach kept one hand on the wheel chair as Rose wheeled Rob toward the front door. The Chief of Staff and several other dark-suited, important looking people met them there. Zach thought it was a great hospital that had their most important guys come and say goodbye to the patients. He noted that the conversation was more like that between friends than mere acquaintances. It also seemed strange that the suits were clearly brown nosing the old man - like he was something special. It didn't make sense but Zach chalked it up to the fact that he might be just a little jealous that Rob was paying attention to them instead of to him.

They had soon moved down the ramp and situated Rob in the back seat of Miss Fitz's personal car. It was lower to the ground than the van or truck and she and Zach had agreed it would be the best choice. Zach helped Rose stow the fold-up wheelchair in the trunk. He then slid in beside Rob. Rose knocked on the window and Zach rolled it down. She planted a gentle kiss on his cheek.

"You're a very special young man, Zach. I'm glad I've had the chance to get to know you."

Zach didn't know how to respond. No one had ever

said those exact words to him before. Finally, he managed: "I'll miss you, too. Rob and I will come back and visit, okay."

"I'll be waiting."

As the car pulled away, Zach could contain his secret no longer. He turned toward Rob.

"Bet you can't guess our surprise!"

"Your surprise?"

"Yeah. Miss Fitz's and the kids and mine."

"Well, no, I guess I can't."

"Since you can't get up the stairs to your own place in a wheelchair, we turned the storeroom off the entry hall by the stairs into a room for you stay in 'til you can make it up to the attic on your own."

"What a fine idea. Thank you. That must have taken a lot of work. That room hasn't been cleaned out in years."

"It did. You should have seen Miss Fitz. She even wore jeans!"

The voice of Miss Fitz came from the front seat.

"I thought that was to be our little secret, Zachary!"

"It was just too good to keep. You really looked like a real girl in 'em, ya know."

Zach continued to chatter a mile a minute which made the uncomfortable trip pass rapidly for Rob.

Soon they were turning into the driveway at the Home. Instead of pulling up in front, Miss Fitz drove around to the back. Rob immediately noticed Zach's handiwork - a wooden ramp up the two steps to the back porch.

"Gee. I stay away just two weeks and you steal my job right out from under me," Rob said, patting Zach's leg affectionately.

"I made it twelve feet long so it would be a real gentle slope. I figured with a little practice you can get yourself up it all by yourself - after you lose that cast and your ribs heal up. I better not catch you trying it before then."

The ramp worked exactly as Zach had planned.

"That is really great, Zach. I don't know what to say. It's another wonderful surprise."

Rob could have sworn that he saw a wink pass between Zach and Miss Fitz. Surely not, he concluded.

"Well, I had a little help planning it. I told the shop

teacher what I wanted to do and showed him my plan. He was the one who suggested I make it twelve feet long. I guess he knows his stuff, huh?"

"It sure seems that way."

Zach pushed the chair down the hall, past Miss Fitz's office and stopped in front of the storeroom door near the front entrance. There wasn't a child in sight and the school bus should have dropped them off a half-hour before. Rob thought that strange but let it pass without comment. Above the door was a banner that read: "Welcome home, Rob!"

"Ready!" Zach asked.

"I'm more than ready," Rob answered.

Zach knocked on the door - three rapid raps followed by three slow raps.

'Strange,' Rob thought to himself, but then he had come to learn that Zach did many strange things.

The door swung open from the inside.

"Surprise! Surprise! Surprise!" came a chorus of excited, high pitched young voices.

"We threwed you a s'prise welcome home party, Rob," Billy announced as if it all needed to be explained. He rushed up and administered the first of many, yet to come, hugs. Like those that followed, it was untypically gentle. Rob surmised they had been coached by Miss Fitz (or threatened by Zach - probably both) to go easy on Old Rob for a while.

Most of his things were there - the couch, his favorite chair, the table beside it, and even the braided rug on the floor. His plants were on the windowsill, looking surprisingly healthy and happy - Zach's work no doubt. The sole new item was the hospital bed in the front corner.

Zach explained: "Rosie said you'd have to use this kind of a bed for a while so I said we'd have to put it up here where you can see out the window."

"What a great idea. I don't know what to say. Thank you all, so very much."

At that point, Maudie arrived with a cake, clearly decorated with love by the younger children. Miss Fitz started to make excuses for the misspelled words on the icing, but Rob's finger to his lips silenced her. It read: WELLCUM HOM ROBE!

"This is the finest cake I have ever had," Robe - that is Rob - said.

Rob cut the cake with Maudie's help, and everyone ate their fill. Presently, Miss Fitz scooted the children off to the bathroom to wash faces and hands. With a final wave of gentle pats and, "Glad you're backs," it was just Miss Fitz, Rob and Zach.

"Zach, don't you have something to do," Miss Fitz said.

"If you want me to leave, why don't you just say that instead of making me figure it out? Geez!" Zach's remark contained more hostility than either adult was prepared for.

"Sounds like the lad's just about had it with all of this," Rob observed.

"He's probably held it together longer these past few weeks than he ever has in his whole life," Miss Fitz added with uncharacteristic insight and compassion.

"He has a way of touching one's soul, doesn't he," Rob said.

"I must admit that he does."

"You wanted to talk with me?"

"It's about your hospital bill. How are we supposed to pay your hospital bill?" she asked, more frantic than angry.

Rob reached into his shirt pocket and removed a folded sheet of paper. He handed it to her without a word.

It was his bill. She read down the list of items. It totaled \$12,000.00. She gasped, clapping a hand to her mouth.

"Just look at the bottom line on the last page, Miss Fitz. It's all okay," Rob suggested, for once taking no delight in her impatient, unsupported complaints.

She read it out loud: "Paid in full."

"But, how, who, why . . . how?"

"You're repeating yourself, Miss Fitz. Just don't be concerned. It's been taken care of and that should relieve your concern. Nobody will have to go hungry in order to pay my bill."

"Well, I really didn't mean that. I just didn't - well . . ."

"Why don't we just call it over and done with. I should have told you earlier. I am sorry for any anxiety it has caused you. I just wasn't thinking."

Miss Fitz fidgeted, straightening her jacket and pushing at the bun on the back of her head.

Rob continued.

"If that's all, how about getting Zach back in here. Tell him to bring the toolbox. We are going to have to lower the legs on this bed or I'll never be able to get in or out of it."

Wanting to say the right thing, but having no idea what that would be, Miss Fitz hesitated awkwardly, and then turned to leave the room.

"I want to thank you for all your help, Miss Fitz. You and the kids are my only family you know."

She turned and smiled, nodding her understanding.

"Leave the door open please. I want to be able to hear the children. I've missed that more than anything."

"They'll just come in and bother you."

"That will be wonderful, Miss Fitz. That will be truly wonderful!"

Zach had been sitting on the floor beside the door, back against the wall and, undoubtedly, his ear against the crack.

Spotting him there, Miss Fitz started to relay the message. "Rob needs, . . ."

"I know, I know. The tool box. I'm on my way."

Miss Fitz shook her head in disgust. Rob shook his head in delight.

Zach stuck his head in the door.

"I'll be right back. Don't go nowhere!"

Again, Rob was amused. The boy's last phrase seemed all quite serious. Where, pray tell, would he go?

Miss Fitz noted the exchange between the boy and the old man. As Zach trotted off - something she disapproved of indoors, but had long since stopped trying to enforce in his case - she went back to Rob's door.

"Zach's been a big help. I must give him that. He seldom followed my instructions, but he did get things done."

"That's good to hear," Rob said, nodding and not at all surprised. "I'm sure it made him feel great when you told him that."

She flushed and stammered, and abruptly returned to her office. It confirmed Rob's assumption that she had not actually thanked the boy. Zach clearly presented an

emotional dilemma for her. She wondered why it seemed so easy for Rob to cope with the boy, and so difficult for her.

Rob heard Zach's running feet approaching. They stopped just down the hall and he heard a murmured exchange between the lad and Miss Fitz. It was nothing he could make out.

"Wonder what she thinks I did wrong, now," were the first words out of his mouth as he totted the heavy tool chest into Rob's new room.

"What?" Rob asked, hoping for some clarification.

"Fitz just told me to stop by her office after I was done fixing the bed."

"I'm sure it's probably nothing big," Rob said trying to reassure him.

"It's never nothing big to me. She's the one that gets all bent out of shape over nothing."

He didn't sound angry. It was more an expression of honest bewilderment. Rob took that as a sign of progress.

In no time at all, Zach had removed the screws and lowered the legs.

"Okay. Try it!" His words echoed Rosie's kind but firm tone of voice.

With more of a painful struggle than Rob had anticipated, he made it onto the bed. Zach placed the pillows where he thought they should go and cranked up the head of the bed until he felt Rob looked comfortable. He assumed his assessment of the old man's comfort was correct, so didn't bother to ask.

"I got one more idea. That was too hard for you. What you need is a hand rail you can lean on."

Before Rob could comment, Zach disappeared. Rob lay back. He was more tired than he had realized. His eyes soon closed and he was asleep.

When he awoke, there beside the bed stood the old metal-pipe-bicycle-rack from out back. It was the shorter of the two - about three feet long and clearly freshly scrubbed. Zach was nowhere to be seen. Rob surveyed the contraption. It appeared to hold promise. He tried it, supporting himself on the top pipe as he slid into the waiting wheelchair. He shook his head in amazement. What joy this

boy was bringing into his life.

* * *

At that same moment, Zach entered Miss Fitz's office.

"So, what's wrong this time?" he asked, plopping down into his favorite chair by the window.

"Does something have to be wrong for me to invite you here?" Miss Fitz asked, trying to signal a friendly start.

"Yes, at least that's always how it's been before."

"Well, not this time."

Zach's head perked up although the rest of him remained slouched in the chair.

"So, what then?" he asked in his always impatient manner.

"Well, for one thing, the Thompsons called and want you to come for a weekend visit next week."

"Can't do it," Zach snapped.

"You haven't seen them for several weeks. I'm certain they miss you."

Those words felt warm and friendly. It was like somebody really cared about him. Still, he had somebody he cared about and Rob needed him right now.

"I'll give them a call and explain. Maybe we could do the eat-out thing. They seem to like that. Can I call them?"

Wanting desperately to correct the 'can I' to 'may I,' she bit her tongue. "Certainly, you can call them. I'm sure they'd like that."

"Okay. I'll call them this evening. Anything else?"

"Well, yes."

She cleared her throat, buying time to select just the right words. Zach thought it meant she was choking at the thought of saying whatever was on her mind.

"I just wanted to thank you for all of your help around here while Rob's been away."

Zach heard the complement but waited for her to ruin it. She always ruined compliments. He didn't have to wait long.

"Of course, you seldom followed my instructions, but you did get things done, I'll give you that."

For the first time, Zach felt sorry for Miss Fitz. She always had to win. In that way, she and Rob were exact opposites. Zach figured he should say something. He sat up

a bit straighter.

"If that's a complement, thanks. If it's just another put down I feel sorry for you. Can I go now?"

"No. What did you mean by that?"

"You're always putting everybody down, just like then - you couldn't even just say 'thanks.' You had to go on and say how I probably didn't really deserve it because I did stuff my way instead of yours."

"Well, I didn't mean it that way. I'm sorry if that's how it sounded to you."

"To me? Everybody here thinks that way about you. Even Billy and he loves everybody in the whole damn world. You know what he says about you? He says, 'She's okay if you just don't listen to her words'."

"I see." There was an uneasy pause, before she continued. "And Rob. Does he feel the same way?"

"You should ask him that - adult to adult, you know."

"Rob and I don't talk about such things," she said.

"Neither do me and you as far as I can remember."

Miss Fitz smiled a very sad smile - it was much like Zach's mother used to look when she couldn't afford to get him something she knew he really wanted. She sighed. Zach gave in - a little.

"I'll tell you one thing he thinks."

"And what would that be?"

She didn't know whether to brace herself for a volley of unpleasant commentaries or be ready to accept a complement of some kind. She readied herself for the former, just in case.

"Rob says that you're the best thing that has happened to this place in the past fifty years and that I just need to remember that and overlook the stuff I hate about you."

Zach qualified his previous, overly emotional statement.

"Hate probably wasn't the right word. Rob doesn't like me using it. He says when I use it, it means that I'm not really thinking about what I actually mean. He calls words like that, lazy thinkers shorthand."

"Sounds like you and Rob have some pretty deep conversations."

"Yeah. He's the first person who ever thought I was smart enough to talk about stuff - er, ideas like that."

He grinned. "Stuff. That's another one of those lazy shorthand terms. It's a go nowhere word. People use it when they are too lazy to think through what they really mean."

"Do you think I use a lot of those, 'go nowhere words'?"

"No. Since you asked, though, I think you have just the opposite problem."

Although Miss Fitz detested having anything about herself attacked, she did find it somehow amusing that this maladjusted little ragamuffin was lecturing her on the weaknesses in her personality. She encouraged him to explain.

"Oh. What is that?"

"You assume everybody else defines words just like you do and the fact is, most of us, especially us kids, don't."

"Can you give me an example?"

"I can give you a truck full."

"One will suffice."

"Suffice? There's your example. You really think a twelve-year-old kid knows from 'suffice'?"

"Sorry. It means 'will be enough'. Please go on, though."

Miss Fitz actually seemed interested in what Zach thought. It amazed the boy. He sat up a bit straighter.

"Okay. Take 'fun'. Fun for you is like following all the rules, or doing things exactly the same every time or keeping really clean - things like that. Fun for me is doing new things or finding some new way to do the same old things or getting my hands filthy working in the dirt, or getting my heart really pumping 'cause I'm scared sh ... well, really scared."

"And that is fun for you - being really scared?"

"See, me and you, we probably define 'scared' in two different ways, so we use the same word but we really aren't talking about the same thing. Rob says you mustn't assume you really understand what someone else means until you get to know them real well."

"I guess you and I may need to get to know each other a little better. Maybe if we did we wouldn't be . . . how do you say it . . .?"

"Wouldn't be on each other case as much," Zach added with a nod of understanding.

"Yes. On each other's case as much."

"Well, this has been quite the chat, Zachary - er - Zach. Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me."

Two 'thank-yous' in ten minutes, Zach thought to himself. Will miracles never cease! Since he was a roll, he decided to continue. He eased back into the chair.

"Rob says me and you are a lot alike - maybe that's why we don't get along."

"Alike?" You and I?" Miss Fitz was taken aback.

"Yeah. We both build walls between us and other people so we won't get hurt anymore."

"I see, and do you agree with that?"

Suddenly she sounded a lot like Rob. Maybe he was rubbing off her. Zach thought that would be great. He sensed that the old man was rubbing off on him, and it seemed like a good thing. He got back to her question.

"Rob's a pretty wise old man. I don't really understand it all for sure, but when I do, I imagine I'll agree."

"You really trust Rob, don't you?"

Zach sat up. He bristled.

"I don't trust nobody."

He slid up to the edge of his chair.

"Can I go now? I got more important stuff - ah, activities - to do than sittin' her jawin' with you."

"Yes. You may go. Let me know when you want to make that call. You may use my office so you can have some privacy."

Just why he'd need privacy to talk on the phone, Zach couldn't understand. He wasn't planning to drop his pants or anything while he spoke to them. At any rate, now that she had set him free, he wasn't about to ask what she meant.

At the door, he stopped and turned back toward Miss Fitz.

"Oh, yeah. Two more things. I got almost seven bucks saved up if you need it to help pay off Rob's doctors' bills. And the second thing - I know it's really hard for you to remember my right name so it's okay with me if you call me Zachary."

He didn't wait for a response and was soon at Rob's open door. His first words amused Rob.

"Life was sure easier back when I just flat-out hated her

ugly hide!"

His expression suggested he realized that he had used the 'h' word and shouldn't have, but he didn't take the time to take it back.

"Is that steam I see coming out of your ears?" Rob asked trying to lighten the situation.

Zach managed the slightest glimmer of a smile but again, ignored what had been said.

"How'd it work?" he asked, running his hand across the top of the bike rack.

"Like a charm, Zach. It was a great idea. Thanks a lot."

"It's okay," Zach answered obviously pleased about the whole matter.

"You know, Zach, I really haven't had a chance to thank you properly for all the help you've been to me and to the Home these past several weeks. I want you to know how very much I appreciate it all. Quite honestly, I don't know many boys your age who could have done it as well."

Zach's lower lip quivered.

"Well, it was all my fault, after all."

"Your fault? What was your fault? You mean my accident? How could my poor judgment in the basement be your fault?"

"The flower pots. You were down there getting me flower post. I didn't even really want them. I just said all that to make you think I was going to stick around. I thought that would give me a longer head start when I left out from this dump. I planned to run that night when you got hurt."

Zach managed to catch a few tears with his index finger before they flowed down his cheeks.

"Zach, Zach, Zach! You didn't force me to go into the basement and climb that rickety, makeshift set of steps I put together. That was my very poor judgment. It couldn't have been your fault by any stretch of the imagination."

The boy sensed that Rob was sincere but still, Zach knew deep inside it wouldn't have happened if he hadn't been at the Home. Once again, his hate for the boy who had killed his mother raged within him.

"If I ever track him down, I'm going to kill him, you

know," Zach said out loud, as if Rob had been listening in on his thoughts.

"Kill, who? What? I don't follow you."

"Never mind. It's personal," Zach said realizing Rob was in the dark about his plan.

"It's hard not to 'mind' when your best friend announces he is going to kill somebody," Rob said holding out his hand for Zach to come to him.

Zach hesitated, then moved closer and took Rob's hand. It was a firm, reassuring grip that met him there. For that moment life felt safe. Life hadn't felt safe for a long, long time to Zach - even before his mother died.

"I killed her, you know?" Zach said, taking a seat on the footstool beside the wheelchair.

"Her!"

"My Mom."

"I thought it was a car accident."

"She wouldn't have been at that intersection at that very second if I'd a been on time that afternoon. I got a detention and it made us late."

He freed his hand, covered his eyes and began sobbing from the depths of his soul. Rob wheeled to the door and closed it, returning immediately to Zach's side. He placed his firm, big hand on his young friend's shoulder. They sat in silence. Zach needed to cry. Rob needed to reassess the guilt and fears that Zach had just expressed. What a terrible load it was for such a young person to have to bear.

It wasn't the time for reassuring words because no words would be reassuring. It was just a time to be together with your best friend.

Eventually, Rob did feel moved to say one thing.

"Zach. I hope you know that I love you and that we are going to get through all of this together."

Zach looked up into his old friend's face and nodded - partly, that acknowledged, 'I know you love me,' and partly that, 'we're going to get through it'.

Without another word, Zach got up, went over to the couch, curled up on his side and, in seconds, was fast asleep.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Several weeks passed. Rob was doing far better than his doctors had predicted. Zach saw to it that he took his walks on his crutches morning and night and threatened Miss Fitz with who knows what if she didn't see to his walk at noon. Rob had been practicing navigating a few stairs at a time in preparation for the time he could return to his attic room. He realized that might not actually happen before his retirement on January 31st - less than two months away.

Since his first week at the Home as handyman, Rob's day off had been Wednesdays. He always took the truck and was gone from sun up to sun down. No one knew where he went. He didn't say but had left a phone number in case of 'extreme emergency.' No such event had occurred so the number had never been called.

Due to his accident, he had missed those last four outings. He felt he could manage the truck again so he planned to be away from the home on Wednesday. The idea visibly worried Miss Fitz. It sent Zach into convulsions.

"You have no business being out there all alone, God knows where, all by yourself," Zach went on.

"When I get there, I won't be all by myself."

"But you gotta get there first," Zach pointed out. "It's got to be the worst idea you ever had. I won't let you go!"

Zach folded his arms and stomped his foot. Rob was touched by the boy's concern and tickled at the way he went on about it. Before he could figure an argument to counter Zach's not altogether inappropriate assessment of the idea, Zach offered a solution - one he had clearly already researched.

"Here's me and Fitz's plan and since I already stoled

the truck keys and hid 'em you don't have much say so."

Rob couldn't control a chuckle. He tried to turn it into a cough so as to not make Zach feel bad - Zach being so very serious and concerned about the matter. The boy continued.

"You wait and take off Saturday or Sunday when there ain't no school and I can go with you and take care of anything - if anything comes up, you know. If you're smooching up your girlfriend or anything, I promise to make myself scarce."

Zach's concern touched Rob's heart. The fantasy about how he spent his day off just plain tickled him. Most of all, Rob was delighted that the boy and the lady had mended fences long enough to get their heads together and hatch this plan.

The idea was not a bad one. Although Rob really wanted to go, he truly wasn't sure if his legs and hips were up to it.

"I'll tell you what, Zach. Let's go out back right now and see how I feel sitting in the truck and working the brake and clutch. I had planned to do that on my own first, anyway. If I can manage that, then maybe next Sunday would be a good compromise. I'd be pleased for you to accompany me."

"I could drive you, you know, but I don't suppose you'd allow it."

"I'm sure you could and I'm sure I won't."

That produced the first smile of the conversation.

Rob hadn't realized how high the truck was off the ground. It was a major struggle to mount the running board and slip inside. Once at the controls it soon became apparent that his hip was not going to allow him to work the clutch. He handled the brake and accelerator fine but realized he wasn't ready. It irritated him no end. Zach saw it in his face. Rob sighed and patted the steering wheel as if saying goodbye to an old friend.

"Well, I guess that's that," he said, motioning for Zach's help to dismount.

The deed was done and Zach helped him settle into a chair on the back porch.

Zach left him there, saying, "I got some important stuff to do before school. I'll see you later."

Rob had never heard him use the words 'important' and

'school' in the same sentence before. He felt something was surely up. It was! Ten minutes later Zach returned, Miss Fitz in tow.

"Me and Miss Fitz, we got it all worked out."

"What do you have all worked out?"

Rob looked up at Miss Fitz a question on his brow.

"It's like this," Zach continued, still all quite serious.

"Miss Fitz says if you'll take your day off on Sunday, you can use the van. It's got automatic everything, ya know. No clutch stuff. But, I gotta go along to take care of you, huh, Miss Fitz?"

"That's the deal you talked me into. I'm still not sure it's a wise plan. You have a very persuasive friend, here, Rob."

"I am well aware of both of those things. He was referring to 'friend' and 'persuasive,' although only he and Zach seemed to understand that.

"Well? I need a decision here," Miss Fitz said impatiently. "I'll have to reschedule things you know."

"I appreciate your generous offer and I . . . we . . . accept."

She gave the pair on final, head-shaking glance. It seemed a mixture of disbelief and envy.

Once she had left, Zach pulled a chair close in front of Rob. Even before his bottom hit the seat, he was reeling off a string of questions.

"So, where we going? Is it to your girlfriend's? How old is she? Think she'll like me? . . ."

As more questions burst forth, Rob became amused that Zach had obviously already determined there was a love interest involved. The final question: "What should I wear?"

"Whoa!" Rob said when at last there was a break in the barrage of questions.

"First of all, I don't go to see a lady friend."

Zach was visibly disappointed.

"Second, school clothes will be quite appropriate."

Zach had hoped to hear 'grubbies' but that would be okay.

"Third, you'll find out our destination when we get there and not before."

Zach sat back as if all his bubbles had been burst.

"But . . ."

"But nothing. Either you're in or you're out, but those are the conditions."

"I'm in - you know that."

"Great!" It's almost time for the school bus. Have a great Friday. By the way, what's a prepositional phrase?"

Zach smiled. The old man never gave up. They'd been over and over and over infinitives and prepositional phrases the night before.

"A prepositional phrase consists of a preposition and its object which is a noun or a pronoun and it usually modifies some word in the sentence. Want a list of the twenty most common prepositions, too? It got 'em down pat."

"I'll settle for two that begin with 'w'."

"How about 'with' and 'without'?"

"Without question, you are really with it, this morning," Rob said.

Zach rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"That reminds me, I promised Mrs. Williams I'd take her some starts from my African Violets. 'Spose Maudie'll let me use a baggy?"

"I 'spose Maudie will let will let you use anything your little heart desires. You've got her wrapped around your little finger."

"Think so?"

"Think so!" Rob said emphatically.

"I had a good teacher, Old Man."

Zach rushed off, realizing he was suddenly on a short schedule. A few minutes later, as the bus honked its familiar beep, beep, beep, Zach trotted back onto the porch, book bag and baggy in hand. He patted Rob on his shoulder and said, "See ya at four." The pats had become Zach's way of showing affection. He wasn't a hugger or a kisser but being a patter seemed to feel okay.

It hadn't escaped old Rob's notice. Zach had clearly taken great pains to comb his hair. That was certainly a new development. Perhaps the love interest the boy was most concerned about was not the Old Man's, after all. That revelation both warmed Rob's heart and scared him silly - Zach in love!!!! He hoped he'd settle for just patting her

shoulder. He was quite certain that he wouldn't. Oh, my!

* * *

Zach spent Friday night, Saturday, and Saturday night at Bill and Mary's place. It was his third visit and first 'two-nighter' as he had been referring to it. Bill and Mary had cleaned out a large basement bedroom back to the wallpaper so Zach could begin putting together a place of his very own.

Although it was what Zach thought he wanted, it was at the same time a scary development. It meant the Thompsons were really serious about having him come to live with them. He had convinced himself that they might possibly be good temporary foster parents - something only a few weeks before he swore did not exist. The guestroom, which he had occupied on his previous stay-overs would work okay for that. He even felt at home there. But, this build-your-own-room-from-the-bottom-up thing, looked like they were thinking permanent. If that meant adoption, Zach wasn't ready.

He worried about how his Mom would have felt about him taking on a new mother. He knew it wasn't the same and yet it bothered him deep into the night. It wasn't that he didn't like the Thompsons. He did. He just wasn't sure he loved them and he felt he should love them before considering such a big and forever step. As a foster kid, if he felt it wasn't working out, he could just throw some fits or run away and he'd be removed. But once he was adopted, he knew that no amount of fits or running away would change things. Once he became their son on that piece of legal paper, he would always be their son. It was just plain scary.

Besides feeling disloyal to his Mom, he also felt that way about Rob. He and Rob were a great team - they took care of each other. Zach helped Rob when a strong, quick young guy was needed and Rob helped Zach with homework and advice and talks about important things. They were there for each other when they just needed to feel close to somebody. When he put it into words like that, it seemed pretty one sided - much more Rob doing for Zach than Zach doing for Rob.

He smiled to himself thinking, 'Rob would just say sometime later on when I'm older and wiser I can do all that same stuff for some other kid and that will even out

everything.'

There was one more thing. He knew Rob loved him and he thought he probably loved Rob, too. That love stuff was still pretty confusing. He had heard once that a parent's love meant they'd gladly give up their own life to save their child. Zach wasn't sure if a child's love for a parent required that same kind of commitment or not. If it did, he wasn't at all sure of his love for the old man. His own life seemed to be the most important thing of all to him. What would Rob say about that? Probably that that's how it's supposed to be when you're twelve. He'd have to ask him and find out for sure. He could ask Rob anything. He knew he couldn't do that yet with Bill or Mary.

Although those thoughts had not resolved his questions, he did feel better - less frightened and more comfortable about the future. He was soon asleep.

* * *

Zach had awakened the Thompsons at five a.m. Sunday to make sure they got him back by seven. That's when he and Rob were to begin their day together away from the Home.

It was a typically cold and blustery, December morning there in north central Indiana. It had snowed overnight and adding that to what had already fallen, there was well over a foot on the ground. Zach thought it was always nice to get even just an inch of new snow. It made everything look clean and bright. He chuckled thinking that would probably make Fitz happy, too - clean and bright. He shook off the notion that that made the two of them even more alike. He shuddered at the thought as they pulled into to the driveway.

His good-bye and thank you was brief and made at the car door. He didn't have time to put up with the endless idle chitchat that Mary and Miss Fitz always got into on such occasions.

He made a beeline for Miss Fitz's office to check back in - something Rob had convinced him was a good idea. She wasn't there so he scrawled a note and left it on "his" chair. "I'm home. See ya. Zachary." Since he had given up trying to convince her his name was just plain 'Zach', he always signed it that way for her. In truth, he thought Zachary was a

pretty classy sounding name.

He dropped his overnight bag in the hall beside Rob's door and knocked as he opened it a crack yelling his usual greeting: "Ya descent in there? Here I come."

Rob's reply startled him, but only for a moment.

"No. I'm stark naked and I'm painting my body bright red. Enter at your own risk."

"A jokester, huh?" Zach said/asked as he spotted Rob standing without his crutches at the front window. (Fully clothed, of course - Rob, not the window.)

"Yes, a joke, or at least that's how I intended it. How was the weekend?"

For the moment, Zach ignored the question. "You shouldn't oughta be without your crutches Old Man. You trying to snap that hip again. You're no spring chicken, you know."

Zach took the crutches from beside the closet door and thrust them in Rob's face.

"Ya want all my hard work to go down the drain just because you won't follow the doctor's orders?"

"Dr. Zach's orders?" Rob asked.

That sounded pretty good but Zach saw a way to improve on it. "Dr. Zachary, to you, Sir!"

It was worth an exchange of smiles - well it was worth a full-on bear hug but that was not yet Zach's style. Rob realized in that moment how much he had missed the boy the past few days.

"So, ready for our big adventure?" Zach asked enthusiastically.

"I'm ready. I'm glad you're coming along. I must warn you, though, our day may just be more of a bore than an adventure for you."

Nothing could dampen Zach's enthusiasm.

"Ate yet?" he asked.

"No. I was waiting for you, in fact."

"I ate at Bill and Mary's but that was hours ago. I'm game for more. Mary's a good cook but she's no Maudie when it comes to hot cakes."

They finished breakfast and were pulling out of the driveway right on schedule at seven o'clock. Miss Fitz saw

them off, offering a variety of advice and cautions which they politely accepted and promptly forgot.

"At least Fitz is probably happy about one thing," Zach said.

"And that is . . ."

"That we left right on schedule."

"I wonder what she'll have to gripe about now?" Rob added.

It was worth another simile.

"She means well," Zach said, adding, "Geez! I'm sounding more like you every day."

"Is that bad?"

"Oh, no. I didn't mean that. Oh, you were just joking again, huh?"

Rob just winked. Zach had long been impressed by how much the old man could say without ever uttering a word; a wink, a shrug, a thumbs-up, that special bouncy nod of the head that said, 'Sure, why not!' For as long as he would live, Zach would never forget that comforting wink the first night he had arrived at the Home.

Later in life, Zach would realize that he had learned a great deal about the important things in life by just listening to himself talk as Rob quietly listened, encouraging him to speak his mind and wonder out loud. He'd ask a question now and then. It never seemed like much but it was. For the time being, though, those talks painted Rob as the fountain of knowledge.

"So, now will you tell me where we're going?"

"The Elms."

"What's the Elms?"

"You'll see when we get there. Rob always meant what he said so Zach understood there was no reason to pursue it. The ride would give him a chance to pick his old friend's brain.

"Do you think Bill and Mary love me?"

"Wow! What a way to start the day," Rob said, expressing surprise more than avoiding the issue.

"You know them a whole lot better than I. What's your impression?"

"I'm not sure. Mary kisses me goodnight. Last night I thought Bill was going to do it, too, but I turned away."

"Was Mary's kiss that bad?"

"No. It wasn't bad at all. It was nice and uncomfortable all at the same time, I guess. I didn't expect it the first time. My Mom's the only person who had ever kissed me - well there was Megan but we were only nine."

Rob wanted to chuckle but understood Zach was being dead serious, so he didn't.

"So, it seemed wrong for Bill to kiss you good night, did it?"

"Ya!! Guys don't kiss each other. Do they?"

"Father's kiss sons. Grandfathers kiss grandsons. In some countries men kiss each other on the cheeks whenever they greet each other."

Zach sat silently for a while, then responded.

"I never had a Dad, ya know, so I don't know about that stuff - that kind of activity or whatever it is."

"How about affection?" Rob suggested.

Zach nodded and glanced at Rob as if to say, 'Yes, that's probably what I meant.'"

"I'll bet you kissed your son a lot, then, didn't you?"

Rob's eyes moistened quickly at that unexpected remark.

"Yes. Quite a lot, I'd say, Zach."

"It meant you loved him, huh?"

"Yes, it meant I loved him."

"Do you suppose that's what Mary's kiss meant - that she loved me?"

"It certainly could mean that," Rob answered, not feeling like he could speak for Mary. "Perhaps you need to discuss it with them."

"I'm afraid they'd ask me if I loved them back and I don't know what to say."

"How about just saying that. Be honest with them and tell them that you really aren't sure, yet."

"The old honesty thing again, huh, Rob?"

"I've found it has worked pretty well for me all these years."

That nicely set up the big question that Zach really had on his mind.

"You told me that you loved me. I believe you. But I

can't figure out why. Why do you love me? Why does anyone ever love anybody?"

"You're just full of the big ones this morning, aren't you?"

"I didn't mean to put you on the spot or nothin'."

"It's not that at all, Zach. It's just so hard to define love to somebody else. Love is a feeling - a way of looking at somebody else. When you feel it, you know it. Feelings don't easily translate into words. Let me try it this way. When I hear your knock at my door, I feel a surge of great happiness inside. When I see your smiling face peeking through the door opening, a warm rush flows throughout my body. When we are close, like right now, I feel comfortable, and content, and safe. It is as if the rest of the world really doesn't matter for the moment."

Zach nodded, longer than seemed called for if he had just been indicating he understood. He meant something else. Rob waited knowing it would come out in time.

Zach continued to just look out his side window for some time. Then, all quite softly he said, "I guess I love you, too, Rob."

Rob reached over and pulled the boy close. All quite automatically he nuzzled Zach's head with his lips and kissed him, loud enough to make his point.

"Thank you, Zach. You know, there is no greater gift between friends than love."

Zach remained nestled inside Rob's big arm for many miles. It was comfortable. It was safe. It was, unmistakably, the feeling of love.

CHAPTER NINE

Zach knew they were on the way to Bloomington. He had made the trip a half dozen times while Rob was in the Hospital, there. The first stop didn't even surprise him - the hospital.

"Thought as long as we were here we should stop and say 'Hi'. That okay with you?"

Zach was clearly excited at the prospect of seeing Nurse Rosie again. He helped Rob out of the van and secured a crutch under each arm.

"Old Rosie'll sure be surprised, won't she," Zach said suddenly candy-bar-hyper about the whole thing.

Rob agreed.

Upon entering, they were greeted by one of the suits who had made over Rob so when he checked out.

"Mr. Franklin. We didn't expect to see you for several more weeks. You're looking great. Really great."

Rob did look great but Zach sensed the man was overdoing it. One 'really great' should have been enough. He knew there was more to that than he understood. He'd keep his eyes and ears peeled.

Rosie wasn't at the Nurse's station and Zach's heart sunk. How could she take off on the very day he came to visit her? He approached the desk as Rob continued talking to the man in the suit. He was surprised that the nurse knew his name.

"You're Zach, right?" she asked.

"Yeah. I'm with Rob."

"Yes, I remember you. We still talk about what a help

you were during Mr. "Franklin's stay."

What was it with this 'Mr. Franklin' stuff all of a sudden? His thought was interrupted by the Nurse's next comment.

"You don't dare leave without seeing Rose. She talks about you all the time."

"Really. About me?"

Her run of complementary remarks was overwhelming to Zach.

"She's on break. I think you'll find her in the cafeteria . . ."

"Chowing down on a cheese Danish, I'll bet," Zach said, interrupting.

"I'd bet you're right, there," she agreed with a smile.

Zach signaled Rob where he was going and Rob nodded his approval, as he continued listening with apparent interest to the man. Zach entered the cafeteria and stopped to search for the familiar face. Before he found it . . .

"Zachary David Thomas," came Rosie's familiar, far too loud greeting from across the room. She waved to get his attention. Everyone turned to look. Zach felt slightly embarrassed but that was nothing like the embarrassment he felt as she put him into a full-blown bear hug and kissed him smack dab on the lips - right there in front of two dozen strangers, no less.

Rosie signaled the cash register lady and soon a roll and glass of milk arrived for Zach. Rosie knew all the right questions to ask. She was as easy to talk with as Rob. If she had been just ten years older, Zach would have tried his hand at matchmaking. If Rob had been ten years younger, Zach would have had them married and well on the way to adopting him. None of those fantasies could be, and the boy knew it, but thinking about them brought a smile to his heart.

Rosie's beeper beeped and Zach accompanied her back to the main desk. It had been a wonderful twenty minutes. As she disappeared behind the closed doors of the emergency entrance, he wondered if he'd ever see her again.

"Mr. Franklin is with Mr. Browning in his office," the first nurse told Zach. Make yourself at home. I suppose by now you know all the comfortable spots around here. Their meeting never takes long."

Meetings? Never take long? All signs pointed to the fact that the old man had some kind of a relationship with the hospital and that it had been going on long before the accident. Rob had some secrets! Zach wondered if they were any of his business. As to knowing all the comfortable spots, that really wasn't true. He had mostly just been in and out of Rob's room. He hadn't really explored the building. Perhaps this was his chance to do that.

Zach roamed the reception area and peeked into the business office. He went to the end of a hallway that he had not been in before. He looked out the window onto the parking lot and then turned to see where else he might go. It was just as he was about to treat himself to a ride (or ten) in the elevator that he spotted it. It was a large bronze plaque on the wall in a fancy sort of sitting area beside the Chief of Staff's office door.

Zach moved in for a closer look, knees on the chair in front of the plaque. He reached out and felt its cold, hard surface as he read the mystifying words. "Franklin Memorial Hospital. Established by Robert W. Franklin in loving memory of his wife, Virginia Ann Franklin, and his son, Eric Robert Franklin." There were some dates that coincided roughly with Rob's arrival at the Home. The more Zach learned the less sense it all made.

Zach asked himself what he really knew about the old man. He had been an orphan and had grown up at the Home. He had been married and had a son. The wife and son died in a car accident. He had been a teacher and now was a handyman. Not much, really, and none of it suggested he could have given the gazillions of dollars it took to build that hospital. It must be some other Robert Franklin.

He turned and plopped down into the chair only to see that Rob had come up behind him and had been watching over his shoulder.

Handing his crutches to Zach, Rob took a seat beside him. Patting Zach's knee, Rob began to speak.

"Pretty nice plaque, wouldn't you say?"

Zach sat speechless, nodding a single, feeble nod as he looked up into his old friend's face.

Rob continued.

"It seems that you and I now both know my secret, don't we?"

Again, a single nod and a host of unanswered questions reflected on his brow.

"Well," Rob went on, "I'll explain it all to you, but I have to ask one very important favor of you - best friend to best friend."

Zach was well ahead of him.

"That I don't never tell nobody our secret."

"You know me pretty well, don't you? Yes, that's the favor and you must promise me that you will never give it away to anybody."

"Whatever you say, Rob. I'll never tell anybody. You can count on me."

"I know I can." He patted the boy's leg again and said, "Let's get on our way to the Elms and we can finish this talk in the van."

The five minutes it took for them to say good-bye to the staff seemed like an eternity to Zach. Here he was on the threshold of the biggest secret in the world and everybody wanted to make small talk.

At last, they were on their way. Zach loosened his seat belt just enough to allow him to sit back against the door with his legs crossed Indian style on the seat. From there he could look directly into Rob's face and not miss a single word, a single look, or a single inflection of his voice.

Rob began.

"I have probably been the most fortunate man who ever lived, Zach. I had a wonderful family, work that I truly enjoyed and I've always been able to get on well with the people around me. I've traveled the World and gained a wide-ranging education. Along the way, I happened to invent a few things that made me a lot of money."

"It must have been a real lot," Zach interjected.

"Yes. You could say it was a 'real lot.' My wife and I were both uncomfortable with all that money so we found places to use it that helped make life better for lots of people. Mostly, we just lived off my salary as a teacher."

"Wow! That sounds like you, though. Your wife must have been a really good person, too, huh?"

"She was the best, Zach. I hope that someday you will find that very same kind of wonderful partner. Anyway, while they were alive, one of our charities was the Home where you and I live. We set up what's called a trust fund. That's a large sum of money that draws interest and the Home can use those earnings any way it sees fit. When I lost my family, I added enough to that trust fund to pay my salary until I retired. I could think of no other place I'd rather be than back where I had grown up."

Zach's eyes grew bigger and bigger as the story progressed.

"It was an anonymous gift. That means no one but the board of directors knows about it. Not even Miss Fitz - and no one must ever know. Right?"

"Right," Zach affirmed solemnly. "What about the hospital?"

"My wife and I had contributed to the old Bloomington Hospital for years. When she and Eric died, I decided to put all the money I had at the time into a new hospital in their names."

"That was really a great thing to do," Zach said. "Can I ask a question?"

"Certainly."

"So now you don't have any money except what you make at the Home?"

"I live on that money, Zach. I have another trust fund that will more than take care of my needs when I retire."

"Oh. Good! I've been worried about that, ya know."

"Well, no, I didn't know, but I appreciate your concern. You are a good person, Zach."

"It takes one to know one, they say," Zach said, not really joking - more like acknowledging Rob's comment without having to get emotional about it.

Rob smiled back, fully understanding what was taking place.

"So, what did you invent?" Zach asked content that he knew all the other information that was relevant.

"Lots of little things. You know those tube-like arms that keep storm doors from slamming shut?"

"Yeah."

Well, I invented a way for that tube to actually pull the door tight after it closed."

"What else?"

"Several gadgets to help people with crippled hands - things to help them open jars and cans and door knobs."

"What else?"

"A toothbrush for traveling that has the toothpaste in the handle so you don't have to mess with an extra tube. You just turn a little wheel at the end of the handle and the toothpaste gets pushed up through the bristles for you."

"Cool. What else?"

"An attic ventilation fan that is powered by solar energy."

"And that stuff really made you lots of money?" Zach seemed disappointed that the inventions weren't along the lines of space shuttles or CD players.

"Sure did. Nothing very fancy but all things people seemed to want to buy."

The conversation died a natural death at the same moment as they pulled up in front of a huge old house - mansion would better describe it. It was set back at the edge of a vast front lawn dotted with tall old pine trees and protected from the street by a thick evergreen hedge about ten feet tall. Upon closer inspection, Zach noticed that the hedge actually encircled the entire acreage. The three-story house was made of white brick. Zach counted twelve windows across the front on the top two floors and six on the side. He estimated that meant there were more than fifty rooms above the first floor. He had never been in such an enormous house. He thought the Thompson's was huge with twelve rooms on two floors - well fourteen rooms on three floors if you counted the basement that opened out onto the back lawn at the base of the hill on which the house had been built.

The sign over the white wooden gate at the entrance to the long winding sidewalk read, "The Elms Retirement Home." Under that in much smaller, cursive lettering it said, "Home to forty-nine really nice people and one old fogey." Zach interpreted that to mean that those who lived there had a sense of humor much like Rob's.

"Well, this is it, my friend," Rob said pulling to a stop at

the curb.

"It's full of old people," Zach said showing both surprise and disappointment.

"I've found that retirement homes are usually filled with old people. I warned you it might be boring."

Zach trotted around the van and opened Rob's door, helping him out and fishing behind the seat to get the crutches.

"I'm going to try it without the crutches, Zach. I don't want my friends to have to feel sorry for me."

"It's dumb pride, I'd say," Zach mumbled under his breath, clearly upset at Rob's decision.

They were no sooner through the gate than several old folks came rushing out to greet them. (Well, rushing as fast as seventy-five year olds ever rush!) From the reception they gave Rob, Zach figured he was really popular there. He still didn't get the connection. Maybe it was another one of his charity things. The events of that past hour had left Zach's head reeling.

"And this must be young Zachary," said a woman who, in Zach's opinion, was wearing way too much make up on her face and had far too much purple tint in her hair. He also decided that he might as well give into the fact everybody over thirty was just going to call him Zachary.

Nevertheless, Zach was surprised and pleased that she knew who he was. Rob must have been telling them about him. It was nice to think that Rob thought about him when he wasn't even around. Suddenly he felt important and the prospects for the day seemed to have just improved.

As they progressed up the walk, a virtual army of old codgers emerged onto the big porch to greet them. It was Zach's happy impression that they were just about as pleased to see him as they were to see Rob. They asked him about school, about his room at the home, even about the Thompsons. It seemed his life was an open book around there.

They were soon inside. Rob immediately took a seat on a couch in the large living room where several other men joined him. They began chatting about things Zach didn't understand. He assumed it was "educated stuff" that he

hadn't learned about yet. Two women - the old purple-haired lady and another who could have been her mother - whisked Zach off to the kitchen. They just assumed that all growing boys loved to eat all the time. It was true, but the way they went about it tickled Zach.

They offered him interesting choices, he thought: milk, orange juice or lemonade; potato chips, pretzels or popcorn; and cinnamon toast, doughnuts or lemon pie. It seemed to be a 'select one from each category' sort of offer.

"Milk and a doughnut would be great," he told them. Soon, they had him spilling his guts about every aspect of his life history. They seemed to feel that no topic was off limits. It wouldn't have surprised Zach to have them ask the date when his first pubic hair appeared. Even so, Zach didn't mind. Their questions, rather than putting him off, somehow made him feel quite important. Like Rob, they were easy to talk with.

Two glasses of milk and three doughnuts later, Rob and his two friends appeared at the kitchen door.

"We thought we should check and see if you needed rescuing," Rob joked, immediately sitting down next to him at the table.

"You can't have him. We found him and we're going to keep him" the older of the two ladies snapped back.

"I just need to borrow him and his strong young legs for two minutes, okay." He turned to Zach. "Would you run out and get my crutches. Neither my legs nor my dumb stubborn pride were as strong as I thought they'd be today."

"Well, thank God you came to your senses, Old Man!" He turned to the ladies.

"He really is a stubborn old guy, you know. I'll just be a minute. Excuse me. Keep those doughnuts warm," he joked.

The 'excuse me,' impressed them all, including Zach, who seemed more than a little pleased with himself.

Upon his return, Rob asked him to accompany him to the third floor. Zach worked the elevator buttons like a pro. Rob was impressed.

"Where did you master elevator operation?"

"One place we used to live was right across the street from a office building and me and my friend Jimmy used to play hide and seek all over that building - in the basement, on

the roof and everywhere in between. You get good at elevators doing that. The button panel was just like this one."

"Sounds like Jimmy is a pretty good friend."

"Was a pretty good friend. All my friends are 'was friends'. That's just the way it's always been. Make a friend, move away and lose a friend."

"But this Jimmy sounds special."

"Yeah, he was. His mom really liked me. I'd stay over at their place when my mom . . .uh . . . needed our place to . . .uh . . . entertain her men friends."

Zach, his head still straight ahead, looked up at Rob out of the tops of his eyes. Rob nodded, indicating that he understood about how it must have been with his mother and men sometimes. Nothing more would ever have to be said.

Rob showed him to a large corner room at the end of the hall. On the door was a little sign that read Rob Franklin.

"What's this?" Zach asked.

"This, my young friend, is where I'm going to live when I leave the Home."

Rob opened the door and they entered. It was bright, with sun streaming in from windows on two sides of the room. It was much larger than his room back at the Home. There was a small separate kitchen area and a big bathroom. There was a double bed - at the Home, he had a single - a couch and matching chair and a small dining room table. There was a TV and a stereo and a huge bookcase already filled with books. There were lamps, curtains, pictures, and tan carpeting. It was nice and very clean but to Zach, it just didn't look like Rob. He tried to be polite about it though, because it seemed to mean a lot to his friend.

"So. This is where you want to be when you retire, huh?" Zach asked.

Rob sensed that the strange wording and inflection of that question asked more than met the ear.

"Your message wasn't real clear, my friend. What are you saying?"

"Oh, nothing. It's a great room - big and light and books and everything."

It was a poor cover-up job but Rob wouldn't press it just then. Zach changed the subject.

"So, this is where you come every Wednesday, huh?"

"Yup."

"These old guys are your friends, then?"

"Yes. I've known some of them for many years."

"They're all teachers or something close to that, aren't they?"

"You're very observant. Yes. This is a teacher's retirement home. How in the world did you . . .

Zach grinned, cutting off Rob in mid-sentence. "Snooty-English-teacher-talk. The place reeks of it!"

They chuckled. Rob pulled Zach close.

"So, there's something about all this you don't think is right. Are you going to share it with me?"

"I don't want to spoil any of this for you."

"If you're as concerned as you seem to be, maybe it needs to be spoiled. I value your opinion. What gives?"

Zach gave Rob a squeeze and then gently pulled away.

"Two things! First, this room is nice but it's not you. Lacy white curtains? You need blue and brown plaid drapes. Carpeting? You need your old red-white and blue braided rug. Shiny new store window dining table? You'd be happier with a weatherworn picnic table. At least that's how I see it."

"I see. You said there were two things. What's the second?"

"Well, these old people seem really nice and I'm sure you enjoy getting together with them, but you're a kid-person. You need to have young people underfoot. If you ask me you'll just curl up and die if you have to move in here."

"My! It's like you've given this a lot more thought than just here today."

"Yeah. I've been sort of worried about you especially since the accident. I mean I'm really relieved to know you have a place to come to and that you have enough money. That's a big relief I'll tell you for sure. But, Rob, there ought to be a better place for you than hanging out with all these old people.

"I am an 'old people', Zach."

"Only in age. Miss Fitz and I talked about it. We've both known kids my age that were older than you in . . . in spirit, I guess is the word."

"I'll take that as a complement, Zach. You have to realize, though, that there aren't a lot of options for us old geezers. I could get a house but I don't want to live alone and soon it would be too much for me to take care of. I've given it a lot of thought. Sometimes you can't have everything you want. I think I can be happy here. You might notice that the couch makes into a bed so you can come and stay weekends when you aren't too busy with teenage boy stuff."

Zach examined the couch. It did make into a bed.

"Teenage?" he asked as if he didn't catch Rob's meaning.

"As I recall, next week is your thirteenth birthday, Pally."

"Oh yeah. I guess it is. Thirteen. I forgot that meant I'd be a teenager."

He fell quiet and went over to the bookcase where he ran his fingers along the spines of the books.

"Hey! What's this?" he said, something on the shelf catching his eye. He pulled out a thick, blue book and read from its cover. "Introduction to General Biology by Robert Franklin, MS."

"You wrote a book?" Zach asked in amazement.

"Several, actually," Rob said pointing to a set of six next to the open spot Zach had just made.

"My God, Old Man, you've done about everything."

Zach sat down in the big chair, opened the book to page one and began reading. It appeared that he had settled in to read the whole volume.

The sight, coupled with Zach's obvious interest amused Rob.

"You don't have to read it all right now. You may take it along if you want to. Just please don't let the adults back at the Home see it, okay."

"Another of our secrets, huh?"

"We seem to be getting quite a few, don't we?"

"Yeah. It's really great. I've never had important secrets before. But I'm up to keeping them. I won't never tell nobody. I promise."

"I know you will keep them. I trust you, Zach."

Zach closed the book and stashed it under his arm as if to never put it down.

"It's lunch time. Got any room left? I'm told that they eat pretty well around her on Sundays."

"They were roasting chicken in the kitchen. It really smelled great. I got room. Doughnuts are like cotton candy - they don't last long."

CHAPTER TEN

It was obvious to Miss Fitz. It was obvious to old Maudie. It was even obvious to young Billy.

"You're sure different since you and Old Rob went off in the van last week," Billy said to Zach at supper.

"Different how?" Zach asked partly amused and partly inquisitive.

"You ain't dumped over your food. You ain't been screaming at Miss Fitz. You ain't broke no windows or doors. You even been helping the second graders with their homework. You are just plain different."

"Is it okay, that I'm different?"

"It's okay. I like it when you sit by me like this."

"Well, how about a game of Chutes and Ladders after we get the dishes done?"

"I'll beat your pants off!" came Billy's delighted response.

Actually, it had been two weeks and things had been moving along on a very even keel. School was going well for Zach. There was a girl or six who thought he was cute and were not shy about telling him so. His birthday party at the Home had been a true surprise to him. The Thompson's were there, of course. They brought him a new ten speed and also a gift for each of the other children. His class was having a winter dance the week before Christmas. It called for dress up clothes so Zach and Bill had gone shopping. Maudie had been giving him secret dancing lessons. Miss Fitz found out and suggested - with a smile, even - that he watch the dance shows on TV in case Maudie's repertoire needed updating.

Rob continued to make progress, though he still tired easily. He was able to climb the stairs but chose to remain down on the first-floor a while longer. It just made life easier. The past Wednesday he had taken the truck by himself on his day off. Maudie and Miss Fitz continued to pump both Zach and Rob about that magical day they had together. It was met with smiling silence from Rob and a sing-songy, "I know something you don't," from Zach. That was usually accompanied by a brief, behind waving, dance.

Zach was spending each weekend with Bill and Mary. They picked him up from school on Fridays and returned him to the Home in time for supper on Sunday. He had a set of clothes at both places. The dog that he had demanded in the first conversation he had with the Thompsons was, by then, feeling quite at home and slept on the foot of Zach's bed even during the week when he wasn't there. It refused to behave for anyone but Zach and that was causing some problems.

Rob was pleased things were going so well for them. He missed his young shadow on the weekends, but it gave him more time again for Billy and the other younger children. The plan was for Zach to move to the Thompsons full time on January first. That was just ten days away.

Zach had mixed feelings about it. He wanted to make the move, but he still felt as though he was running out on Rob. Nothing Rob could say seemed to change that. Zach had given up trying to talk Rob out of moving to the Elms at the end of the year. Maudie said the Home just wouldn't be the same with the two of them leaving at once. A new, part-time handyman had been hired and Rob, with Zach's help, had been showing him the ropes. The kids seemed to like him. It hadn't registered with them that Old Rob was about to leave them. He would come back for visits, but it wouldn't be the same.

It was going to be a time for changes in everybody's life there at the home. Rob hoped it would be for the better all around. He had still not fully convinced himself that it would be.

* * *

It was ten fifteen on Saturday evening when Rob took the call. Bill Thompson was on the line. Zach was missing.

He had left the house sometime between eight and nine. His backpack and a few clothes were missing with him. There was a note. "I'm sorry I didn't work out for you. Love, Zach. PS. Don't worry about me. I grew up knowing how to survive on my own."

They talked for some time trying to figure out what might have gone wrong. Rob had no inkling that the boy had been planning to run away. In fact, he was quite sure it had not been planned.

"Did anything upsetting happen this weekend?" Rob asked, looking for the obvious reason first.

"Nothing that Mary and I can think of. We've been over and over everything. He had stayed up way too late last night watching a Three Stooges marathon on TV, so he said his was going to bed early and about eight he said goodnight and went down to his room.

"Mary and I sat up talking about things for quite a while. At one point, we heard him rummaging through the refrigerator out in the kitchen. He often did that in the evening so we didn't think twice about it. That was the last we heard of him. It would have been about eight thirty. At nine, I went down to say goodnight and found that he was gone. "

"Where was the note?" Rob asked.

"That's a funny thing. It was under his pillow like he didn't want us to find it right away."

"He was building in a little head start for himself, I imagine. Still it's encouraging that he left a note, I think - especially the PS. You have no idea how he might have got the idea he wasn't working out for you."

"Absolutely none. We have replayed everything that went on this weekend. It all just seemed wonderful to us. He seemed happy. He joked. Yesterday we laid the purple carpet he selected for his room. He had his usual good appetite. He played with Rosie - that's his dog. It's a male, but nothing would do but that it be named Rosie. That dog is probably the only thing that isn't going so well. She just won't mind us. Last week she went on a rampage, breaking a lamp and ruining several of Mary's newest paintings. That's one of the things we were talking about this evening. We decided the dog had to go and were trying to figure out the best way to tell

Zach."

"Did Zach overhear any of that conversation?" Rob asked.

Bill relayed Rob's question to Mary and they talked between themselves for a moment.

"We think he might have. It was that conversation that was interrupted by the kitchen noise. Usually, after his goodie raid, he comes in to show us what he's taking - nothing we ever asked him to do - just something he started on his own."

Again, Bill turned his attention to something Mary was saying at the other end.

"Oh, my, Rob. Mary was just remembering something I said. It was about Rosie, but if Zach only got in on part of it, he could have misinterpreted things. I said, 'Obviously, it just isn't working out with him. We're just going to have to give him back.' Do you suppose . . . ?"

"Yes, I do suppose," Rob said. "Okay, now we have to figure out where he'd go. I'm sure he had an escape plan when he first arrived here but he didn't ever share it with me. Who would he run to?"

The Thompsons had no idea. Rob had two.

"I'll make a couple calls. Are you going to call the police?"

"I guess we better. We didn't want to because we were afraid he'd be so frightened if they started chasing him."

"Better frightened for five minutes than out on the streets all night, don't you think?"

"Certainly. I'll call them right away."

"I'll get back to you after I make a few contacts," Rob said and he hung up.

His first call was to alert his friends at The Elms. It was a long shot but it was better than no shot at all. If Zach wanted to be found, he'd run to somewhere he was known.

His second call was to Mrs. Elliott, the juvenile probation officer. He wondered if she had anything in his record that might indicate where his friend Jimmy lived. She didn't. Rob's heart sank. He called Miss Fitz who was at a friend's for the evening. He had never had to call the number before, although she had left it on several occasions. To his surprise, it was a man's voice that answered. Although

pleased at the fantasy that prompted, he had no time for it. He filled her in on the turn of events and related to her all that he knew.

"Call Mrs. Elliott back. Have her check for alternative phone numbers given the schools in case of illness. Maybe we'll get lucky and find a Jimmy or James or Mrs. Jimmy somebody - assuming the kid was named after his dad. It's a long shot."

"What a great idea," Rob said. "I'll get right on it."

"I'll stay here in Bloomington. If he's found here I can go right to him."

"Another good plan. I'll call you when I know anything."

She had one final comment. It was delivered in a deliberately sexy tone of voice. "And, for your information, I'm not at my brother's house." She hung up. Rob could almost see her doing Zach's little dance at the other end of the line.

Rob decided that made her nearly human. He shook his head and chuckled as he dialed. Mrs. Edwards began the search.

"I'd say Zach would have been between eight and ten when he knew Jimmy, if that narrows the territory for you."

It did and five minutes later she picked up the phone.

"Mrs. James Arthur. I have a phone number and an address. It may be old. These people move often. Shall I call?"

"If you call and he's there, he'll be alerted and run again. How about calling the address to the police? The Thompsons have already called them."

"That makes sense. I'll take care of it. Buy the way let me give that information to you in case you need it." She reeled it off and Rob copied it down.

Although the Thompsons lived in the Carlton School District, they were only about twenty minutes from Bloomington. Rob called them back and filled them in. They wanted the address of his friend just in case. They wanted to be there when he was found.

Fifteen minutes passed and no word. Rob was worried. He paced back and forth ignoring the pain in his tired hip and legs.

"Where else?" he asked out loud.

He picked up the phone to make sure it had a dial tone. There was no reason to think it wouldn't but when you're waiting you just want to make sure.

Twenty-six minutes. The phone rang. It was Mrs. Elliott. The police report that they found Mrs. Arthur but she has no son. She was just a friend of Zach's mother.

"Any other ideas?" she asked.

"Yes. One. But it may be foolish. Anyway, here it is. Zach talked about playing with Jimmy in a ten-story office building with an elevator. It was directly across the street from the apartment he and his mother had. I got the idea Jimmy lived in the same building. Their apartment had a South window for her flowers so the street would be an east-west street. The elevator system was relatively new apparently made by the same company that installed the one at The Elms Retirement Home on Fremont Avenue. That would have been three to five years ago. And one more thing. That office building had a security guard at a front desk. Zach once went into great detail describing how he and Jimmy would crawl on their hands and knees in front of the desk to get by him without being seen. Maybe that will give the police something to work from."

"It's worth a try. I see that most of Zach's addresses were in the southeast section of town. Maybe between the two, the police can patch it all together."

She hung up. Rob went back to pacing. Eleven o'clock came and went. Eleven thirty. Twelve thirty. Two a.m.

Apparently, he had finally nodded off to sleep in his big chair. The phone awakened him at three-ten.

"Hello, Rob here."

It was Bill.

"We found him, right where you said he'd be. We don't know how to thank you. From your description, the police had it figured out in no time. Then it was just a matter of going door to door."

"Is he okay?" Rob asked, a bit perturbed that Bill was going on so with the unimportant details.

The voice that responded was not Bill. It was Zach.

"He's okay. He feels really stupid - like the dumbest old fart that ever lived, but he's okay. Bill and Mary explained

everything. I thought they were talking about me but they were talking about the dog."

"Well, I'm just so relieved to know that you're all right."

"I'm really sorry I put everybody through all this. I didn't think ahead very good. I acted like Fitzenheimer, didn't I?"

Rob wasn't sure what he meant. "How's that?"

"She's always jumping to conclusions without getting all the facts first."

"Well, yes, in that way you acted a lot like her. I have a feeling it isn't fatal, however and I predict a full recovery."

Rob heard the faintest of chuckles and then, the reward of a lifetime, "I love you Old Man."

"I love you, too, Zach."

It had been a night none of the players would ever forget.

* * *

It was December 23rd - Rob's birthday. It was the last one he would spend at the Home. That made it a difficult time for Rob. He had held it together pretty well through those past six months, but with his seventieth birthday, retirement, and the move away from the Home all coming in on him at once, he suddenly became quite sad.

He tried not to show it outside his room and probably went too much overboard the other way trying to cover it up. He smiled too much. He joked too often. He tickled the kids longer than necessary.

He and Zach hadn't had a good long talk about anything important for weeks. Although he missed it, Rob thought that was probably a good sign that suggested the boy was moving closer to his soon-to-be-parents - and that was how it should be. They were going to be his family and it was they he had to trust and confide in. Knowing what was right and feeling comfortable about it were not necessarily the same things. It was just one more thing that contributed to Rob's case of the blues.

Rob knew there would be a 'surprise' birthday party for him that evening and he gave himself a pep talk to help get him through it. It would begin at seven o'clock - that's when all surprise parties had begun at the Home since he was a boy. Suddenly it seemed like an eternity since he had been a boy.

He sat in his chair waiting to go to supper feeling lower and lower and lower. Then Zach arrived.

In a hushed voice, he asked, "All ready for your big surprise party tonight?"

The absurdity of the concept of being ready for a surprise caused a smile - broad and genuine. It felt good.

"Well, I guess I am now that you are here," Rob said with a sigh.

"You not feelin' well?" Zach asked sensing something was wrong.

"Just letting the old man, moving out, retirement blues get to me there for a minute. Thanks to you, I'm fine again."

Zach wasn't at all sure he should believe that but went along with it.

"Let's go eat," he suggested. "I'm starved. We both need something to tide us over until cake and ice cream time."

Zach had become so used to helping Rob up out of chairs that past six weeks that he automatically put out a hand. Rob happily took it, even though he no longer needed it. Well he no longer needed it for support but it was always nice to receive the lad's gentle touch.

The party came and went. Everyone had a good time. Even Miss Fitz wore a paper hat and blew on a rollout whistle. Rob fantasized it was because she was so happy to finally get rid of him. Zach saw it as definite progress in her social development. The kids just looked on in wide-eyed wonder. The fact was, it was as close as she could bring herself to say, "Thanks Rob, for all your help around here. I have finally come to really appreciate you." Perhaps someday, she would be able to do that with words, face to face. For the time being, a rolled-out whistle launched into his face would have to suffice.

Although Zach had spent most of the party at Rob's side, his eyes often wandered toward Bill and Mary who had come to help celebrate. They had become very fond of Rob, as everyone always did.

One after another the children filed by, giving Rob the gift they had made for him. Each one was accepted with thanks and special words tailor made for the particular child. Finally, it was Zach's turn. He leaned close and whispered in

Rob's ear. "You are going to so love what Mom and Dad - well, Mary and Bill and me got you."

Rob thought to himself that it would have to be quite wonderful to be any better than Zach's slip of the tongue about mom and dad had just been. Rob's eyes moistened. They wanted to cry but he wouldn't allow it.

"Close our eyes," Zach directed. "This will take a minute."

Rob began counting out loud as if to time them.

"One, one thousand, Two, one thousand . . ."

The kids joined in. On the count of sixty Zach told him he could open them.

There may have been stranger gifts given during that century but Rob doubted it. There most certainly had not been a more carefully planned or thoughtfully executed gift, however. There before him - six feet long and three feet wide was the most beautiful picnic table Rob had ever seen. It was finished like the most expensive walnut dining room table ever made.

Rob first looked at Mary and Bill. Bill shrugged his shoulders as if to say, 'What can you do when your son is determined about something.'

He got up and reseated himself on one of the two beautiful matching benches that accompanied it. He tried his elbows on the table. He felt the smooth finish. He looked close and saw his reflection. He gathered the children around so they could see themselves, too.

"I don't know what to say. It is absolutely wonderful. Surely you didn't find it in a store."

Zach sidled up next to Bill, putting his arm around his waist.

"Nope. We looked and looked but when we found out nobody made 'em, we decided to make it ourselves."

"Really. You two made this? My goodness. You are really talented!"

"Well, since it's kind of a tradition around here to make the gifts we give each other anyway, it all worked out pretty good, huh?" Zach observed.

Rob sat speechless. Zach rescued him.

"You know that table you have in your . . . oops! . . . I

mean, let's see. If you happen to know of any other old table that's not going to be used, I thought maybe it would be nice to put it out in the front hall here at the Home. We really have to do something to make that place more cheerful, ya know. It's gosh awful gloomy."

Rob looked directly into Zach's face.

"I just happen to know where there is such a table and I think it would look great out there."

By bedtime, Rob was feeling much better. The children were each pleased, feeling certain that Old Rob had liked his or her present the best of all. Miss Fitz was considering ways of making the entryway seem more inviting. Maudie was handling her own sadness about losing both Zach and Rob by belting out old fashioned fire and brimstone hymns as she did up the dishes from the party. Zach was finally experiencing that most wonderful of all feelings: the one that he and Rob had talked about so often - the joy that only comes through unselfish giving. Rob called it charity or altruism. Zach simply called it love.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Growing up, Rob had often felt cheated because his birthday came so close to Christmas. Currently it wasn't that at all. It was just that too much seemed to be going on at the same time. It had been Zach's birthday a few weeks before, then Rob's, soon to be followed by the children's Christmas program at church, then Christmas and a week later the New Year's Eve party at the Elms. This year that event was being turned into a 'Welcome Rob to the Elms' affair. That would be no more of a surprise to him than had his birthday party. The blues just wouldn't be shaken.

Gradually his usually warm, full, smile became the mere suggestion of a smile. His jokes became less frequent. Even his usually erect posture seemed to slump. Leaving his beloved life at the home was to be far more difficult than Rob had imagined. He refused to begin packing until the last possible moment. He used the excuse that he didn't want to upset the children. In truth, it was to minimize his own sadness.

Christmas was on Friday. It was Thursday and Rob had just finished lunch with Billy and the three other children who were left behind for the holidays - none of them having any relatives that would take them for the season.

Rob had put on a good show and kept the children giggling throughout lunch. Zach was spending the school holiday with his new family. It was as though he had already left Rob's life and Rob understood that was for the best. The boy needed a set of younger parents who possessed the necessary energy to keep up with the frantic pace a teenage

boy set. They obviously had grown to love each other. Zach's life was going to be wonderful - something no one could have predicted just three short months before.

"Self-pity killed the cockroach," Rob said out loud, as he slowly climbed the stairs to the attic room. He didn't fully understand that old saying, but he had known it since he was a small boy. It seemed to mean that feeling sorry for yourself could come to no good end regardless of how bad things seemed.

Although his things were now all downstairs, Rob still enjoyed spending time looking out at the familiar snow covered view from the big window in his old room. He pulled a wooded crate close and took a seat.

Presently, thumping up the stairs, came the unmistakable clatter of Zach. The old man's heart gladdened. He checked to make sure there were no tears poised to trickle down his cheeks.

"Thought you might be up here," Zach said, unbelievably not the slightest out of breath.

Rob stood and met the boy's lingering embrace.

"Okay. Here's the deal," Zach began.

Rob understood that signaled that something out of the ordinary was about to be suggested - imposed might be a better term. Rob smiled at Zach's enthusiasm and settled back onto his make shift seat to listen.

"Me and Mom and Dad - they said it was okay to call them that if I felt right about it - we decided to start our new Christmas tradition by doing two things. We're going to open our presents on Christmas Eve - that's tonight. And second," his eyes danced at the mere thought of what was about to be said, "You're always going to come and be with us on Christmas Eve - if you agree to it, of course."

Not waiting to give Rob time to think it over he went on, "Well, what do you say? Is this a great idea or what?"

Since Zach had already decided it was a done deal, he couldn't understand why Rob hesitated - if five seconds truly counted as hesitation.

"Well? Well?" Zach persisted.

"It is a wonderful invitation and I'll be pleased to accept it, at least for this year."

"Just this year?" Zach asked, his smile evaporating.

"Zach, I can't know what turn my life will take during this next year. I think it's just best to wait and see before making any long-term promises that I may not be able to keep."

Slowly Zach's face re-lit into its usual radiance. I can see that. By this time next year, you may be hitched up with some rosy-cheek old gal from the Elms, huh?"

"That is not in my plans although some kind of female companionship is certainly possible. I think I'm ready finally ready for that."

"Well, we came to get you. Mom and Dad are waiting downstairs. Doesn't that sound great - Mom and Dad. I really feel that way about them, ya know."

"Yes, Zach. It really does sound great."

"How about we change you out of that awful flannel shirt and into your red sweater. That would be less lumberjack-like and more festive, don't you think?"

Suddenly, Zach had become his fashion advisor as well as his entertainment director. The boy's new love interest at school must have been altering his perspective on the male wardrobe.

"Good suggestion. Let's go down to my room and make the transformation."

As he closed the door, Rob wondered if he would ever visit that room again. Just in case he might not, he turned and said 'goodbye'. It was too low for Zach to hear but the cobwebs, and the shadows and the wide wood plank floors all seemed to receive the old man's love-filled message.

Before long, Zach had Rob suitably dressed and they were into the car and on their way to Zach's new home.

"We got the place so decorated up you'll never believe it. We made a huge wreath for the front door. You'll love it! I got the wood all sawed up for the fireplace. We're going to have one roaring blaze this evening. Me and Mom made wax candles for the mantle. I never knew you could just make candles. She knows all about those craft things. They're the fattest, tallest candles you've ever seen. They look like waffles on the outside."

Zach's chatter continued right up to, and through, the front door. He took Rob's coat and hung it in the closet.

"Can I show Rob my room first?" he asked Mary.

Rob was impressed at how that part of the parent-son relationship seemed to be developing.

"Sure. There's nothing much going on until dinner," Mary answered.

"When she says 'dinner' she really means 'supper'," Zach explained.

From the round of chuckles it provoked, such things were clearly the source of good-hearted fun within this newly forming family. How right that seemed to Rob.

There were two very large, yet cozy, rooms downstairs. They had windows and sliding patio doors across the entire width of the outside wall. They opened out onto a large stone patio, that day covered in fresh white snow. Zach explained that the other room was just like his in size and layout. Each had a private bath and an enormous closet. Across the hall to the front of the house were several smaller rooms - the laundry, workshop, furnace room and storage area.

The room looked like Zach - from the purple carpeting on the floor to the posters on the walls. There was a computer, a stereo, a small TV, bunk beds and a study area. A row of shelves occupied most of the back wall. Also, there were the usual dresser, lamps and beanbag chairs.

"Where's Miss July?" Rob joked assuming that it was, in fact, just a joke.

With a cheek-busting grin, Zach flipped over one of the 'superhero' posters, which hung by cord from a nail.

"She's Miss August, actually."

He flipped it back, assuming an old man Rob's age wouldn't be interested in such things.

"Dad said it would embarrass Mom so we worked out this arrangement."

It was then that Rob first noticed it there on a shelf at the study desk. It was a picture, framed in glass and sitting toward the front for easy and frequent viewing. It was one of Rob and Zach, taken by Maudie while they had been repairing the backstop at the Home.

Zach noticed Rob's attention to it.

"That's my favorite," he explained. "You made me do things that day I never knew I could do. I'd say, 'I can't,' and

you'd say, 'give it a try'. I kept being amazed at all the things I could do. It made me feel really important - like there was some worth to me after all. It may have been the greatest day of my life."

"The way I remember it, you griped constantly through the whole ordeal," Rob said with a chuckle.

"Yeah. I guess that was as close to saying 'thanks' as I could come, back then."

'Back then', of course, had been less than three months before. The boy had blossomed on all fronts during that time. Rob picked up the picture to take one last close look.

In hushed tones that were in no way called for, Zach confided, "You'll find one for you in your sock on the mantle." That merited a squeeze-each-other-at-the-waist-thing.

The biology book was on the table beside Zach's recliner. Zach rushed to explain.

"Before you think the wrong thing let me explain. I was reading in it one evening when Dad came in and he spotted it before I could hide it. He picked it up and said it was the same book he had used when he was a sophomore in high school. He said he had figured that it was you that wrote it. He's good about putting two and two together. So, see, he already knew - sort of - so I really didn't give away our secret. I was going to tell you about it."

"You are absolutely right. You didn't give away our secret." Rob picked up the book and noticed a bookmarker half way through the last chapter. "You've read this far already?" Rob said, making it a question.

Zach looked a bit sheepish.

"Well, not really. It's the chapter on human reproduction - I guess you know that, though."

"As I recall you once told me that you knew all about that sex stuff."

Another grin from Zach.

"Well, I do of course. I was just checking it out to make sure you had it all straight in there."

That deserved a good ruffling of the boy's hair. Earlier it would have remained mussed until Miss Fitz admonished him to do something about it. That time, however, the comb was whipped out of his hip pocket and his locks were

immediately put back in order.

"Dad got me two other books about sex - sort of." He took them off the shelf. "This one is about growing up from a boy to a man. I'm getting there pretty fast, you know. The other one is about the real thing, s-e-x. Dad is really good that way. He remembers how it was to be thirteen himself, I think. At least he seems to answer most of my questions even before I ask them. He's kind of like you in that way - comfortable to talk to. Mom is too, but not about things like this."

"It sounds like you and he have a good thing going," Rob said.

Zach nodded, slowly and deliberately.

"We do. You know what Dad said when the cops brought me home after I ran away?"

"I imagine he said he loved you," Rob answered.

"Yeah. That's what he said but he used different words. He said, 'Let's cut out this kind of crap and get you adopted, Son.'"

"You're right, Zach, he was saying that he loved you.

Zach smiled and grew silent, putting the books back on the shelf.

"We're going to go to some judge's office and sign up as a family next Thursday. I want you to come and be there with me if you're free. Kind of like my best man, I guess."

"Of course, I'll be there with you Zach. Wild horses couldn't keep me away."

"It's a really big step," Zach went on.

"You have any doubts about it?" Rob asked more bluntly than his usual approach to such questions.

"Oh, no. It's made me happier than I ever thought I'd be in my whole life. There's just one more thing I have to take care of first."

"Take care of?" Rob said, leaving it as a question.

"Yeah. I'll fill you in about it later."

Suddenly, and quit unexpectedly, Rob felt the slightest twinge of jealousy. Zach had such a good thing going now in his life, while Rob's life was still very much up in the air. He was delighted for Zach. He was more than a little frightened for himself.

* * *

The evening meal - by whichever name you choose - was delicious. They had all of Rob's favorites - no coincidence he thought. There was ham, candied yams, dressing, mashed potatoes, creamed corn, green beans and, of course, pumpkin pie with whipped cream.

"I whipped the whipped cream," Zach said, bursting into rails of laughter. For some reason, it cracked all three of them up. Zach explained. "See. I thought I was helping, so before we left to go get you, I whipped up the cream and left it out on the counter. A half hour later all that was left was a puddle of muddy looking goo in the bottom of the bowl." Then, in a philosophic tone he added, "You know, before I came here I thought whipped cream only came in fizz cans."

After dinner, they took seats in front of the blazing fire. Zach lovingly took down each sock from where it had been hanging on the mantel, and delivered it to the one whose name had been beautifully appliquéd on its front.

"Mom made one for each of us. Is she something or what?"

Sure enough, in among the candy canes, apple, orange and walnuts, was Rob's framed copy of the picture. It was a truly precious gift, although only Zach and Rob fully understood that.

There were far fewer gifts under the tree than Rob had expected. In fact, a quick calculation suggested there were just three apiece, provided he had been included and he expected that he had. He asked Zach to get the three little gifts he had brought along in his coat pocket and the gift exchange began.

Before Zach began distributing the presents, Mary had something to say.

"This is a very special Christmas for Bill and me. We have our son who we love so deeply and we feel as though we are rapidly making his best friend, one of our best friends."

She reached over and patted Rob's arm, directing the next comment to him.

"You probably expected more presents under our tree, Rob. Well, so did Bill and I. We had some pretty big plans in fact. Zach had a different idea about that - a wonderful idea

and his dad and I are very proud of him. Zach suggested that since we have so much and so many children have so little, that he wanted them to receive the presents we were planning to give to him. He insisted that we give them anonymously."

She sniffled. Bill put his arm around Zach. Zach sat quietly, not knowing whether to be proud or embarrassed. Rob decided to speak before he started to cry.

"What a wonderful thing to have done, Zach. It doesn't really surprise me though, because you are a very good human being."

At that point, fully embarrassed, Zach tried to distract the attention from himself.

"It's mostly your fault, you know, Old Man," the boy said, playfully.

"Fault? Mine?"

Rob sounded genuinely baffled.

"Yeah. If we hadn't had all our special talks, your charity-thing wouldn't have rubbed off on me, like it did. Now I can't get rid of it no matter how many showers I take."

It was worth a smile all around. It may have been true, or at least partly true. That possibility made Rob feel warm and pleased.

They took turns, each person opening one present and then the next person and so on around the circle. It was a wonderful way for everyone to share in the excitement and pleasure of each present.

When at last, they had all been opened, Mary served hot chocolate with candy cane sticks for stirred in flavor.

Presently Bill spoke.

"It appears that we have ourselves a new son, Rob - but under one rather sticky condition."

Zach got up from his spot on the floor by the fireplace and stood between the still seated Bill and Mary, his arms around their shoulders and his face beaming.

"Only one condition," Rob joked. "Zach, you're slipping."

"Well only one that all three of us consider the most important one." Bill clarified.

Zach and Bill looked at Mary.

"I guess I've been appointed spokesperson for our

family," she began. "We seem to have two problems . . ."

Interrupting, Zach leaned down and whispered something in her ear. She started over.

"We seem to the three problems remaining around here. First, Bill and I have to be gone more than we wish we did - me to my art shows and Bill on business trips. So far, Zach has found reasons to disapprove of all the sitters we have interviewed. Second, this place of ours is so big that it's really difficult for us to keep up with the yard work, the pool, the repairs - things like that - especially now that we want to be spending time with our son. So, Zach made what Bill and I think is a wonderful suggestion. Zach, you take over from here."

Zach was not inclined to phrase it as a question - more as a huckster's, back-alley proposition.

"Me and Mary and Bill - Mom and Dad - we want to adopt you for our Grampa and have you live here with us. That way I'd have a built-in sitter, there would be plenty of odd jobs around here to keep you busy, and it would also solve our third huge problem. You see, we got that big, great looking room downstairs with a wonderful view of the valley and a private entrance. It's just sitting there, all-empty, and lonely, and needing a kind, mature person to look after it. And, best of all, it's right next door to one of the cutest darn kids you'd ever want to meet."

The three adults smiled, tickled at how the lad had put the offer together. Rob understood that it hadn't just been a spontaneous speech. Zach had planned it well to hit all the right chords in his old friend's heart.

As Old Rob just sat there overwhelmed, trying to absorb the totally unexpected proposal, Bill reiterated the main points from an adult's point of view.

"Here's how we see it. We need a handyman and a yard and pool keeper. Zach needs a live-in sitter. We all need a Grandfather - none of the three of us have one. You - we have been told by our resident expert on all things Rob - need a place to live that will keep you young and out of the clutches of unscrupulous, purple-haired, old ladies. We truly do want you to come and be a part of our family, Rob, but we understand that may not fit into your plans. We talked it out

and we won't be offended in any way if you turn us down. After all, it is your life."

Zach moved away from his parents to a spot beside Rob, putting his arm around his old friend's shoulder. Rob sensed it wasn't just the usual guy to guy arm around the shoulder. It was a gentle touch, accompanied by a series of slow, barely visible, loving pats. It said, 'We're too good a team to split up, Old Man, and anyway, we still need each other.'

Rob's eyes had long since been moist. There was a single quiver of his lower lip, which he silenced by drawing it up tight against the upper one. He cleared his throat and reached up, putting his big firm hand on top of Zach's.

"Well, you people make a convincing case. I will accept your kind and generous offer but under one very important condition."

The three Thompsons exchanged puzzled glances. Rob's eyes began twinkling, signaling that the blues were gone and the old Rob was back.

"What's the condition?" Bill asked, concern in his tone.

Rob began all quite seriously, although his intent was strictly to poke a little fun at Zach.

"The condition is this: That you all three realize, right up front, that I'm *me*, *Rob*, an original, and not just some Replacement Grampa."

In his uncontrolled delight, Zach leaned down and planted a huge, lingering kiss on the top of his new Grampa's head. They all smiled and laughed - the first of many, many such smiles and laughs they would share together as that new, loving family, in which no replacements were allowed.

The New Beginning