



The Secret Tree House Pact

By
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The Secret Tree House Pact

Intended for 9 to 13-year-old readers.

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[*Note to the Reader from the Authors:* Sometimes we use the *best* word instead of the *easiest* word. In those cases we often add a synonym in () behind it. When writing for this age span of young people between the ages 9 and 13 there may be some words the younger readers have not yet come across. We hope this helps grow your fantastic vocabulary.]

CHAPTER ONE

Did I Mention . . . ?

Eleven is a *great* age for a boy! Eleven is a *terrible* age for a boy! I'm eleven. I'm a boy.

My name is Ford – not like the car but my shortened version of Winford – my mother's maiden name that got attached to me as a first name before I was old enough to mount an effective protest. I think kids should have the right to choose their own names – say on their tenth birthday. I have lots of great ideas like that – trouble is, I'm usually the only one who thinks they're great.

Did I mention I'm a loner? I'm a loner. It's hard to say whether that has been my choice or it's been forced upon by me that 99 percent of the population that hates me. The evidence seems to be that it has been my doing. I don't understand why. It is never my intention to treat anybody badly. However, in my eleven, going on twelve, years it has been my experience that most people suck – really suck, big time! And just to leave no doubt, by *suck* I mean stink, are lousy, detestable, despicable, repugnant, vile, revolting, abominable, abhorrent, and loathsome. Don't worry if you don't know those words. They all mean really, really, stinky, sucky, people.

Did I mention I'm a nice guy? I'm a nice guy. Most people never learn that about me because they don't take time to get to know me. When younger, I wondered if I had become invisible, because I could walk down the hall at school and it was like nobody ever saw me – they didn't look at me, they didn't speak to me, they didn't move out of my way (or

step over me while I lay there on the cold, tile floor after being knocked down). Since then, I've determined I am all quite visible. People just prefer to ignore me. It's too bad. They are missing out on so much.

Did I mention I'm unhappy? I'm unhappy. Oh, I keep a smile plastered across my face, cheek to cheek just below my nose. I speak to everybody even though they don't speak back. It's my way of insisting to the world and the people in it that I am really here and not about to go away.

Sometimes, heck, lots of times, I wish I *could* go away. I guess, really, I *am* away – in my own private world since nobody will have anything to do with me. A few years back I tried getting in people's way and pestering them figuring if I irritated them enough they would at least yell at me or hit or me or do something that would tell me they saw me there. I gave that up because it became way too painful and I found that although I did seem to have lots in common with the dark inside of my locker and the bottom of trash cans, those were not my preferred places to live my life.

Wings would be nice, then I could just fly away when things got too unpleasant – or a jet pack – that might be even better. If I had super powers I *wouldn't* use them against the people that hate me. I'd try to help them; then, maybe, they'd see me for the nice guy I really am. It seems to me that hurting other people never makes things better and almost always makes things worse – in the long run. It's like: Billy hurts Johnny. Then Johnny and his friends think they have to hurt Billy, back. That makes Billy and his friends go back after Johnny and his friends. It never really ends – the violence and bad blood. It's why I choose to be a nice guy even if nobody knows it.

Did I mention I have a tree house? I have a tree house. It's in a small wooded area at the rear of our big back yard. Did I mention I live in a mansion with servants and rich parents? I live in a mansion with servants and rich parents. We all survive together at the edge of town on ten acres.

Alfred doesn't hate me. He's the servant that mostly takes care of me. He always has. I like him. We talk. He's the only person in the world that knows about my tree house. I've never let him see where it is, but I've told him about it and

showed him drawings I've made of it. Alfred always seems interested in me. I think that goes beyond the fact that my parents pay him to seem interested in me.

So, I got Alfred. I got me. I got my treehouse. I got more toys and junk than any two dozen eleven-year-olds could ever use. Did I tell you my parents are rich – in money, at least. They are rich – moneywise. I wish they thought they were rich because I was a part of their lives, but that doesn't seem to be the case. Many days I don't even see them. My father is busy making money and my mother is busy spending it.

I'm an only child. Did I mention that? I can't remember either of them – my parents – ever kissing me. Alfred used to kiss me on my forehead when he tucked me in at night. Somewhere along the line that stopped. When I was really little I loved baths because Alfred would tell me wonderful stories about when he was a boy – while he helped me with my bath. I take showers, now.

I don't understand my parents. Did I mention that? They hardly ever speak to each other – as far as I have determined. He has his business people. She has her society people. Alfred had a wife once. She died. I don't know if he has any friends now or not. He gets Saturdays or Sundays off and he never speaks about that time. Ever since I was really little, I've had the fantasy that some Sunday he'd take me with him. I can see now that's not going to happen. He deserves time away from me. I've come to understand that. Did I mention I'm very lonely? I'm very lonely.

So, I've got these parents – John and Betty (she prefers Beatrice) – who I really don't know very well. I live in this huge old mansion. The most important part about the mansion seems to be that it has to be kept spotlessly clean or mother throws a fit. I've never heard Father express an opinion about that. Since they never visit my room that rule doesn't seem to apply to me. I'm sure glad about that. There are two maids to take care of the cleaning. There is a car man – Billy – who, I suppose does what most car men do – keeps the five cars gassed up, clean, shiny and in good running order. There is a cook – Florence. I like her but, she's a first-floor person and I'm up here on the third floor.

I have four rooms in my *suite* – that’s what Alfred calls them/it. One is like a bedroom. One is like a playroom – mostly toys from when I was a kid. One is like my own living room – everything a guy my age hates – fancy furniture and frilly curtains only fit for grandmas. The other is my study room. I like it best of all. It has well-filled book cases on three sides, floor to ceiling windows on the other, a desk, a big library table, a globe of the world on a sturdy wood stand that sits on the floor, and two computers – a desk top and a laptop. Lots of other electronic stuff. I have a TV in there, but the big one is in my bedroom. I spend a lot of time sitting or reclining in the big window seat – it’s almost as big as a small bed. I can look across the back yard toward the woods. Did I mention my room is on the back of the house – third floor? My room is on the back of the house – third floor.

There’s a bathroom of course with a huge tub, a shower big enough for all the guys in my class to pay basketball in (I exaggerate sometimes), and a walk-through, hot air blower, so I don’t have to dry off with towels – just stand there until I stop dripping. There’s also the usual other bathroom stuff. Alfred says a family of five could live in there with room for relatives to drop by on the weekend. He tries to make jokes. Did I mention I like jokes? I like jokes. Unless I’m the one making them, jokes don’t happen very often around my house.

Did I mention I had one best thing? I have one best thing. You see, there is a very sturdy trellis that covers most of the back of the house. It is covered with ivy that stays green all year. I can reach it from one of the windows in my study room. Did I mention why it’s my one best thing? That’s because I can use it to get down to the ground and then climb back up later. Alfred knows. He doesn’t necessarily approve, but he understands. I had been using it for years before he discovered about it – I was eight at the time. It might have been dangerous for most little kids, but I was not just any little kid. I’m quite athletic and agile and careful and intelligent. You’d think those would work in my favor, but I haven’t found out how to do it – with kids, I mean. Anyway, I can come and go whenever I want to and know body knows.

Did I mention I was a misfit? I’m a misfit. Mother insists that I carry a brief case, wear slacks, dress shirt, tie and sports

coat to school. The other guys wear jeans and pullovers and tennies. Did I mention I have to wear shiny, leather shoes? I have to wear shiny, leather shoes. Back before I became invisible, the other kids made fun of me for how I dressed. I tried to blame my parents, but the kids had stopped listening to me long before they stopped seeing me.

Did I mention that Principal Wilson is a very nice man? Principal Wilson is a very nice man. He and I made an arrangement when I entered fourth grade – did I mention I'm finishing up 6th? Before school, he lets me enter his office through his private outside door and change into regular kid clothes in his private restroom. Although it was never said, I believe he and Alfred got their heads together about it because one-day Alfred put a sack of clothes in my brief case as I started off to school and told me to stop at the office first thing. Principle Wilson had hangers ready to receive my clothes. It hasn't made me popular or anything, but I feel like I'm more a regular kid now. I redress before I leave in the afternoons. My car guy – Billy – lets me off and picks me up at the office door. I doubt if he's in on it – the clothes thing, I mean.

Did I mention I'm rich, *and* I hate it? I'm rich and I hate it. I think it's partly why the other kids hate me. That's not saying I don't have habits or mannerisms that annoy them – I'm sure I do. Never having really been able to mix with other kids, I don't know much about how to be a regular kid. I probably try to talk with them the way I talk to Alfred and Dr. James. Did I mention I have a tutor – Dr. James. He teaches me about things that are more advanced and more interesting to me than the things the teachers teach in school – advanced math and literature and Spanish and German. Did I mention being smart doesn't count as a good social skill among middle school kids?

Boys my age are into sports, and girls my age are into boys who are into sports. I believe I mentioned I'm pretty good in athletics, but the other guys will never know that because they won't let me play with them. I have a half-court basketball set-up out back. I'm a good shot. Not sure how good I'd be in a game with actual players around me. I pretend they are there – I bob and weave and twirl. I also have

a swimming pool, enclosed in glass for year-round use. I'm fast and know all the strokes – Dad hired a coach for me last year. I work out in the pool almost every day – mostly practicing the butterfly stroke hoping to build up my chest. Alfred says my chest will build up when my chest builds up. I assume he means I have to wait for Mother Nature to do her thing.

Alfred and I play catch – we used to play catch more often. Alfred just turned fifty-five and I think it may be hard on his old bones. Did I mention I also have a tennis court? I have a tennis court with a ball toss machine. I think I'm pretty good. Someday I hope to face an actual human opponent. I can do 30 pushups and 10 pullups. According to Google, that's more than most boys my age.

I'm starting to wonder about girls. I mean I don't want to kiss on them like I know some boys my age do, but I'd like to get to know one. I hear they're different – they think differently – from us guys. I'd like to find out about that. Alfred says females tend to make peace and males tend to make war. I have started sorting girls into pretty and plain. I hate that I do that. It used to be a girl was just a girl and I could just like her depending on the sort of person she was. The older I get the more I see that slipping away and being replaced by the 'pretty or plain thing'. Did I mention I hate that about growing older? Dr. James says I'll get all that sorted out if I'm just patient.

Did I mention I've never been patient? I have never been content to be living in today, when tomorrow is just around the corner waiting to bring new wonders for me to think about and learn about. I often miss sleep over it – thinking about what the future has in store for me. Sometimes I cry myself to sleep at night because I have no friends and can't figure out how to get any – one, even.

Did I mention it seems to me that life isn't fair? Life doesn't seem to be fair. A kid should be able to be happy and have friends. I'm nice to all the kids. They aren't nice to me. Some of them take pleasure in tormenting (bothering) me. I'm not sure how they got to be those sorts of people. Maybe they don't have an Alfred in their lives. I credit Alfred with modeling for me the best ways to be a good person. Lots of good *that's*

done for me – *Boring Fording* – that's what's they call me. It makes no sense of course but they still use it to deride me (put me down).

Tomorrow's Saturday – the first day of a four-day weekend – end of the year teacher conferences on Monday and Tuesday. I love Saturdays!

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CHAPTER TWO

The Beginnings

I was up at the crack of dawn, that's what Alfred calls it. I have always been an early riser – between five and six. I'm usually ready for bed by nine. My schedule is pretty much up to me. Come to think of it, my life is pretty much up to me. I suppose lots of kids would think that would be great – nobody meddling in their life. It just tells me nobody cares enough about me to keep things straight in my life. I'd love for somebody to tell me it's time to go to bed, or to be sure to wash behind my ears or to go take a shower so I wouldn't stink. Those things would tell me somebody cared about me – that they were paying attention to me – maybe that they loved me and wanted things to go great for me.

That's not how it is in my life. Alfred comes close – he came closer when I was younger and actually needed more help. Sometimes Dad will ask me how things are going. I used to try and tell him, complete with all the specific things going on in my life. I found out he really just wanted me to answer, "Fine!" He'd pat me on my back or shoulder and say, "That's great, Winford."

I'd like for those conversations to be much longer. It would tell me he was *really* interested in me. I also wish he'd call me, 'son', instead of Winford. I've never told him how much I hated my name. Sometimes inside my head, especially when I'm feeling down, I yell at my parents for giving me that name. I've told Alfred how I feel. He said he was sure they thought they were giving me a great gift when they gave me my mom's maiden name. Did I mention, I hate

my name?

Saturday means no school, no harassing from other kids, no fear of being hurt by the bigger boys. Saturday means tree house day. I'm sure I mentioned I have a tree house. It's the one true joy of my life. I'm the boss, there. I'm safe, there. I keep changing it so I'm like its creator and caretaker. I look after it and help it grow. Let me tell you about it.

One day, when I was seven, I was walking in the woods looking for insects. When I find a new one I take a picture of it and later look it up and add the picture and information to my insect scrap book. I have a great graphics enlargement program on my computer. I have over 150 insects in it, now. Anyway, I often find new specimens on tree trunks or on tree leaves so I spend lots of time climbing up in the trees. One day, when I was fairly deep in the woods, I had climbed well up into a huge oak and when I looked down there it was – a wooden platform that had been built a good way up off the ground in a group of sturdy trees. I left the oak and walked to the cluster of trees that held the platform. I climbed until I was sitting on it – legs dangling over the edge. It was about eight feet wide, twelve feet long, and quite sturdy. It had been built over a base of 2 X 4's covered in one-inch plywood marked ACX – that means it was made to be used outdoors and could handle rain and snow and such without coming unglued. I had no idea how it got there, but it looked to be many years old. It was my woods and I claimed it for myself and immediately began having wonderful ideas about building an enclosed, room up there – a tree house – *my* tree house. I took out my pad and pencil – I always carry those things in my back pack for just such times.

I drew the base and marked where the supporting trees were so I could draw out some of my ideas later. The clump of 4 trees stood just inside a very small clearing in the woods. The woods was fifty or so yards wide and a hundred long – a football field is 100 yards long. I climbed down and surveyed it from all angles, imagining how my tree house might look. I wanted big windows for light but also solid walls for privacy and protection against storms and wild animals. I wanted a sturdy roof that would keep out rain and hold a load of winter

snow. It needed to be well built – tight – to keep out drafts and varmints like chipmunks and squirrels and birds and snakes and insects. I remember smiling at the thought that the insects were some of my best friends and there I was planning how to keep them out. Maybe I'd hang some pictures of them inside it. That had mostly been a joke.

Our car man's name is Billy – did I mention that? He is older than Alfred – in his seventies I imagine. He's always nice to me – polite and helpful. Billy lives in rooms over the garage. I've seldom been in them. He's a private sort of person. Sometimes when I'm bored out of my gourd, I go to the garage – it's on the east side of the back-lawn close to the house. He lets me help him wash the cars and watch as he tinkers with the engines. He always answers my questions. Did I mention I ask LOTS of questions? I do. It may be one thing that irritates the other kids. He says he was a race car driver when he was a young man. I have no reason not to believe him. I've seen his pictures.

The point of all that about Billy is that he drives an old pickup truck and is willing to keep my secrets. While I was working on building the tree house I would order material from the lumber yard and he would pick it up and deliver it to the edge of the woods. Did I mention I have a credit card? I use it to order things on line – and from the lumber yard. To help me move all that, I built a skid-wagon – like a long narrow wagon with six-inch-wide runners like on a sled. There's a rope loop in front that I use to pull it through the trees. That's why it has to be narrow – to be able to move between the trees.

I just got a few things at a time – just enough to keep me busy for a week or so. Still, it often took several trips to transport all the material back to where the platform was. I didn't care. It kept me busy and I like to keep busy – did I mention that? It required most of my eight-year-old summer to get it all enclosed. Ever since then I've been adding and remodeling. It will probably never get finished – I keep getting wonderful new ideas. I wish I had somebody to share it with. Did I mention I am lonely?

My latest addition to it is a bank of solar panels on the roof. I had to do some limb trimming to allow sunlight to hit it.

They are high tech – the highest tech available and they produce enough electricity for several, hundred-watt light bulbs and a small ceramic cube heater and a fan. Heaters use a lot of electricity. I also have three outlets for things like my phone and laptop chargers. When snow comes, the panels use some of their own electricity to keep them warm enough to melt it. The panels charge four storage batteries so I can have electricity twenty-four hours a day.

The most amazing thing is the electric rope-ladder-letter-downer-and-roller-upper that I invented. It's housed in a box that juts out from the north side and it's activated by a remote control I salvaged (rescued) from a broken model car. (The batteries are in that box, too.) When I get close to the tree house, I press the button that lowers the ladder and once I'm up inside, I press the other button and it rolls the ladder onto an axil up inside the box. One of my best things, I think.

It's not complete yet – the tree house. All along I've planned a sleeping loft upstairs. I made the room double-tall just for that reason. I haven't worked on it much yet because Alfred says I can't overnight there until I'm eleven – I turned eleven some time ago – but now he says I can't overnight there by myself. He made it clear he wouldn't be a party to a sleep over with me, himself. So, I'm still going to build the loft. I know I can do that. I'm not so sure how I'm going to get somebody to sleep over with me. Maybe I should Google *knock-out-drugs* – just kidding. Like I said, I like to joke around.

Did I mention that sometimes it takes me a long time to get around to the point I'm trying to make. It does. Like all of this about this morning and the tree house was to say that's where I'll be today. I'll get a can of pork and beans and some fruit from the kitchen and I'll be all set – maybe two cans – and bottles of water and pop – bread maybe – cookies. My back pack expands so it can hold a lot of stuff. I usually take my phone and laptop wherever I go. I have them packed today.

* * *

I just told Alfred where I'll be. I always do that because he wants to know. I like that he wants to know. I believe it's because I am important to him and knowing where I am, is like his way of looking ahead to protect me – in case something

might happen and I didn't get back home he'd know where to start looking. Our rule is to be home by dark. I always call him when I leave the tree house. Did I mention how nice it is to have Alfred in my life? I'm pretty sure he loves me. I'm pretty sure I love him.

For some reason, I forgot to poke the button and lower the ladder so I had to wait for a minute or so once I arrived at the clearing. I said it was as *great* invention, not a *fast* invention. As the axil turns it makes clicking sounds. I was looking up at it when I turned it on. Through the glass door, I thought I saw something move inside. It was a sliding, double, patio door – all glass. Maybe it was just the reflection of moving branches. It was quite breezy.

The ladder stopped. I climbed to the top. At that point, I have to reach out to my right to grab onto one of the trees up front so I can pull myself onto the front porch. Once safely there, I turned on the ladder mechanism and watched it roll up out of sight and out of reach into its box. I had momentarily forgotten about the possible movement inside. I slid my backpack to the porch floor and reached around to open the door. I use the one on the right. The one on the left is fastened closed. It's mostly there just for the light.

As I was reaching, I suddenly realized that what I had seen had *not* just been a reflection. There, not a foot away from me on the other side of the glass was a boy – my height and build – a bit skinner I suppose. His hair was blond like mine except it was long and touched his shoulders. I could see the top of a T-shirt showing at the neck under his gray hoodie. He wore jeans – old jeans and cowboy boots – *old*, black, scuffed up, cowboy boots.

We just stood there looking at each other for a long moment. I wasn't as much scared as I was startled and puzzled – how, why, who – things like that. I figured it was time to be friendly so I raised my right hand in a back and forth wave of sorts. He did the same. I smiled. He smiled. I shrugged my shoulders. So did he. I reached for the door latch and squeezed it. The boy stepped back. I slid the door open to my left and just stood there.

“Hey!” I said.

“Hey!” He said.

“I wasn’t expecting to find anybody in my tree house this morning.”

“Is this yours? Wow! It’s fantastic.”

I had to agree. The kid clearly had good taste. I didn’t mention either.

“My name is Ford.”

“Ford. I’ve never heard of anybody having that name. I’m Jake.”

“Hi. Jake.”

“Hi. Ford.”

We both burst a big smile at the same moment. I spoke.

“So far, this has to be the dumbest conversation any two boys ever had.”

“I agree. I’m sorry if I shouldn’t be here, but I was out walking early and came upon the woods from the south. You came from the north. I will go if you want me to.”

“Goodness no. I’m glad you’re here. I don’t have many friends.”

“Me either – none, I guess would explain my friendship situation more honestly.”

“If we’re going for honesty, I guess I fall into that category, also.”

He smiled again and looked me straight into my face.

“Maybe we can change that – the category.”

“Maybe we can. You like to build stuff?”

“Don’t know. Never have.”

“Well, I’m about to embark (begin) on building an upstairs in here – like for a sleeping loft with a mattress on the floor so I can lay there on my stomach and look out the front windows and see across the tree tops.”

“You really know how to do that – build, I mean, *not* look out over the tree tops?”

It was good for a laugh between us. Our first. I took note of that.

“I built this whole place, except for the platform. I don’t know who built that. It’s old but in very good shape.”

“Wow. I’d like to help, but you’ll have to show me how to do everything. Do you sleep up here sometimes?”

“Nope. Not allowed to by myself. Maybe I’m not going to be by myself anymore. You must live close by.”

“I live south across the river in Tanner Town.”

“Tanner Town, but that’s where the poorest of the poor people live.”

Jake lifted his arms out to his sides.

“And here I am, living proof you were right – poorest of the poor.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I have no proper social skills whatsoever. Maybe you can help me acquire them. My mouth just tends to say things without checking with my brain first.”

“You’re funny. You also use lots of big words.”

“I know. I can’t seem to help it. I know them so I use them.”

“I didn’t mean it was a bad thing,” he said. “I’d like to know big words.”

“Maybe we have our first deal – I’ll help you with vocabulary – big words – and you help me correct my sorely deficient social skills.”

“Maybe. First, I’ll need to know what *sorely* and *deficient* mean.”

More laughter.

“I like you, Jake. You are what Alfred calls a genuine person, like Billy. What you see is what you get. Nothing artificial about you.”

He shrugged and spoke.

“Alfred? Billy?” he asked.

“See, there I go just rambling on as if I were the center of the universe and you should know all about me. I think I like this deal.”

Jake returned to his questions.

“Sorely? Deficient? Alfred? Billy?”

“Sorely means deeply or really. Deficient mean lacking. Alfred is the man who takes care of me. Billy is the man who takes care of our five cars.”

“You’re an orphan with five cars?”

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CHAPTER THREE

Eeny, Meeny, Miny, Moe

“Oh, no. I have one of each – parents, that is. They hire Alfred to look after me. They are very busy.”

“Five cars?”

“I suppose I should admit it right from the start. My family is so stinkin’ rich you can smell us coming a mile away.”

I hadn’t necessarily meant it to be humorous, but Jake broke into laughter. It was contagious and I was soon right there with him.

“What did you mean, ‘*admit it*’?” he asked.

“I have found that lots – maybe most – people don’t like rich people. I’ve always thought it was partly to blame for why kids don’t like me at school.”

Jake turned serious and spoke to me.

“I have found that lots – maybe most – people who aren’t liked, just are not likeable.”

I remained quiet, thinking about what he had said. At first his words hurt. I thought some more.

“Thank you for that, Jake. If you agree to our arrangement, I’m sure you are going to have the biggest challenge – helping me become likeable or at least fit in better. I often just blurt things out with no consideration of how they may make other people feel.”

“Shall we shake on whatever this is we’re agreeing to?” Jake asked.

“It will be like our Secret Tree House Pact – just the two of us.

I held out my hand and we shook. For some reason, it

suddenly made me very sad. After a few unplanned, defensive, quick sniffs, a few tears still found my cheeks.

“Did I say something, wrong?” Jake asked.

I shook my head and slid down onto the floor to sit. The tears continued. At that point, I didn’t try to hide them. He followed my lead and sat down across from me – cross legged. I could tell he was upset that I seemed upset. I figured if this thing between us was going to be based on honesty, I needed to bare my soul. I wiped at *my* face with the backs of my hands and looked him squarely in *his* face.

“Just now when our hands touched – you’ll think this is crazy – but it’s the first time I can remember ever touching another kid because I wanted to – out of kindness. It’s usually more like putting my arms in front of my face to protect myself from black eyes and bruising. It was really wonderful. I don’t expect you to understand.”

“Well, I *don’t* think it was crazy. I think it’s sad and I feel bad for you. I guess I’ve never known about such a thing so you’re probably right – I really can’t understand.”

I noticed he had been licking his lips as if they were dry.

“Thirsty?” I asked.

“Sort of, I guess.”

I stretched out to my left through the open door and pulled in my back pack. I removed a bottle and handed it to him.

“Thanks. You come prepared.”

He opened it and guzzled half the bottle all at once.

I noticed him eying the contents of my bag.

“Alfred says my back pack is like a yard sale – something in here for everybody!”

He smiled.

I forced it open so he could have a better look. His eyes went immediately to the clear plastic sack filled with food. The kid was hungry. How should I handle that sort of thing? I gave it a shot.

“So, join me in breakfast? I should have plenty for both of us. I tend to be overprepared. It will be great not to have to eat alone.”

He shrugged. I took that to mean he really wanted to eat but would never ask me for food. Now that, I didn’t

understand. I went through the motions of opening the sack and enumerating (naming) its contents. Then, I sat it between us, removed a carrot strip and began munching. He did as I had done. It made me think if he was ever going to get something that might begin putting some meat on his bones, I'd have to take something with more to it. I opened a zip sack that held a ham salad sandwich cut, corner to corner. I took half and handed the sack to him. He was not as hesitant about receiving it as I thought he might be.

"I love ham salad sandwiches," I said. "Alfred used to kid me that I'd turn into a pig – he meant the four-legged kind that oinked. So far I seem to have evaded that fate."

"Evaded?"

"Avoided. Escaped."

He nodded, removed the sandwich from the bag and began to eat. It made me wonder how long it had been since he had eaten. I thought it was best to approach that question from another angle.

"So, I've told you some things about me. No pressure, but I'd like to hear some things about you. Like I said – no pressure about that if it's uncomfortable."

While he finished chewing, he held up what little was left of his half of the sandwich as if preparing to begin some sort of answer.

"I've never had this kind of a sandwich before. It's very good. Ham salad, you called it?"

I nodded and figured it was probably best for him to take his time – answer my question or not. I surprised myself. I really wanted to be patient about it – about him, I suppose. Me . . . wanting to be patient . . . Wow!"

"Me and dad have a place up above the flood-line close to the river on south of here. Ma died when I was so little I don't even remember her. I guess dad had just got home from being a soldier in a war. His right leg got blowed off. He walks with a crutch. It's been really hard for him to get work. He was a mechanic in the army – took care of tanks and Humvees."

"I suppose there aren't many tanks around here that need taking care of, huh?"

I had meant it seriously, but, again, Jake took it as a

joke and smiled and chuckled. He seemed to relax a bit.

“He does odd jobs. I go to Washington School – 6th grade. School ain’t my favorite thing. I can do the work, okay, but most of it seems worthless. Why am I ever going to need to know what countries fought in the *War of the Roses*?”

“I can’t answer that, of course, but I figure the more I know the better chance I have of succeeding in life. Anyway, I just love to understand about everything.”

Normally, I would have corrected him because it was Wars, not War. I didn’t.

Jake shrugged and looked back into the food sack. I motioned for him to dig in. He pointed to the beans.

“We have a lot of those at my house. Ketchup helps, I’ve discovered. May I have an apple?”

“Of course. Before you leave you can put some of the fruit in your pockets to have on your way home or later.”

“I don’t know if I can do that or not. Dad hates having to take handouts.”

“Then, here’s the deal,” I said. “You help me get the second floor in place and I’ll pay you in food. I don’t see how he could object to that.”

“You don’t know dad, but it will satisfy me. I see a pear in there. He loves pears.”

“Consider it *his* then – his commission for loaning you to me.”

That was met by a broad smile.

“You sure know how to twist up words to mean just what you want them to mean.”

I smiled. He was right. My teachers had pointed it out more than once – or more like a thousand times to be perfectly honest. My principal says I’ll likely end up a lawyer or politician because of it. Neither of those professions are on my list. I have trouble trusting both of them – probably unfair of me.

I opened a bottle of water and took several swigs – ham salad makes me thirsty. I stood and pointed to the pile of lumber – 2 X 4’s on the floor behind me and two sheets of plywood standing against the rear wall. I had designed the top of the doors and downstairs windows – one on each side wall – to all be right at seven feet. That’s the height at which the

supports for the second floor were placed. I didn't need that much room at my age and height, but not knowing when I'd tire of the tree house, I wanted to allow room for growth.

I already had put in place, 2 X 4's all the way around the inside up at that seven-foot mark. I explained to Jake.

"See the 2 X 4 supports around the room up above the windows and door?"

He nodded as he followed them around the room with his eyes.

"We will lay the 2 X 4's, you see there on the floor, across the narrow width of the room so they sit on top of them. Once they are nailed in place, we will lay the 4 X 8 sheets of plywood down on them and nail them in place. I planned the area so it is eight feet in both dimensions."

"Dimensions?"

"The distance front to back and side to side."

Jake nodded and offered a puzzled look.

"What," I asked.

"If we are up there nailing the plywood in place, and if it just exactly fits the space across the 2 X 4's, how will be get down?"

I took up his puzzled look for just a moment and then broke a smile and began laughing.

"You have a great point. I'd have nailed myself into a coffin up there."

"So, we will need to cut an opening in one piece first, huh?" he offered.

"We will. I figured the opening would be about two feet square in the North-east corner right above a ladder built against the back wall. That's bigger than we'll need to get up and down, but there will be things we'll want to take up there."

"Good plan. That will keep the ladder out of the way down here and the hole in the floor out of the way up there. You make good plans."

"For caskets, maybe."

That made both of us laugh. It was really nice to have somebody besides Alfred laugh at the jokes I tried to make. I got all warm inside but didn't mention it. I was sure I had already convinced him I was an odd ball in way too many ways. I didn't want to risk losing him.

I had ordered eight-foot-long 2 X 4's so I wouldn't need to cut them. Standing on the two chairs from the porch, we wedged the 2 X 4s between the side walls and slid them into place down against the 2 X 4 supports. I had enough so we could put one every 12 inches to make a solid floor.

"Why so close together?" Jake asked. "You plan on holding square dances up here?"

It was worth prolonged smiles from both of us. Every so often I just stopped to think about how great it was to be doing what I was doing with another kid. I felt sure he wouldn't understand that so I didn't mention it. Later on in our relationship, I might bring it up. I hoped our relationship would last beyond that day.

It took until noon to get all those supports nailed across the room. It took some doing to frame around the entrance opening. Jake handled a hammer better than he had led me to believe he could. He liked doing that so I let him do most of it.

During that morning, I learned a number of important things about him. He was a whole lot smarter than his rather poor English suggested. I figured he hadn't been around adults who spoke the best English. Once he found out what a word meant, he had it – he didn't forget and he began using it. He didn't think badly of me for using what he called 'big' words. Kids at school made fun of me for using them. I always knew it was coming, but that didn't stop me. I figured they just kept proving over and over again how ignorant they were – both in not caring what the words meant, and also in being so unkind toward me about it.

"I'm ready for lunch," I said and dropped down onto the floor below us.

He did, also, although without any remarks about being hungry. We pushed the chairs out of the way. During the five or so hours I had known him, I had also learned he was a kind person. I imagined that at his place, when he was hungry he just kept it to himself so he wouldn't make his dad feel bad when there wasn't food. I already knew he had a lot of good things to teach me. I hoped I would be able to do the same for him.

I handed him a can of beans and the can opener.

"I hear you are an expert at this," I joked.

He took it like I had meant it – as a joke. After I said it, I wondered if it had been the wrong thing to say. It was things like that I needed to work on – knowing what to say and do and when to say and do them. Jake didn't seem to get upset about things. He was as patient as I was impatient. I was much more careful than he was. I noticed it when we were measuring the distances and placing the 2 X 4s across the room. He'd slip one in close to the mark but wasn't bothered that it didn't sit exactly on the line. By the time we set the last one, he was doing it my way. I couldn't tell if he saw how it was a better way or just wanted to please me. It left me something important to still learn about him. That was fantastic.

While he opened the can, I found two spoons, opened the bag of chips and the zip bag that held two well-buttered biscuits. I wondered why I had prepared for two people that day. Maybe I always did. It wasn't important. That day I *had!*

"The can lid," Jake began. "Leave a hinge or remove it all the way."

"I'll bet between us we can lick that can clean, don't you?"

"I suppose so. The damage is done now. It's off. We'll have to eat 'em all."

That told me that at his house, food was not wasted. In my lifetime, all by myself, I had probably wasted enough to have fed him and his father all those years. I felt sheepish. I was sure he was teaching me more than I was teaching him.

We sat to eat, knees almost touching since we were sharing the beans out of the same can. He held it. My mother would have had a hissy fit if she had known that – sharing our germs that way. I had to smile, enjoying thinking about that imaginary fit. Imaginary fits couldn't be fatal, could they!

"Thanks for all this," Jake said.

"No thanks to it. You are earning lunch, remember?"

"Not just for lunch. For everything this morning."

"I guess I don't understand, Jake."

"You have been kind right from when you first spotted me in here. Most people would have ranted and raved at me for trespassing. And you were so patient while I learned how to use the hammer. My dad's patient, but even he would have

got impatient with me for all the times I missed the nails.”

“I was just thinking how fast you mastered it.”

“Thanks. What I liked the most was how you didn’t press me for stuff about my life.”

“I have to admit, I wanted to, but I read someplace that friends don’t do that. That they respect each other’s right to privacy.”

He nodded but made no comment.

“I guess I’d like to know more about you, too,” he said.

At that moment, we got our spoons locked together inside the can. It was cause for prolonged laughter.

“This calls for a Eeny Meeny,” he said.

“What’s an Eeny Meeny?”

“Dad and I do it all the time to decide who gets to do something – like get the last something. Here’s how it works.”

With each word, he pointed back and forth between us as he spoke the phrase.

“Eeny, meeny, miny, moe; Catch a cricket by his toe; If he hollers let him go; O-u-t spells out and out goes he!”

He was pointing at himself when he got to ‘he’.

“That means I’m out and you get to go first with your spoon.”

“I see. Okay, then. Will you please get your doggone, big, cotton-pickin’, spoon out of the way so I can get some a them ever-lovin’ pork ‘n beans?”

He broke up over what I said and was soon laying on his back on the floor. I couldn’t help but laugh along. Jake had a wonderful laugh. I figure he had had a lot of practice at his place. That made me feel good about his dad. I ate my spoonful of beans, making a big production out of it. That made him laugh even more. I handed him the can for his turn. We finished the meal mostly in silence. I guess we both had wonderful things to think about.

CHAPTER FOUR

Big Words and Happy Times

“Ready to get to the plywood?” he asked as I tossed the can into my trash container and returned the spoons to my bag with the food.

“Let’s rest a while longer. All your hammering wore me out.”

Really, I just wanted more time to talk uninterrupted by work.

“He smiled. I like how you joke. Dad and I joke, too. It makes life easier.”

“Maybe some time I can meet him and you can meet Alfred.”

“Maybe, or maybe we just need to have each other.”

I couldn’t figure if that meant he was ashamed to let me see his place or not. I didn’t ask. I sure wouldn’t want to make him feel bad by seeing my huge old house and all the stuff I have.

“Maybe you’re right about that. Let’s just let that go for now, okay?”

“Yeah. Okay.”

It had become warm and Jake removed his hoody.

“I’ve been admiring that,” I said. “My parents won’t let me have one.”

“A hoodie? Why not? You don’t have to answer that.”

“I want to answer it, but I don’t want to make you feel bad.”

“My feelings are pretty strong. Dad says a person is just who he is and if anybody don’t like that, that’s the other

person's problem, not mine.”

“That’s a pretty sophisticated way to configure it.”

He gave me the look that had previously accompanied his request for the meaning of a word. I smiled and offered what I figured he wanted to hear.

“Sorry. Sophisticated in the way I used it means ‘intelligent’ or ‘thoughtful’ or ‘wise’. Configure means, ‘think about it and organize it’.”

“No *sorry* to it, please. I find I like learning new words, and you seem to be a spring just filled with them.”

“Good. I like having you ask about my words.”

Jake smiled.

“When you tell me what they mean it’s like you’re giving them to me – like *your* words become *our* words.”

“And that’s great. I think you are a lot smarter than you give yourself credit for being.”

“I heard a man say those very words to my dad once. I’m sure that man was right – about dad.”

“And me. Am I right, too, about you?”

He grinned.

“I guess time will tell.”

“I have a question for you, Jake, and it will make me sound like a goof, but that doesn’t seem to matter to you.”

I hesitated. He looked into my face waiting to hear what I had on my mind.

“I was wondering if we are like friends.”

He didn’t hesitate.

“If friends are people who like each other and have some of the same kinds of interests, I’d say we are friends. At least you didn’t throw me off the porch when you found me here. I suppose that was part-way to being a friend right there.”

It was my turn to smile. I wonder if hearts can smile. Mine sure seemed to be smiling at that moment.

“You were going to tell me about the hoodie – why your parents won’t let you have one.”

“Oh, yeah. They think only bad kids wear them. I guess I sort of went along with their thinking because I didn’t know any better – until I met you. I’m sorry for that, you know.”

“It’s hard to understand about things you’ve never had

experiences with, don't you think, Ford?"

"Yeah. It is. Thanks for understanding."

"I think it's good we're coming to understand each other."

I nodded, not knowing where to go with that conversation.

"Well, friend," I said, getting to my feet, "I suppose we need to do battle with those big pieces of plywood."

"What's the plan?"

"One of us up there and one of us down here, I suppose. We'll use a chair so the one down here can stand on it to help maneuver a sheet into position. Then, the one up above can pull it up. The area up there is eight feet square like it is down here – on the inside. We'll nail it in place, front to back, and then do the same to get the other one up."

We looked at each other at the same second and said the very same thing.

"That won't work."

"That won't work."

We laughed. I let Jake have the say about it.

"If we nail one piece down – front to back like you said – there won't be a opening left that's big enough for the second one to fit through."

"That hit me as soon as I said what I said. So, Plan B, I guess. Lay them cross-wise – the first one across the front section from side to side. That will leave a four by eight section at the rear to fit the second sheet through – the one with the entrance hole in it."

"I'm glad there was a Plan B," Jake said. "It seems to me I need a lot of Plan B's in my life." "Do you?"

"All the time – and lots of times I get clear up to Plans F, G, and H."

"That last one has to be one 'H' of a good plan I suppose. Oh, sorry. I know you don't swear."

"I don't, and some time we can talk about why I don't, but I have to tell you, what you said was really funny. By the way, I haven't heard you swear either."

"Dad doesn't allow it in his presence and I guess I see no reason for it. He says he has no way of preventing me from swearing when I'm not with him so he leaves that up to

me.”

This Jake kid had a really wise father. Making a rule you can't enforce is just plain dumb.

We went to work hoisting the first big sheet up through the cross beams. It was really hard work.

“How much does one of these things weigh, do you think?” he asked.

“I don't *think*, I *know* – right at 100 pounds.”

“How in the world did you get them up here from the ground all by yourself?”

“I have a block and tackle hooked onto one of the trees just above the roof and I tied them to the main rope and hoisted them up. A block and tackle is a . . .”

“I know. A series of pullies you thread the rope around and it makes heavy loads seem light – well, lighter at least. Dad's a mechanic and he uses them to lift cars and pull engines all the time.”

“That's how I did it. I can't see a good way to use it in these cramped quarters.”

“Gotcha! It may take both of us down here to get it started,” he said. “I'm sure I can't lift a hundred pounds.”

“When we begin tilting it and shoving it across one of the 2 X 4s it will seem to weigh a whole lot less than that. The more the tilt, the less weight. A law of physics. We can look it up later.”

He nodded and seemed interested in following up on it.

“Here's an idea,” I said. “It sounds like there will be lots of going up and down. Maybe we should build that ladder in the back corner before we go any further.”

“Good idea. I agree,” he said.

That's what we did. It took about an hour. Then, it took a while to figure a system that worked to get the first sheet up there. I hadn't planned really well and we had less than an inch to spare at the ceiling upstairs.

It was going on three when we finally got the second one up there. We marked where the entrance hole would be and sawed it out. It took only a few minutes to slide each piece into place and get them tacked down with wide head nails. I didn't trust that finish nails might not work their way down into the plywood and let it come lose in the future.

Jake finished the final nail. He had hardly ever missed one on the plywood. A fast learner, and well-coordinated, I figured. We sat on our new floor, our backs against the rear wall. We looked around. The front wall was nearly five feet high. The roof slopped – front to back – making the rear wall only about four. There were two large windows on the front wall. They came clear down to within just a few inches of the new floor. I had planned it like that for the view – and the light, of course.

“This is so great,” Jake said.

“Just wait until we get it carpeted.”

“You’re going to put carpet on the floor?”

“Not only on the floor. I plan to run it all the way up the walls to the ceiling. It will add insulation, make it quiet as a sound-proofed room in a radio station, and make it easy to pin posters and things up on the walls.”

“You have great ideas, Ford. *Really* great ideas. This must have been very expensive.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that so I was honest with him.

“I’m not sure how to respond to that. I suppose ‘expensive’ has different meanings to different people.”

Jake nodded. I believed he understood what I was trying to say. For me to spend a thousand dollars on a tree house was probably like for him to spend two bucks on a hoodie from a second-hand store. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. The money I spent really wasn’t even mine – it was dad’s. I had done nothing to earn it – I just got to use my credit card when I wanted to. I didn’t know if I should feel guilty or fortunate about having so much. I hoped that some time he and I – Jake, not dad – could talk about it. Jake changed the topic.

“I wonder how hot it is?”

He wiped sweat from his forehead with the bottom of his T-shirt.

“There’s a thermometer downstairs.”

We climbed down our super-duper new ladder and I went to the east wall.

“Almost 80. That’s hot for May in this part of the country,” I said.

“It’ll be lots hotter than that come summer. In August, it gets so hot at our place that it’s hard to sleep at night. Sometimes I sleep up on the roof. If there’s a breeze I can usually feel it up there.”

“Two story house?”

It had been my question. Jake smiled.

“It’s barely one story. I should be truthful with you. Our whole place is only about three times bigger than this room – probably 20 by 20 – maybe not quite. Two rooms. Dad has a bed room. It’s small. I sleep on the couch in the main room.”

“That sounds . . .”

I had begun my response before I knew what to say so I just stopped. For me, that was progress.

He looked me in my face and just smiled and said what was on his mind.

“Regardless of what anybody thinks of it, it’s my home – the only one I can remember – and provides everything I need. I think I’ve decided that I’d like for you to come and see it sometime. Before that you’ll have to make a promise, though.”

“I’m good about keeping promises. What kind of a promise?”

“From the few things you’ve said about your place, I know mine can’t stack up to it, but you have to promise not to feel bad for me. I love my place. It’s where I’ve grown up with dad. Me and him have a really good thing between us. I’d never trade it for anything. When I think about it I feel loved and that’s the best feeling there is.”

I *sure* didn’t know how to respond to all of that.

“I can promise that I will do my very best not to feel sorry for you. That’s the only honest promise I can make. I’ve never had any experience with houses like that. I can see I’ve really been sheltered. The houses on my street are all big and fancy with walls around them and big lawns and flower gardens. I’m not sure why I’m rambling like this, but it seems a necessary part of being honest with you – and I really do want to be honest with you.”

“That’s probably the best promise anybody’s ever given me – well, dad and I have an understood sort of promise about how things are between us and that’s the best there

could ever be.”

“I have to ask you something, Jake. If you came to my house would you promise not to feel bad for me?”

“Feel bad *for* you? I don’t understand. My imagination tells me you have great gobs of stuff.”

I chuckled at ‘great gobs’. I wasn’t sure how to answer him.

“That’s my point. I hear you talk about you and your dad and, frankly, I feel jealous – really, really jealous. I’d gladly give up my four-room suite and everything that’s in it if I had a dad like you say yours is.”

“Wow. I never thought I’d hear that from a rich kid. I mean, I’ve really never thought about it. You’ve given me a big thing to think about. Sometimes I dream about how it would be to have lots of stuff and live in a big house. I have seen some, of course – maybe even yours, from the outside. Did you say you have *four* rooms all to yourself?”

“Yeah. Isn’t that just about the worst?”

“I don’t see why it has to be, of course I don’t have any way to know how your life really is.”

“I guess neither one of us does – know how the other’s life is,” I said.

Things grew quiet. We had taken seats on the floor and had each picked up our bottle of water and drank.

“There’s more water in my back pack. It’ll be warm by now, but it’ll be wet,” I said. “And apples and oranges, if you’re ready for a snack.”

Remembering his earlier reluctance, I tossed him an orange and took one for myself. I love the smell of an orange while I’m peeling it – peeling its peel – that’s sort of funny. More silence. Eventually, I broke it.

“I got this awful problem,” I began.

“You sick, you mean?”

“No. Nothing like that. It’s about fair and unfair.”

“I’m still not with you, Ford.”

“I have so much and you have . . . well, a lot less than I do.”

“You were going to say I have so little, weren’t you?”

I nodded.

“You need to divide your things into two groups, I think,”

he said while we attacked the juicy oranges.

“What groups do you mean?”

“One group is stuff and one is relationships – I think that’s the word – things between people.”

I nodded. He continued.

“It sounds like you have more stuff than any ten regular kids could use let alone need. What you don’t seem to have is the kind of relationships you want or maybe, need.”

“I get what you’re saying. I can tell you for sure that ‘stuff’ doesn’t make up for the other.”

“And see, I’ve never ever even considered that. I can’t be sorry that you have lots of stuff, but I am sorry for how you think about it.”

“How do you think I think about it?”

“Like a replacement, given to you by your parents, to take their place.”

“You are pretty insightful for a kid, Jake.”

“Let me take a stab at ‘insightful’ – ‘can figure stuff out accurately?’”

“Right on.”

“I wonder how I knew that?”

“It’s called context – thinking about what a word must mean because of where it is in a sentence. Like, ‘the old man who lost his wife was sick with grief’. What would grief mean?”

“Like saddened by her loss?”

“Right on again. See, you are smarter than you thought you were.”

“Or” – he grinned an ear to ear grin – “I’m smarter than *you* thought I was.”

“Hmm. If that’s so, I apologize. You mean I misjudged you because of some other characteristics like your somewhat limited vocabulary and problems with grammar and saying you didn’t like school.”

Jake shrugged.

“*You* said it, Ford, not *me*.”

We shared a long smile.

This having a friend thing was clearly even better than I had ever imagined.

CHAPTER FIVE

Is That a Kid Screaming?

"I need to be getting home," Jake said. "Dad's been away working at a garage all day. I left him a note saying I'd be back by supper time. He'll get paid and bring something special home to eat. I can't disappoint him and not be there for his surprise."

"Can you come tomorrow?"

"That will depend on if dad has made any plans for us. He'll have money for gas so we might go someplace."

"That makes me really jealous," I told him.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to."

"Oh, I know you didn't. It's all on me. I hope you have a great supper and a good day tomorrow with your dad. Really, I do."

"I know you do. I wish I could fix your thing with your parents, but I have no idea how to do that."

I nodded, shrugged and tried to change the conversation.

"I'll likely be here tomorrow – no Alfred – it's his day off this week."

"I'll come if it's possible."

"Can you call me and tell me?"

"No."

"No? I don't understand."

"Me and dad don't have a phone."

"Oh. I see."

I grew silent. Then, an idea struck.

"You can take mine. I have others."

“Dad wouldn’t like me taking something like that.”

“It could just be for calling me – like our own hot line – then it wouldn’t really be like a regular phone.”

He thought for some time.

“I could tell him it’s just for tonight – so I can let you know about tomorrow – he’s big on being considerate of other people.”

“That’s the idea! I’ll need to call Alfred before you take it. I always call him when I start home.”

I made the call – short and to the point – then handed it to Jake.

“You know how to work it?”

“Let me look at it. Hmm. Yeah. I can work it. Is it charged?”

“Yeah. Press ‘ON’ and my two main phone numbers appears across the top. The one you will call is the second one. The first one is this phone.”

He tried it and nodded when he saw what I had referred to.

“One more thing,” I said. “Do we tell our people about us – today – here?”

“I’ve been wondering about that all day,” he said as I activated the switch to let the ladder down.

“Did you decide something?”

“Sometimes my dad is overprotective of me – I’m all he has for family, you know. He might be leery about it – not knowing you and your family. So, I’m thinking not right away. I’ll just keep the phone private tonight.”

“I have the same problem with Alfred,” I said.

“Oh, I didn’t mean it was a problem,” Jake said. “I’m really glad my dad insists on protecting me. From what I’ve read about teenagers, I suspect I’ll come to hate that in a few years.”

I nodded.

“Me too – that I’ve read that, I mean. So, what will you use as an excuse so you don’t feel like you’re lying to him about coming tomorrow. I get the idea you don’t do that.”

“I can tell him I’m going to meet a friend up by the creek and probably go swimming. He’ll allow that – if he doesn’t have plans for us.”

“You swim in a creek?”

“Yeah. About two blocks west of here. I suppose you go to pools to swim.”

“I go to *my* pool.”

“You have your own swimming pool?”

“Yeah. Part of the rich spoiled brat thing I mentioned. I’ve never been swimming in a creek. Aren’t you afraid of snakes in there?”

“Not where I swim. It’s wide and deep and about thirty feet long – it’s a swimming hole that I’m told has been there for years – some kids made it a long time ago – took stones out of the bottom to make it deeper and used them to make a dam downstream to make the water even higher. Swish around in the water for a minute or so and any snakes hightail it for the grass. Snakes basically hate humans.”

“That really, sounds like fun. You suppose you and I could do that sometime?”

“Don’t see why not. At the end of this coming week we’ll be on summer vacation for nearly three months.”

“That’s right. I was feeling down about school coming to an end, but I guess with you, now, I’ll have to rethink that.”

“Most kids look forward to summer break,” he said clearly not understanding why I had said what I said.

“I understand that.”

“As bad as kids seem to treat you, I’d think you be tickled pink for a rest from it.”

“Tickled Pink. That’s a funny saying – I like it, just never heard it before. I love *school*, just not the *kids* at school. I can’t ever get enough learning – knowledge would be a better word. And, without any friends to be with, summer creates a whole lot of unfilled, lonely, time.”

He just nodded. It was like he accepted my explanation, but he couldn’t understand it – my situation. I guess I understood why he couldn’t understand. Maybe having a friend would change that for me. I surely hoped so.

We climbed down the ladder and I re-rolled it up into its box. Jake turned to me and spoke.

“Just to make sure we are both thinking alike on this – we have like a pact to keep this thing between us a secret for a while at least, right?”

“Right. It can be part of our Secret Tree House Pact.”

I offered my hand for a shake on it. I had the flash of a strange feeling. I had offered my hand many times before, but it had never been accepted. My new feeling was that this time it was going to be. It was. I wanted to keep it going for a long time but knew that would not seem proper.

After we finished the shake, he put his hands on his waist.

“If I’m going to, like, tutor you in how to get along better with other kids, I should start with that.”

“I don’t understand.”

He smiled.

“I know you don’t. If you did, I wouldn’t have to start with it, now, would I?”

I managed a smile, also. My response had been absurd (really dumb).

“Guys our age don’t generally shake each other’s hands – not in just between guys stuff. If they touch each other at all, guys either pat backs and shoulders or, if they are best friends, they might do a short hug thing when they meet or leave each other.”

“I have witnessed those things, but I’ve been sure my fate would be worse than just being locked in my locker if I ever offered it. I have no idea how to hug anybody. Well, I’ve seen men and women hugging on TV.”

“Believe me. THAT’S NOT the kind of a hug I mean. Can I show you?”

“Sure, I guess. I can’t believe this, though.”

He just moved toward me and without even seeming to think about it, he put his arms around me and pulled me close to him – for a couple of seconds. I stood there like a goof not knowing what I was supposed to do – arms dangling at my sides.

“That will never do, Ford – it was like I was hugging a scarecrow stuffed full of straw. Watch now. See where I put my arms – one up over your shoulder and the other one around you just above your waist. You do the opposite – your arm around the other side of my neck and so on. It’s not necessary for heads to touch but sometimes they do – ear to ear. It’s not good to over-think it.”

That time I made the first move and it went surprisingly well, I thought.

“See. Not hard. Well, like I said, I need to get on my horse – that’s another one of my dad’s sayings – it means I need to hurry on my way.”

Without another word, he turned and trotted into the woods to the south. I wanted to call after him – say good-bye or something, but I didn’t. I did wave, but he didn’t look back to see it.

I stood there for a few moments giving my day a rapid re-run, then turned and headed home. I had a billion things to think about. I had a wonderful feeling inside. It was probably really in my brain, but it felt like it was inside my chest. I had promised not to say anything about it, but I had never wanted to say something about anything as much I did at that moment.

Alfred would know something was up. He could always read me. I needed to have a reasonable story for him. I would tell him I got the second floor in place. He knew I was eager to finish that, and it would be the truth. Since when I had I begun wanting to be truthful? He would have contacted the kitchen so they would have my dinner ready by the time I arrived. It wasn’t really late, so he might have waited to eat with me. My parents were always gone Saturday evenings – parties, charity balls, plays, concerts, and such. I was usually full of my day’s experiences to tell Alfred. Maybe I could turn the tables and get him to tell me about his day – or better yet, how it had been when he was eleven and thinking about summer.

I did a quick shower before dinner. Alfred *had* waited to eat with me. The conversation went well. He didn’t press. The big news from around the house was that Billy had decided to retire so, by fall, there would be a new employee to get to know. That felt uncomfortable because Billy had always been there – ever since I was old enough to remember. I wouldn’t try to talk him out of it. Like I said, he was an old man.

Alfred dropped by my room at seven to tell me he was leaving. That was the time he left the house to begin his Sunday off. He would be gone until mid-morning on Monday.

When I was little, a woman came to stay with me while he was gone. I didn't understand why he would want to leave me. Eventually, I understood that people needed time to themselves and that most everybody got time off from their jobs at the end of the week. I remember when I first realized that I was Alfred's job. There were mixed feelings about that, I can tell you!

Jake and I had not settled on a time he would call about the next day, so I grew impatient to hear. I picked out a new book to read. It was one that had arrived during the week from a mystery book club I belonged to – *The Mystery of the Shadow Imp*. It was about twin boys who solved mysteries. I took it with me to my window seat and propped my back up on several pillows and began to read.

At eight, my phone rang. I forgot I had given the one I carried to Jake so had to scramble across the room to get the backup. He said his father needed to work at the garage again for most of the day on Sunday so had no objections to him spending time with a friend. His father seemed to trust him and gave him lots of freedom. My parents gave me lots of freedom, too, but I was sure it had nothing to do with whether or not they trusted me. Between them and me, it was 'out of sight, out of mind'. I guessed they just assumed I would be okay and didn't feel the need to worry about me. I really didn't know that for sure, of course.

I read until after nine – it was a terrific book – and then turned in. It had been a strenuous (tiring) day and I had no problem falling asleep.

Although Jake and I hadn't set a time to meet, I had breakfast out of the way, my back pack overflowing with food and supplies, and was on my way across the back lawn by six. I found myself hurrying. By six fifteen I had stowed my stuff at the rear of the first floor of the tree house and was laying on my stomach looking out the window upstairs. I could look down onto the woods at the place where I expected he'd enter the clearing.

It got to be seven o'clock and he had not arrived. Seven-thirty and then eight. Then nine. Then ten. I had tried to read but I was distracted by things swirling through my head. Maybe he had decided not to come back – took me for

my phone and ran. All along, it really had seemed strange to me that he had appeared to like me. Kids never did. Or, maybe something had happened along the way that morning and he was hurt, unable to make it to the tree house. There were other possibilities – snake bite, being chased down by a puma (big wild cat) or a black bear – one had been seen near there a few years earlier.

I felt guilty when I found myself hoping he had been hurt rather than that he had decided he just didn't want to come. That was a terrible, selfish way to think.

At ten thirty I heard a shrill whistle – like the two-finger whistles I'd seen and heard older boys produce on the playground. It puzzled me. Which of *them* would be in my woods and why? My answer arrived on the trot out of the woods – Jake waving and smiling as he came. I noticed he was wearing a backpack. I waved, not knowing if he could see me through the windows – glare and all – and hurried down to the ground to meet him.

"I was worried about you," I said – probably not the coolest way to have begun our day.

I wasn't sure if boys should share things like that – worrying about each other.

"Sorry. A strange series of events at our place this morning."

He was winded from the run and plopped down, cross-legged on the grass, slipping out of his back pack. I joined him. He began the explanation immediately.

"The truck wouldn't start so we worked on it for over an hour. Finally, we got it running. Dad was worried he'd be fired for being late. I had to break my promise to you, Ford. I couldn't let him get fired, so I showed him the phone so he could call the garage and explain. He accepted our story about a hot line system although I'm sure I'll be expected to expand on that this evening – he'll be working late, by the way. Because the truck wasn't running well, he asked if he could take the phone with him today – in case it conked out again. I said he could. I knew you'd be wondering about why I was late, but I knew dad needed to have it along with him – in case. The money is really important to us."

"Oh, you did the right thing, Jake. I fully understand.

How fortunate you had decided to take the phone for the night.”

“Yeah. I was thinking that on my way here this morning.”

“Have you had breakfast?”

“Yeah. I’m good to go. Since it’s so hot, how about I stow my stuff up there and we go over to the creek for a swim to start our day? That way I can get the being honest to my dad part of it out of the way.”

“You bring a swim suit?” I asked.

“My boxers, I guess, if you’re shy about skinny dipping.”

“Okay, then, let’s do it.”

We put his back pack up stairs. I removed the big and improved canvas food sack from mine to take with us and I was soon jogging behind him through the woods to the west. I had never done much exploring over there. He said the creek was about a block beyond the edge of the woods and flowed south into his river. Presently, we left the woods. He pointed.

“The swimming hole is under that stand of tall, spreading, trees way down to the south.”

We changed course slightly and headed toward it.

“Look! From all the rain we’ve had the past week, it’s running really deep and fast,” he said. “Should be great for swimming, today.”

“What’s that?” I asked, slowing down to listen.

We both stopped.

“I hear it two. It sounds like a kid. Screaming. From over by the creek.”

CHAPTER SIX

First, Get Rid of Ain't

Jake was several yards ahead of me and recognized the situation before I did.

“A kid at the bend in the creek,” he called out, pointing. “Looks like he’s caught on something out in the middle. The water’s really wild all around him.”

We arrived at the edge of the creek. Jake kicked off his tennies and pulled off his shirt. He waded right out into the water. I had been a little slow on the pick up so wasn’t ready for the water until a few more moments had passed. We were at a fairly sharp, narrow bend in the creek which considerably increased the speed and danger of the water flow.

By the time I arrived, Jake was holding onto the kid – a boy, maybe eight or nine. He had stopped screaming but continued to cry. The water was shoulder deep on us and pressed relentlessly (with no letup) against our bodies. We both saw the problem – the back of his T-shirt was caught on the limb from a stationary log in the center of the creek. It had run under the shirt, all the way from the waist, up and out the neck opening behind his neck. The branch was too thick for me to break – I tried. The water swirled, white and frothy, around the bend making the task difficult. Jake spoke to the boy.

“This is my friend, Ford, and while I hold onto you to keep you safe, he’s going to pull your shirt up over your head. That will release you and then we’ll get you back to the bank. You understand?”

The boy nodded while he looked me over as if to

evaluate my ability to help. He had no alternative. I followed Jake's lead. Removing a wet T is not the easiest thing to do on dry land. I got it up to his armpits, thinking I would work one elbow at a time through the sleeve opening. He fought me, wanting to continue his grasp on Jake. I understood. He was scared and his life was in the hands of two kids he'd never seen before.

He kept his arms stiff and his grip tight. We'd never free him that way.

'Distraction', I said to myself and began singing the *Hokey Pokey* song at the top of my lungs. I saw Jake put on a frown, but there wasn't time to explain. The kid turned his head and looked at me, relaxing just long enough for me to bend his elbow and remove the shirt up over his head.

"I'll keep holding the kid," Jake said. "You hold on around my waist to keep us stable against the water."

I did as he had suggested. By then he had the boy facing him, the kid's legs wrapped around Jake's waist and his arms around his neck. The boy was looking over Jake's shoulder directly into my face. I had stopped singing. We walked out on the inside of the bend – the shallow side. Jake sat the boy on the ground and took a place beside him.

I began looking around to see if there was anybody else in the area that the boy might belong to. Jake talked with the kid.

"What's your name, kid?"

"Jason."

"How did this happen?"

"Me and my big brother was swimmin' up there."

He pointed up stream.

"We was takin' a break. He fell asleep and I went back in the water – he'll kill me for doin' that. He told me not to go out into the center because there might be a undercurrent that would wash me away. I figured he was just tryin' to scare me. I guess he wasn't."

"I guess not. You okay to walk?"

"Sure. Been walkin' since I was just a little kid."

Jake and I shared a smile. The boy had missed the point.

"How old are you?"

"I'll be nine in eleven months."

It was worth another smile. I guess we each remembered how important it was at that age to get older in a hurry.

"Let's go find your brother," Jake said.

"I'm tellin' you he's gonna kill me."

"We won't let that happen. How old is your brother?"

"Fourteen."

"I just imagine he'll be in trouble with your parents for not watching you, won't he," I said.

"Good thinking, Fraud. I can blackmail him so he won't hurt me."

"My name is *Ford*, not Fraud, Jason. What's your brother's name?"

"Butchy."

"He have another name?" Jake asked.

"Alexander, but don't call him that – he'll punch you out."

"Thanks for the heads up, then."

The land was gently sloping upward following the creek as it curved west away from the property on which my house sat. In just a few minutes, Jason pointed.

"He's still asleep. He was out late last night doin' awful thing to people with his gang."

Hmm? A fourteen-year-old named Butch who was a gang member and punched people out for calling him by his real name? Not the sort of kid I really wanted to meet. Still, it seemed necessary that we go all the way with the kid to protect him and make the explanation.

While we were still twenty-five yards away, Jake did his two-finger whistle thing. A stroke of genius I thought – wake him up while we were still far enough away that we could run for our lives if that became necessary. (Sometimes I get overly dramatic!) The boy roused and sat up, looking around. I was surprised his eyes weren't glowing red and he wasn't foaming at the mouth.

"Where's your shirt, Jason. Like mom's warned you a thousand times, your fair skin will burn like bacon without it."

He stood.

"I lost it while I was near death in the middle of the

raging river.”

This was getting interesting. I wondered where it would go.

“I’m Ford and this is my friend, Jake,” I said.

“And you found my brother – the drowned rat – how?”

He certainly didn’t sound like what I figured a vicious gang member would sound like.

“He was caught by his shirt on a log in the middle of the creek, at the bend half a mile south where the water becomes pretty angry,” Jake said.

“You okay, Bro?” Butch/Alexander asked, putting his hands on the boy’s shoulders and turning him around, to get a good look.

“I’d be dead and gone if it hadn’t been for the heroic efforts of these brave young lads.”

I had to ask. Things just were not the way the kid had represented them or himself. I looked directly into Jason’s eyes and spoke.

“What’s the real story, Kid. It sure isn’t like the picture you painted.”

Big brother responded through a big smile.

“I assume the walking dictionary, here, spun one of his tales for you. He is notorious for such things. I must admit some of them are pretty good. Was it the, ‘my big brother and I are running away from home’ so we won’t get any more beatings, or ‘you have to protect me because my brother the gang member will kill me for what I did’, or ‘my brother just escaped from prison so be careful with him’?”

“That second one seems to hit it. I applaud both his imagination and the way he uses words.”

“I’m told he was born with more brains than is reasonable,” Alexander said. “By the way, I’m Alexander, in case he didn’t tell you.

We all smiled. I filled him in with more details about what had happened and said that any stories suggesting he had been in real danger, would probably be true.

“We had to leave his shirt on the branch out in the water,” Jake said. “It got ripped to pieces in the process. Sorry about that.”

“No *sorry* to it. I just don’t know how to thank you.”

“No *thanks* to it,” Jake said. “Folks take care of each other in our world.”

Alexander nodded.

“We’re going to swim down at the hole south of here,” Jake said. “It will be safe there. It’s in the shade. You’re welcome to join us.”

“We better be getting home. We both have quite a bit of explaining to do.”

Alexander offered his hand for shakes and we shook. It felt special to me, but I didn’t mention that, of course. We turned and left. I learned that shakes between *strangers* our ages seemed to be okay.

“Well, that was an interesting way to begin our day together,” I said.

“If one believed in such things, you’d think the Imps were out to get us today,” he said, grinning.

We shared a chuckle. We picked up our clothes and the food bag, and followed the river on south for another five minutes. The hole was every bit as great as Jake had led me to believe. We swam and had a great time until about three when our growling stomachs reminded us that we hadn’t eaten. We picked a shady spot and I opened the food sack. We sat back, me against a tree trunk and Jake with his back against a long-fallen log. There were deviled eggs – Jake had never heard of them. He apparently liked them. I had two of the half dozen I brought. I felt happy about that.

“How did you manage to keep things cool in a canvas sack?” he asked.

“Florence – she’s our cook – puts a ‘freeze pack’ in the bottom of my lunch sacks. She freezes them in the refrigerator. They contain some sort of chemical that stays frozen for twelve hours. They are reusable.”

“Smart.”

“Yeah.”

“So, how big is your place – the lawn and woods and all,” he asked.

“Alfred says ten acres. My guess is that the woods is maybe six or seven by itself. My great grandfather bought the land and built the house.”

“You like living there?”

“Yes and no. It’s the only home I’ve ever known so I guess it’s comfortable from that stand point. There’s the pool to use anytime I want to – year-round – and the tennis court and batting cage and roller skating rink in the basement. I enjoy all those things. I’d trade it all for a different life, though.”

“What do you mean – a different life?”

“To have parents who are interested in me, like your dad is in you. I assume they love me, but I have no way to know that for sure. I wish I had friends and people to talk with other than Alfred and Dr. James.”

“Dr. James. You have your own doctor?”

“He’s an extra teacher who comes a couple times a week and helps me with languages and other areas I’m interested in that the school doesn’t teach.”

“You go to school all day and have a teacher at night? When do you get to be a kid?”

“I find time, like building the tree house. I read a lot.”

Silence. Then he spoke again.

“Whatever that was you were singing out in the creek was a stroke of genius. I noticed the problem right away – how tense he was and how he kept struggling – but I had no idea what to do about it.”

“Distraction.”

“I’ll say it was. I almost let go of the kid myself when you started.”

We laughed about that. I got around to answering his question.

“It’s called the *Hokey Pokey* – it’s a dance from back in the fifties, I think. You sing it while you dance it. Florence taught it to me.”

“What made you remember it?”

“What makes me remember to breathe? I have no idea. Just glad it happened – and worked. That kid was something else, wasn’t he?”

“He was. I think I’d like his brother, but we didn’t find out about him.”

“I must say he turned out to be the nicest, brother killing, people punching, gang member I’ve ever run across,” I said.

We chuckled some more.

“So, teach me some stuff,” Jake said.

I didn’t understand and must have offered a puzzled look.

“The way I talk. Make it classy like yours. I’ll give you, say, twenty minutes.”

That was cause for full out laughter between us.

“I can think of two pretty easy things that will go a long way to helping.”

He sat forward, knees bent up, clearly eager to hear what I had to say.

“Ain’t!”

“Ain’t what?”

“Ain’t is a word that’s used commonly by lots of people. I know that, but you’ll never hear a well-educated, classy speaking person use it. So, that’s an easy way to begin to rise above the common language, as Alfred calls it. I don’t put anybody down for how he has learned to talk the language, please understand that. Really good people speak all levels of English. But, to your point, to be seen as a classy speaker by other classy speakers, you have to get rid of it – your choice.”

“Okay, so that’s one. What’s two?”

“Me and you.”

“Again, I have no idea . . .”

I interrupted.

“People who use the common language usually say, ‘me and you’ instead of ‘you and me’, which is proper. In classy language, the other person always comes first. ‘Jake and I went swimming, not, ‘me and Jake.’ Sally and I went to the dance. Fido and I fought over the dog biscuit. And then, taking it just a little bit further, ‘Me’ should never be part of the subject of a sentence so it wouldn’t be ‘You and me went swimming’, it would be ‘You and I’. Think of it this way, you’d never say, ‘Me went swimming’, you’d say, ‘I went swimming’, so, you’d say, ‘Ford and I went swimming’. ‘I’ can be the subject of a sentence but ‘me’ can’t.”

“That doesn’t seem too complicated. It will just take a lot of practice and thinking. Never use the word ain’t and always put the other person first when I’m talking about me

and . . . er, when I'm talking about 'He and I', or Ford and I, or Dad and I, or Alexander the gangbanger and I."

"I think you have it. Breaking old speaking habits is one the hardest things to do. It's because our brains begin learning speech patterns way before we begin talking. It is how we can understand language long before we can speak. The problem comes when that pattern we have modeled for us by the people around us is not the classy form of the language."

"That's really interesting. You correct me when I say it wrong. I really do want to speak correct."

"Ok, then, and here's number three. That should have been correctly instead of correct, but we'll get into that some other time."

"Why correctly. How can I know that?"

Or maybe NOT some other time.

"If a word tells 'how' it usually needs the ly on the end – he ran slowly – not slow, he sang beautifully – not beautiful, he spoke angrily – not angry, she texted rapidly – not rapid, he fell in love too easily – not easy. Some words don't follow that rule and you just have to learn the exceptions, like, he ran fast – not fastly. Like I said, let's save that for another time. Just master one or two things at once and soon you'll have a whole new sound when you talk."

"Thanks. Now, more swim or back to the tree house?"

"I vote back to the tree house. I asked Billy – our car guy – to deliver the carpet about noon so we could at least get it up into the tree house this afternoon. He's been keeping it for me in the garage."

"Sounds great. Let's get to it. Did I see apples in the sack?"

I removed two, and flipped one to him.

"By the way, Dad really enjoyed the pear you sent him. I said a friend gave it to me. I hope someday he can meet that friend."

"Me, too, Jake."

He looked at me, obviously thinking.

"Shouldn't that have been, 'I, too'?" Jake said.

I smiled. This was one smart kid.

"Technically, I suppose, but some phrases are called

'common usage phrases' and even though they are not technically correct, they have become accepted because everybody uses them. 'Me, too,' could also be said, like you suggested, 'I, too,' or 'I as well', or 'I am of the same mind,' but everybody would think you were a dork. Oh, that's right, I am a dork."

He chuckled and continued.

"I can see it will involve some work. If you keep helping me though, I'm bettin' I'll catch on."

I didn't mention about the way he often drops off the final 'g' in 'ing' words. We'd save that for later, too.

Did I mention I really like this Jake kid? I *really* like this Jake kid.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Friends can be Different

After leaving my lunch bag up on the porch, we headed to the edge of the woods where Billy would have left the two rolls of carpet. They were there, wrapped in plastic so they didn't draw moisture out of the grass. They were larger than I remembered.

"What's the plan to carry them? They look pretty heavy and we can't roll them – the trees are too close together."

"Ten paces to our right we will find my magic sled."

"Whatever you say," he offered with a smile.

"Some gadget," he said looking it over. "Wide skis instead of wheels and only about a foot and a half wide."

"I designed it just for in here. It slides up and over fallen branches and rocks with no problem. It could be improved, but since I'm – we're – so close to being finished I see no reason to change it."

We positioned it beside one of the rolls and soon had the load balanced in place. With a few rounds of rope, it was plenty secure to make the short trip into the woods. We both pulled using the loop of rope at the front. It really wasn't difficult with the two of us. After we had also brought the second roll, we put the sled back out of sight where I kept it.

"Now, we use that block and tackle thing you talked about, I'm betting," Jake said shading his eyes to look up along the tree trunks. "I see it. You have the rope tied to the trunk at the roof level. I'll go up and toss down the ends."

He moved to the base of the support tree on the front, left, and began shinnying up the trunk, showing a good deal of

skill.

“So that’s how you got up there that first morning, is it,” I asked. “I had been wondering. That reminds me, you need to show me how to do your two-finger whistle.”

He nodded but kept to his business. I soon had the two ends of the rope in my hands. While Jake waited on the porch, I tied one end of the rope around the center of the first roll of carpet – eight feet long – and began pulling on the other end. I had to adjust the spot where I wound the rope to keep it from tilting as I lifted it. Before long, it was just above the railing. Jake pulled it onto the porch and I let go of the rope dropping it to the floor. I went up the ladder and helped him pull it in through the front doors.

“The next one will be trickier,” I said. “It has to go in one of the windows upstairs and the roll looks to be about the same diameter as the window is wide. I’m thinking, we’ll have to squish it into sort of an oval in order to slide it inside.”

I had been correct. It was much more difficult. Jake went upstairs and opened the front window on the south. Standing on the porch I worked the block and tackle. From there I could also guide the carpet as it rose. He grabbed the top of the roll sitting it on the bottom of the window sill and held it in place. I pulled the rope raising the other end until the roll was sticking straight out from the window.

“How much too wide is the roll?” I called up to him.

“Not much, really. Give me a second. This is like flattening a kid’s ears back against his head when he got his head caught between two fence posts.”

“Sounds like you’re speaking from experience.”

“We can go into that later, but yeah. The worst five minutes of my life. . . . There, the end is inside. Now we need to find a way to keep moving the loop that’s around the roll back toward the other end so I can pull it all inside.”

“I can do that if I stand on one of these chairs. Give me a minute to get things arranged.”

“The first chair was wicker and not steady enough. The second one worked fine.

“Okay. I’m rolling the rope back. You pull.”

Not many words passed between us during the next five or so minutes. At last I watched my end slip through the

window. (My end of the *carpet roll*, that is.)

“Be up there in a minute,” I called.

“Bring drinks. It’s about a thousand degrees in here.”

I picked out two, still sort of, cold cans of orange pop and went to the ladder. He was looking down through the opening and I tossed the cans up – one at a time – and then made the climb.

“It *is* hot up here,” I agreed. “Time to start work on the air conditioner.”

“A/C uses a lot of power. Will your solar panels really furnish enough electricity for that?”

“My A/C unit won’t use a single, volt, watt or ohm.”

“I know those terms – studied them in science earlier in the year. Electrical units I figured I’d never need to know, but how can you . . .”

“I have blueprints downstairs. By the way, its lot’s cooler down there – more cross breezes and now with the second floor, no direct sun on the ceiling.”

With smiles that recognized how dumb it had been for me to go upstairs in the first place, we were soon downstairs, our backs against the big, soft roll of carpet.

“I like your color choice – blue and brown speckles – my favorites – probably blue better than brown, but I guess it depends on the shades of each.”

“I enjoy these little conversations you periodically (every so often) have with yourself,” I said, teasing.

He offered a smile and shrug.

We opened the pop. It spewed all over us. We laughed ourselves silly. Two smart boys should have suspected that would happen right after tossing the cans up through the hole and then back down. Jake licked his arm where it had squirted on him.

“Not bad, really – orange soda and salty sweat. You should try it.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely *not!* It’s thoroughly disgusting.”

“You’d have let me try though if I hadn’t asked, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course. It’s what guy friends do for each other.”

“Then thanks, I guess,” I said, really meaning it.

“So, this A/C unit of yours?”

It had been a question. I pulled a file folder from a cardboard box at the rear of the room and removed a drawing. We sat back against the roll of carpet.

“Looks like a screwed-up umbrella of some sort,” he said moving in closer for a better look.

He was right in a way. I chuckled at the description and began the description pointing from place to place.

“As you see, it is shaped sort of like a huge megaphone like cheer leaders use – a small opening on one end and a really large one on the other. The small end will be adjustable – one to three inches in diameter. The large end will be forty-eight inches. From one end to the other it is six feet long.”

“That’s big.”

“It is. Here’s how it works. You’ve noticed, I’m sure, that there is always a breeze up this high.”

He nodded and had a comment.

“But like today, even that breeze is on the hot side.”

“It is. This gizmo will be made like a weather vane so it turns with the wind, keeping the large end always into the breeze.”

“So, the air is forced out through the small opening?” he asked.

“Right.”

“I can see how that will make a stronger breeze but it will still be hot – just more powerful – won’t it?”

“That’s the secret science that’s at work here. Science tells us that when air is forced through a smaller channel it cools down. So, when four feet of breeze enters one end and gets forced down to one or so inches at the other, there will be a whole lot of cooling take place – not icebox cold, but significantly cooler.”

“I’ll take your word for it, but it seems really strange.”

“No need to take my word for it. Prove it for yourself. Hold your open palm about three inches right in front of your mouth. Now, open your mouth wide – making a large opening. Now, breath out fast like blowing only it’s hard to blow through a wide-open mouth. Remember how warm that feels on your hand. Now, form your lips like you were going to whistle and blow as hard as you can. Tell me what happens.”

Jake repeated the exercise a half-dozen-times.

"I'll be darned! The air from the whistle-sized mouth is a whole lot cooler. The air inside my mouth is the same temperature – small opening or large opening – but when it leaves through the small opening it is definitely cooler. I'll be darned!"

"You said that, already."

"And I may say it again. That is amazing. Good old science class, I guess."

"Yes, that's one lesson it teaches us – that science is useful, but there is a second lesson as well."

"What's that, or are you going to make me guess?"

I smiled. That had crossed my mind, but I went ahead and tried to make my point.

"When I studied it in class I found it interesting and tucked it away not having any way to know if it would ever be useful – think, Wars of the Roses, here, Jake."

He frowned, but I could tell he was thinking. After a moment, his face brightened.

"Ah ha! I asked why I needed to know about that war when I had no idea why it could ever be important to me. Like the principle of science didn't seem useful to you either, but you learned it and since you did, now, look what you've done with it. I've always hated the idea of having to learn stuff that doesn't seem practical at that moment, but now, I'm going to have to re-think it, I suppose. Maybe people who plan out school stuff really do know what they're doing."

"Yeah. Imagine that. Could a teacher, who has twenty years of education, really know more about learning than kids?"

"You really are something else, Ford. It is so great that I'm going to get to know you – really know you like friends do."

I felt like crying, but I managed not to, figuring it wasn't a very masculine thing to do. So, I just smiled and said something dumb like: "Back at you."

"Are we going to install the carpet today," he asked.

"I didn't bring the tools. Maybe next time."

"When will next time be?" he asked.

"I was just wondering that myself. It's the last week of the semester so, I have exams. I suppose you do, too."

“I do, but I never study for them if that’s where you’re going with it.”

“Well, I do study. I’d feel like I was letting myself down – cheating myself – if I didn’t prepare so I can do as well on them as I can. I hope you can understand that.”

“I understand about not letting myself down – dad’s always preaching that at me. I just never thought that when I make grades that are less than what I could make, that I’m letting myself down. I see it is, I guess. You just made my life way more complicated, friend.”

“Your welcome. I think it’s what guy friends do.”

He smiled, nodded and almost chuckled as I threw his words back at him. If Jake had known the word *touché*, he’d have used it. (Touché can be used to mean, ‘that was a better response than mine’ or ‘you got me!’)

“The problem with working on the A/C is that I have to do it in the shop at the house. That’s where the power tools are.”

“You want my help or is it just your project. I can see how an inventor would want to do all the work himself. That’s not a problem.”

“Two things. First, of course, I want your help. Second, you are welcome at my place anytime, so whether you come or not is something for you and your dad to work out.”

“Okay,” he said. “Knowing that, puts it in my lap. I guess we’re saying we are ready to share each other with our ‘people’, I think is the word you used. I got just one ‘people’ and quite truthfully, I have no idea how many you have.”

I smiled understanding how confusing my situation was – even to me in this instance. The servants, except for Alfred, wouldn’t count as people for our purposes. With mom and dad absent most of the time, I supposed they wouldn’t count for something like this. Billy probably wouldn’t either. That also left me with only one ‘people’ – my Alfred. I smiled just thinking about it.

“I’ll take it up with Alfred – my one ‘people’. You take it up with your dad. We’ll see what happens from there. Like I said, though, I know Alfred will love the idea of me having a friend over.”

Jake nodded. I could see his wheels turning and had

confidence he'd get it worked out.

We rested and talked 'til after six. It didn't get dark until around seven. I figured Jake should be on his way, and through the woods by 6:45 at the latest.

"It'll be dark in an hour. You'll need to be out of here before that."

"I know. That'll just give us time for a hot dog roast and s'mores."

"I didn't bring hot dogs?"

It came out like a question.

"But I did. It's what's in my backpack."

"Won't they have spoiled all day in this heat?" I asked.

"What your cold packs do for deviled eggs and pop, my stove does to hot dogs."

"I don't understand."

"I boiled the hot dogs this morning. Cooked hot dogs last a long time – the bacteria get killed so they don't go bad so soon. Believe it or not, I learned that in science. When we put them on sticks over a fire all we'll need to do is heat them up. I brought buns and catsup packets, too."

"Sounds great. I didn't understand about the other thing: *some mores?*"

"They're spelled *s'mores* – a toasted marshmallow laying on part of a chocolate bar all cozied together inside two graham crackers. Dessert. I saw you had a fire ring made of stones down in front. Okay to build a small fire?"

"Sure. Not having water to put it out we can use dirt. Need to get that ready first. I've often done that. Thanks for dinner by the way."

"Hot dogs over a fire ain't – scratch that – aren't dinner. Don't know the word but not dinner."

"How about 'camp grub'?"

He liked that and grinned.

We soon had a small fire going, had cut sticks, and were roasting the hot dogs. He liked his nearly black, crusty, and rather dry. I liked mine lightly browned and juicy. Friends can be different that way. Did I mention that? Probably not, because it seems I just learned it myself.

We enjoyed the meal and laughed a lot when, all quite seriously, I asked how I was supposed to attach my *s'more* to

my stick and roast it over the fire. Like I said, in terms of our pact, Jack clearly had the bigger job.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Anything New in your Life this Week?

One thing I have always admired about Alfred – whenever it was not dangerous to me or others – he always let me just be me. He never said I had to be this way or that way. He never indicated he'd like me more or better if I changed to be some other way. I think I took up his philosophy about such things back when I was pretty young. It's just that I have never really had anybody to use it on – with – apply it to – however it should be said. Hmm. School bullies present a special group that I suppose I don't include here. I think they DO need changing. More thinking, I guess.

I meant it when I told Jake I didn't judge people by the kind of English they spoke. Now *teachers*, I've been known to get after them, but they should know better. Maybe not. Maybe I'm more of a snob than I thought I was.

I'm glad Jake doesn't swear because I'm not sure how I'd react to that. It's not that I think of swear words as 'bad' words. How could a *word* be 'bad'? "You're bad, Mr. Word. Go stand in the corner." I think of them as *lazy* words. You never know what a person really means when he swears. Like if he says, 'My teacher's a *blankity blank blank*. I mean, I know he is displeased in some way, but how? Is it because his teacher is mean, unfair, raciest, argumentative, a liar, unreasonable, not understanding, cruel and on and on down a long list? One other problem is that when a person chooses to use a swear word *he* doesn't even have to know exactly what HE means – he just swears about it. So, *I* don't know what he means, *he* doesn't know what he means and for sure *the person* he might

be swearing at doesn't know. How can that person change or improve or even just respond appropriately if he can't understand what the swearing-guy is objecting to? It just burns me up to hear swearing, because I really do want to know what people mean when they talk. What swearing *does* tell me is that the person doing the swearing is a really, really lazy person when it comes to communicating. He doesn't take time to think through what he means or how he is really feeling before he begins talking.

Because of exams during that next week, Jake and I agreed to wait until the following Friday, after school to meet up again. I missed him. I wondered if he missed me. I spent lots of time reviewing for the tests. He said he didn't do that. I wondered?

Listening to him talk, and assuming he is a whole lot more normal than I am, I must assume most kids don't enjoy studying the way I do. I just love learning new things. I can't imagine how life would be without the opportunity to do that. I'm not going to give it up just to be acceptable to the other kids. I will need to think about my options – how to stay the same and still be different. Hmm? Suddenly, that sounds like a difficult task. I do hope it's possible.

My school got out at noon on Friday. Soon after I arrived home, I packed a good-sized lunch and headed for the woods. Alfred had noticed a change in me.

"It seems there is an extra spring in your step when you start off for the woods these days."

I imagine I just shrugged, not wanting to give anything away until I conferred with Jake about how and when we would reveal our secrets. Alfred was probably right – about the spring thing. He usually was. I had been fortunate to always have him in my life. I hoped Jake got out early, too, and would decide to come right away. We hadn't set a time any more definite than, 'after school'. I just hoped he came – regardless of the hour. He would have had five days in which to think about me – us, I suppose. We seemed soooo different. Having had all that time to think about it, I really didn't understand *why* he would still like me.

It made me stop and think: Why did *I* like *him*? Well, he was very easy to talk with. We shifted back and forth about

who was in the lead between us depending on our skill and knowledge. We evidently thought very much alike about things because we hadn't even come close arguing. He didn't hesitate to ask questions and make suggestions – like the entrance hole into the upstairs and in which direction to lay and nail down the sheets of plywood. We worked well as a team – on the tree house, *and* while we were untangling that Jason Kid from the limb in the creek. It was like we anticipated (predicted) what the other was about to do and what we should do to complement (complete or support) each other's efforts. I also like his sense of humor and his quick mind – he really learns rapidly.

I suppose there are other things, too. Being the same age helps – we've been through some of the same things – grades in school, growing up changes, questions about life. I'm sure there will be more things. Honesty! That's one really big thing about him. I believe I can trust him. All that sounds like a pretty good basis for a friendship. I hope he has found some things about me he likes. I didn't tell him I play the clarinet and flute. I hope he doesn't think they are sissy instruments – lots of the boys at my school do – of course *they* are the ones that don't know how to play *anything*. I wonder if *he* plays something.

There is one more really important thing I hadn't thought about until this moment. I have noticed that lots and lots of kids my age are afraid to make mistakes that the rest of us might see. It's like they take a mistake as some awful reflection on them – like everybody will think less of him because of it. I suppose some kids do use it like a putdown – how dumb can they be. One thing Dr. James has helped me understand is that a mistake can be a very good friend, because it guides you away from something that didn't work and suggests you need to keep looking for the correct 'whatever it is'.

When I make an error, he has this thing of throwing his arms in the air and calling out, "Wonderful." He means it is wonderful that I just learned something important. What I'm getting at is that, Jake doesn't seem to think badly about me when I make a mistake – like forgetting the hole in the floor. I get the idea that his dad is a lot like my Dr. James when it

comes to things like that. It sure makes life easier that way. Dr. James and I always smile and chuckle when he does that with his arms. It's a whole lot better than having a teacher say, "No, Ford, you are wrong." No chuckles there! Since Jake asked me to prompt him when he slips up using English, I think I'll try the arm thing with him. I have the idea he'll love it.

As I entered the woods, I stopped and attempted a finger whistle – Alfred, of all people, can do it and he helped me work on it during the past week. I placed my little fingers, tongue and lips just like he showed me and I blew. The shrill shriek that followed, took me by surprise. My heart even reacted. That was so great! Just as great, however, was the whistle that came back at me through the trees to the south. Jake had come!

I wiped away a most unexpected tear. This having a friend thing was, clearly, deeply important to me. I had decided long ago that I wouldn't try to be anybody but who I really was with friends. If they required that I change, then we couldn't have a relationship based in honesty. I worked at removing the moisture from my cheeks as I picked up my pace, dodging in among the trees. During all the years I had been going to and from the tree house, I used slightly different paths each time so I would not cut a visible trail that somebody else could follow. I wanted it to be my secret. Now it was Jake's secret, too. I needed to speak with him about that – the way he approached the clearing from the south.

I spotted him sitting on a stump ten yards in front the tree house – near the other side of the clearing. It made me feel good that he got there first. It told me our relationship was important to him.

"What's up?" I called as I entered the open, circular area.

He stood, slowly, but didn't move toward me. He put his finger to his lips as if asking for silence. He pointed up to the porch. There, stretched out and licking his front right paw, was a Bobcat – all three feet and thirty-five pounds of him.

"It's a Bobcat," Jake began, appearing to know things about it. He kept his voice low. "It's a male – he stood up and turned around a few minutes ago."

I nodded and said what I knew.

"I'm aware some have been spotted around here – perhaps one a year, I've read."

"There are three at the Wild Animal Refuge down at Prairie Grove," Jake said. "A male and two females. I've seen them there. It looks to me like this one's right front paw is injured – study him for a minute and see what you think."

I did and agreed.

"Isn't he beautiful?" I said.

"I suppose so. He's been eying me, but hasn't made any move in my direction. I was about ready to leave and come looking for you, actually, but something about him seems safe."

"A Bobcat can chase down a deer in an open field. I'm not so sure about the *safe* thing. I'm going to see if I can find anything on the internet," I said.

I went to the sheriff's web site thinking that might list such sightings.

"Am I good or what?" I said, kidding – sort of. "Look here – top of the home page. Bobcat escapes from Wild Life Refuge."

"There! It gives a number to call," Jake said, pointing.

I made ready to make the call. 'Bobby' the Bobcat may have been making ready to have supper. He jumped onto one of the tree trunks and backed down to the ground.

"This can't be good," I said backing toward the trees that formed a ring around the clearing. Jake moved with me.

"Did you hear it whimper when it lit on the ground just now – like that paw is hurting, I'm thinking," Jake said, shadowing me as I continued to back up.

I reached into my lunch sack and removed two cans of pop.

"No thanks," Jake said clearly puzzled.

"Yes, thanks," I said forcing it on him. "Weapons if we need them. Shake them up and if things begin to look dangerous, open it just a bit and spray it at him. It may scare him off. Most cats don't like 'wet'."

"You think quick – ly," Jake said, offering a quick smile into my face, "but I'm not sure I have great faith in your weapon of choice."

“If the stream doesn’t deter (stop) him, maybe the hissing will – maybe he’ll think it’s a snake.”

“Are Bobcats afraid of snakes?” he asked.

“If they have any smarts about them they are.”

“I don’t like *solutions* that begin with the word, ‘IF’,” he replied.

It was all I had.

We were just back into the line of trees. Bobby limped to within three yards of where we stood and then surprised us. He lay down in the grass, rolled over onto his back, and reached up his paw – the injured one. I spoke. Regardless of how I phrased it, it was really a question.

“Me thinks ol’ Bobby, here, is the one from the refuge and is used to people – to have people take care of him, it seems.”

“I began walking toward it.”

“You idiot!” Jake whispered – *whispered* loudly enough to be heard in the next county!

As I reached the animal, I began talking in a low, calm voice. Later, Jake would tell me I was repeating the *Gettysburg Address*. My intention had been to soothe the animal with the drone of my voice. I put one hand on his head and rubbed it gently. With my other hand – the one I imagined just might become Ol’ Bobby’s supper – I took hold of his leg just above the injured paw.

At first, he withdrew it and looked at me from where he remained on his back. Then, I felt him relax. Using both hands I took his paw and spread it apart. I switched from Honest Abe’s speech to words for Jake, maintaining the same calm, slow manner.

“I see the problem. A short, sharp stick stuck deeply into the center of his paw. Like the biggest splinter I’ve ever seen. See if he’ll be okay when you ease in here beside me.”

“You mean see if it’s going to be two boys for the price of one at the old Tree House Café this evening?”

Regardless of his words, he moved in. Keeping to my patter (rhythmic speech) I continued talking.

“If he decides to come after us we need to run off in different directions so he can’t get both of us,” I said.

Jake nodded and ran the back of his hand across his

forehead.

“You need to gently pull out the splinter while I force the paw open wide. I can tell when I do that, some space opens up around the stick so I’m thinking it will ease the removal process.”

“I’m so glad, ‘you’re thinking’. Are you thinking he prefers catsup or mustard on his eleven-year old boys?”

Again, he didn’t let his obvious objections interfere with his job. I moved my head in between the paw and ‘Ol Bobby’s eyes so he couldn’t see what was going on.

“Now would be a good time, my friend,” I said, still as calm as any boy might be just before his face gets torn to shreds by a wild cat’s big jaws and sharp teeth.

My, how Bobby’s breath stunk – it was absolutely terrible. I thought I’d throw-up right then and there. I turned my attention to that beautifully marked face and was happy to hear Jake say the splinter was out – cleanly and all in one piece.

“How about pouring your can of pop over the wound to clean it out,” I suggested, more than asked? “The fizziness should help bubble out the dirt and stuff.”

I heard the pop of the lid. Bobby made no response, probably used to that sound at the refuge.

“The liquid deed is done,” Jake said as if thinking he needed to speak in code in front of our new acquaintance.

I turned my head to get one final look at the paw. It looked clean and was no longer bleeding. I took those as good signs. Very gently, I lowered his paw and let go. Jake and I backed away slowly and carefully. Bobby began licking his paw and gave us a look as if to say he approved of the orange flavor. Presently, he rolled onto his side and then stood, looking back and forth between us – perhaps wondering which of us would go best with the orange juice appetizer.

He turned and walked into the area among the trunks of the four trees that supported the tree house. He lay down, closed his eyes, and apparently went to sleep. The pain was either gone or much reduced. I knew from things I had read that big cats slept often and easily.

“We stopped where we were and Jake smiled into my

face, speaking – trying to put on an English accent.

“My dear Dr. Ford. I have this teacher that’s a real pain in my butt. Do you suppose you could remove her for me? Easy on the orange pop.”

We laughed. It was as much a way of releasing the tension that had built up as it was about the humor – and it *had* been humorous hearing it.

“So now what?” I said, as much to myself as Jake.

“Call the sheriff and tell him we have a new playmate he might want to come and pick up.”

“Oh, yeah.”

I made the call. The officer said they would come with his keeper from the Refuge. It would be an hour. I directed them to my house. Then I called Billy to meet them out front and bring them to his usual drop off point where one of us would meet them. I also let Alfred know what was going on – sort of.

I retrieved our lunch sack and we gathered around the stump where we proceeded to eat. I hoped that the scent of ham salad would not arouse the sleeping giant that was napping just ten yards away from us.

“So,” Jake began, showing an Impish grin, “anything new or exciting in your life this week?”

“Not really. Yours?”

“I guess not. Oh, well, I did have a passing affair with a new kitty-cat. Named him Bobby. He has a habit of going to sleep at just the right time.”

CHAPTER NINE

I Hoped He Wouldn't Hate Me for what he was About to See.

The authorities arrived with a trailer, and Bobby was soon on his way out of our lives. He even seemed pleased to see his trainer. The Refuge guy said he would see we received free life-time passes. I had never been there. Jake said he figured his dad would take us – once he got used to the idea his son was rubbing shoulders with the richest kid in the city.

I hated to be thought of that way. Jake understood and explained, unnecessarily, it had just been a joke. I smiled, but we both knew it was true. I figured that since he knew I hated it, that was a good step in our friendship. The great thing was, it *didn't* matter to Jake like it *did* to lots of the kids – lots of the kids I wouldn't have to see for another three months. YIPEE! That realization caused me to relax from one end to the other. My main question remained: 'Could Jake help me become an 'acceptable kid' in that amount of time?' My next thought was if I should even expect that of him. Was I just using him? I hoped not. We had a deal – a pact – to help each other.

With the cat gone, we were sitting in the chairs up on the porch munching apples.

"I told dad we had become friends. I sort of had to, in order to be honest when he asked what I'd been up to while he'd been working. He thought it was great and hopes he'll get to meet you soon."

"That *is* great. I've been thinking about him – well, you, too – all week. He seems like an interesting mixture of my

Alfred and Dr. James.”

“You won’t be disappointed. He’s the best man I know.”

It was great he could say that. I hated that he could say that. I didn’t know my dad well enough to even wonder about that kind of thing. I’d live with it. I did caution myself at that moment that no matter how much I came to like Jake’s dad, I had to keep straight that he was not my dad, nor was he a substitute for my dad. I already had three subs – Alfred, Dr. James and Billy. And, I was about to lose Billy, the way Alfred told it.

“You into sports?” Jake asked.

“I like tennis and batting and swimming and roller skating and shooting baskets. I’ve never really played sports as games – with or ‘against’ somebody else. Up until a few years ago Alfred and I would hit a tennis ball back and forth across the net. That got too strenuous for him as I grew older and could run him all over the court. I still hit balls from the lobbing machine. It’s how I bat, too – from the pitching machine. When I roller skate sometimes I hold a broom, and pretend I’m skating with a girl. Does that sound dumb?”

“That’s an interesting question. Last year I’d have probably said ‘yes’. This year I have to say ‘no’.”

“Me too. Things are changing about girls.”

He nodded. I got the idea he had never really talked about that sort of thing with other boys. Neither had I, of course. It seemed an uneasy topic between us just then, so we dropped it. Probably later.

“So, we going to lay that carpet this afternoon?” he asked.

“That may depend on when you can come over again. I have a mattress arriving for upstairs on Monday so it would be good if I – we – could get that carpet laid before then.”

“Yeah. I can be here if you’ll have me.”

We shared a smile. We seemed to be doing that a lot. He had no idea how important it was to me that he had essentially asked me if I wanted him to come and be with me. Nobody in all of my twelve years six months and eleven days, had done that before. I kept it to myself.

“In that case, why don’t we just goof off this afternoon and get back to that tomorrow?” I suggested.

“Okay,” he said. “That sounds good. What shall we do?”

I guess I frowned because he asked if anything was wrong. I had an answer.

“This will be the dumbest thing you’ve ever heard another kid ask.”

He remained silent, waiting, almost as if he were getting used to that.

“I’m not at all sure how to goof off.”

It made him break up with laughter. He slid down in his chair and held his stomach. Tears rolled down his face. His laughter made me laugh and for several minutes I’m sure we looked like a couple of idiots in danger of falling thirty feet to our deaths. He wiped his eyes as he straightened up. I watched him, keeping my smile. Apparently, I had been correct: it *had* been the dumbest thing a kid had ever asked. I figured he had been laughing at the humor in the situation and not at me. Jake wasn’t the kind that would laugh AT another person.

“I take it you were serious, Ford. I’m sorry for laughing but . . .”

“No explanation needed. You really have a wonderful laugh, you know.”

“That’s what dad says. I’m not sure what it means, but I guess my laugh is my laugh, end of story. Seriously – about goofing off – I suppose it means doing something that isn’t required or necessary or that serves any purpose other than just enjoying it.”

“From that definition, when I’m studying, I’m goofing off – I’m just enjoying it.”

“Not sure how to respond to that. I doubt in the whole history of boys it has ever been suggested as a possibility. Perhaps it has to be some non-intellectual or non-job related pursuit (activity), then.”

“Like swimming last Sunday?”

“Yeah.”

“Climbing trees qualify?”

“Definitely! I love to climb trees. Know where we might find some?”

That time, I was the one who laughed first.

As he stood up he felt the phone in his pocket – he was wearing cut-offs and had shed his T-shirt before I arrived. The temperature was looking at the mid-80s.

“I brought your phone back. Sorry we kept it all week.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. I have two other lines – don’t ask why – that’s just how my mom does things. If most people have one, I should have three. I’d like you to keep it. It’s going to get paid for whether it’s laying in my drawer or riding along in your pocket. It will make things easier between us and when you or your dad needs to make calls you can.”

“I understand your position. I’ll try to sell the idea to dad. Like I told you, he’s not one to take charity.”

“Certainly, he accepts friendship, doesn’t he?”

Jake smiled.

“I just may be able to hook him with that argument. You’re really good when it comes to sneaky.”

“I’ve had a life-time of practice. In fact, at my place, the servants spell ‘sneaky’, F-O-R-D!”

He smiled and chuckled and slipped it back into his pocket. We climbed for an hour or so. He took more chances than I did – like scooting way out on the branch of one tree and moving over onto the branch of another one. He reminded me of monkeys I had seen in videos. Even though I figured we weighed about the same, I wasn’t willing to risk it. In fact, I felt for my phone, wanting to make sure I had it in case I needed to call 911. Back, ‘BJ’ – Before Jake – I would have been freely offering my advice for the other kid to be careful. I realized it was like me saying, ‘You need to be doing it my way, not yours.’ I can see, now, how that probably always irritates the others. They didn’t see me as trying to help, but instead, they took my words as putting them down or interfering. So, I zipped my lips. One more good lesson from my new friend.

I had enjoyed climbing all my life and smiled at the thought I’d been goofing off all those years and didn’t even know it.

Eventually, we were back down in the clearing.

“You up to a race?” he asked.

“From one side of the clearing to the other?” I asked not really understanding.

“No. Out on your – what do you call it – back lawn, I suppose. Where we picked up the carpet.”

“Sure. We could race up to the garage. Probably a two-minute run. I’m sure Florence has goodies she’ll be glad for us to eat. She always has goodies for me.”

“In the garage?” he asked looking puzzled.

“No. The kitchen.”

“And Florence is . . .?”

“Florence is our cook. Sorry. I thought I’d mentioned her.”

“I suppose that would be okay. Dad seems just fine with me spending time with you.”

“That’s an odd expression – *spending time*,” I said. “Like time is money.”

“I’d never thought about that, but it *is* odd. You can save money and spend it later, but you can’t save time to use later.”

“It would be cool if you could, though,” I said.

“Yeah,” he came right back, offering an example. “Just imagine a piggy bank full of ‘time’ you could take out and use whenever you were running behind – like for doing Monday’s homework way too late on Sunday night.”

“I can see we are going to have some great talks about strange things. I figured I was the only one who ever thought about stuff like that.”

Jake smiled.

“I’ll make sure to *save some time* for those talks.”

We both broke up.

We walked to a spot where the woods opened onto the back lawn. He smiled.

“What?” I asked.

“Do you realize we just *walked* to this spot so we could begin *racing*?”

It was worth more chuckles. There were always chuckles with Jake. Did I mention it was so great having this kid in my life? It is *so great* having this kid in my life.

“So, where’s the garage?”

It was out of sight, over a gentle rise, a little to our right, so I pointed.

“It extends right from the east side of the house. Can’t

miss it, anyway you'll be following in my dust, so you just follow along and I'll get you there."

"Following you my grandma's bustle," he said. "You'll still be tying that shoelace when I get there."

He pointed at my shoe.

"I looked down and he took off on the run. My shoe was NOT untied. I had to smile. More goofing off, I assumed."

Even though he got a short head start, I soon closed the gap. I had no idea if he was fast or average as kids our ages went. What I soon found out was that I was faster – a lot faster. I caught up to him and we were running side-by-side by the time we topped the rise. I pointed again. He suddenly stopped and just stood there with his hands on his hips.

"What?" I asked circling back to him thinking he might have sprained an ankle or pulled a Charlie-horse or something.

"*That's* your house?"

"I'm afraid so."

"It looks like an apartment building."

"Sorry. It's all I have."

"Oh, I didn't mean you should be sorry. I just wasn't prepared for . . . so much of it, I guess."

We stood there catching our breath for a few more moments. He spoke again.

"You are *really* fast, Ford. I'm the fastest boy in my class and you're leaving me in your dust."

"I didn't know, I guess. This is my first race."

Jake began laughing as we started walking.

"Don't take this wrong, friend, but a week ago I'd have bet no kid like you existed, anywhere on the planet – no, make that in the *universe*."

"I suppose that will take more explanation," I said.

"You'll just have to be patient. We'll get to all of it sooner or later."

"Maybe we just jog the rest of the way," I suggested.

"That's up to you. I'm not above getting buried in a race when its legitimate (real). I applaud your skill."

"Thanks."

I set an easy pace and we jogged on. I headed us right

for the kitchen door.

“Hey, Florence. I’d like you meet my friend, Jake . . . Jake Somebody, who I’m sure probably has a last name but so far it hasn’t been important so I don’t have the slightest idea what it is.”

“Hello, Jake somebody bla bla bla,” she began with her wonderful smile and mandatory (required) hug. I’m Florence. My sole purpose on earth is to keep young Ford’s tummy from growling.”

“And keeping Alfred well coffeed and sweet-rolled,” I added, hoping they would think my phrasing was humorous.

They did.

“So, what fantastic morsels (bits of food) do you have laid in for the weekend?” I asked, pointing to a chair at the kitchen table for Jake.

We took seats.

“How about cheese Danish and milk for starters?” she said.

She didn’t wait for an answer and soon had a plate of goodies setting on the table. The milk was served in a pitcher with empty glasses turned upside-down on the table.

Jakes eyes grew big. I wasn’t sure why. My guess was, he was not used to either so much milk or such a pile of pastries. I didn’t ask. Knowing what I knew about him, I figured it would come out when he was ready. Suddenly, I wasn’t sure it had been a good idea to have brought him there. I turned the glasses right side up and poured.

“Will you be staying for dinner?” Florence asked Jake.

He looked at me. I looked at him and spoke.

“Yes. We’d prefer egg salad sandwiches and French fries up in my room if it’s not too much trouble?”

“Nothing is too much trouble for you, Master Ford. Give me half an hour. Peach pie with that be okay?”

I looked at Jake and asked:

“Hot or cold?”

“I don’t understand.”

“I like fruit pie refrigerator cold, but I understand most people like theirs hot.”

He looked at Florence.

“Cold will be fine – with a fork, please.”

I wasn't sure how he thought rich kids ate pie, but figured it had just been one of those nervous slipups I was so famous for. Alfred said it came with my age – in my case, that 'age' had existed from five to eleven and counting.

When we stood to leave the room, Jake pushed his chair back under the table, stacked the dishes and glasses together, and picked them up, addressing Florence.

"Where shall I put these?" he asked.

"What a gentleman. Please come back often. There beside the sink will be fine."

I felt somewhat embarrassed. In my whole life, I'd never made such an offer. I figured next, he'd be offering to boil the eggs for the sandwiches or maybe harvest the wheat for the bread. I grabbed him by the arm to get him out of there before Florence proposed to him.

Out in the hall, he spoke.

"Florence is very nice. You're lucky to have a woman like that in your life."

It was something I had never thought about. Now, I would need to, of course. I'd handle that later.

"Stairs or elevator?" I asked.

"You have a elevator in your house?"

"Two, I'm afraid – East Wing and West Wing."

"Steps, I guess. Where are we going?"

"I suppose I should have asked you, first. To my room, unless you'd rather not. I'll understand."

"It's okay, I guess. Forgive me for gawking at everything in here – marble floors, felt wallpaper, crystal chandeliers, drapes *and* curtains. This hall must be fifteen feet tall. I feel like I'm in a museum – no offence intended – but gee whiz, man!"

"I figured you'd hate it – like I do. I also figured it will be best if you just get it all over with at once. I know CPR if it's too much for your system."

I hoped he'd think that was funny, but it seemed to go over his head. He just kept looking and feeling things – he even sniffed the drapes when we came to the huge windows beside the front door.

The central stairway at the front of the main hall was eight feet wide with a carved wooden rail. The steps were

marble with carved front edges. They wound around to the right in a very gentle arc. The narrower, second flight got us to the third floor where my room was. I pointed to our right and we walked down the hall that separated the floor into the rooms at the front and those at the rear. My room – well, rooms, but I called them my room – was at the south west corner of the house – the opposite end from the garage and kitchen. The door was eight feet tall – double doors, actually. I turned the knob on the one to the right and pushed it open. Before we entered, he turned around and looked back down the hall we'd just walked.

“This one section of hall is four times bigger than my entire house,” he said.

I said what was on my mind about things like that.

“I’m thinking it is going to be best if we don’t compare yours and mine, huh? What you have, you have. What I have, I have. Can we just leave it at that?”

“I guess so, although you already seem to have claimed my dad as yours.”

“You caught that, did you. I did, too. I’ve got it straightened out in my head this week. I won’t be planting my flag in his chest, okay.”

That finally got a grin. I hoped he wouldn’t hate me for what he was about see.

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CHAPTER TEN

I had a Lot to Thank Jake for.

Jake moved around my rooms looking and touching like a boy in a candy shop. I didn't know how to feel. Certainly, he could never have what I had – in stuff, I mean. I wondered how important it really was to him. Finally, we got to the room that overlooked the rear of the property – my study room. He walked directly to the rear and stopped in front of the big window with the seat. He looked out for some time scanning the area.

“Of everything you have, this is the only thing I wish I had,” he said.

From the look on his face I understood he was being sincere. I just didn't fully understand what he meant.

“What? The window, the window seat?” I asked.

“No. The view. Just look at it. Acres of green grass. A dozen flower gardens. The rolling slope down to the trees. The whole southern sky toward the end of a day – still light in the west but growing darker by the second in the east. I really envy you, this.”

I had my answer about how important all my *stuff* was to him. I'm not sure how I felt – somewhere between ashamed and unappreciative, I suppose. I had snuggled up in that window seat thousands of times and not once had I seen what Jake saw the very first time he looked out upon it. I mean I had seen the grass and flowers and such but not in the same way he had – appreciatively.

“Thanks for that,” I said.

He heard my voice but apparently not the words,

because he said nothing in return. He sat down sideways, one leg, knee bent, on the seat, his torso turned so he could continue to look. I didn't want to interrupt what was clearly so important to him. I sat at the other end facing him so I could continue to watch his face. I figured most girls would think he was handsome. I liked the way he wore his hair – down to his shoulders. It was clean and combed and shiny. My mother would have gone directly to her grave if showed up wearing mine that way. That made me smile – it probably shouldn't have.

Florence arrived with the big tray. She knocked at the hall door and I trotted back through the rooms to greet her. Jake followed me. She entered and put it on the table in my living room – the one into which the hall door opened.

"You should have called ma'am," Jake said. "We could have come to get it."

Florence elbowed me in my side and pretended to whisper to me behind her big hand.

"This kid's a keeper. Adopt him before he gets away."

She winked at Jake, turned and left.

"I really like your Florence – kind and efficient with a great sense of humor that sits just below the surface. I wasn't sure if *real* women had a sense of humor or not."

"Real women?" I asked as I arranged the food on the table.

"I've had lots of women teachers and none of them had much of a sense of humor. I guess I don't think of them as real women."

"All the servants in this house have good senses of humor. Alfred says I demand it of them. Like being around me somehow pulls it out of them."

Jake nodded.

"I can understand that. It's like me and . . . er, like *dad and I* are. When one of us gets to feeling down, the other one can always pull a smile out of him."

"I'm glad for you. Mom and dad smile a lot, but it's just always there. It is very seldom in response to something."

"Not sure I get it," he said.

By then we were seated and beginning to plow through the stack of sandwiches Florence had brought.

“Here’s an example. I say something you think is funny and that triggers your smile – your face changes its look. With my parents, it just stays the same – that plastered smile. It drives me nuts.”

“I can see how that could be. Must be hard to know what they’re thinking.”

“Not sure I’ve ever known what they were thinking. I don’t mean to paint a picture of them as bad human beings. They aren’t. I know they contribute to a lot of charities and never connect their name to it – do it anonymously, I mean. I really do like that about them. Some rich people just give money so they can have a building named after them or something like that. I hate that. That isn’t charity. That’s just some rich guy shouting out – ‘Hey everybody, look what I did. Am I not the greatest man you’ve ever known? Everybody clap for me. Maybe a few finger whistles.’ Ugh!”

“I’m sorry you don’t have an opinion about it,” he said breaking out in laughter.

“I do get on my soap box sometimes, I guess.”

“I guess.”

He changed the subject before I burst a blood vessel in my temple from continuing.

“She’s really a good cook. She made the ham salad, too, I imagine?”

I nodded.

“She’s a ‘from the bottom-up’ sort of cook. Uses very few prepared products.”

“I suppose that’s healthier,” he said.

That conversation had run its course.

“When we finish eating I’ll need to be going. Dad doesn’t like me out alone after dark. By the way, where’s that Alfred guy, you’re always referring to.”

“He’s taking Saturday off this week – his cousin’s wedding or birthday or funeral or something.”

Jake laughed. I did, too, once I saw how my litany (list) of possibilities had been humorous.

When it was time for him leave, I walked a little way back across the lawn with him.

“Guess this is where I leave you,” I said.

“Okay. Tell Florence I apologize for not thanking her

before I left. Next time I'll make it right."

He turned to me and offered a brief hug. By the time I remembered how to do it, it was over. That didn't seem to matter. He turned and jogged off toward the woods. I should have offered him a flashlight – it would be dark in among the trees even though it was still basically light out in the open. The illumination was always lower in among the trees.

It had been a useful time for me. I had learned several important things – mainly that I was a self-centered goof. I had grown up thinking Florence – all the servants, really – were there to work for me. Because of that, I had never considered the need to appreciate all the things they did for me. I mean, I usually said thank you – probably seldom said, please – but it was just habit. It had no deep and sincere meaning behind it. That made me feel bad-ly.

I also learned that all my stuff really didn't impress Jake in any meaningful way. Oh, he was surprised about it, but he gave every indication that he wouldn't want to have it. I had worried about that – making him feel bad. If I thought he might feel bad because he wanted similar stuff, that must mean that I value it more than I think I do. I wonder how I would do without it. When I'm in the tree house, I tell myself that I could live there with no problem, that I don't need my stuff. Truth seems to be that I do or at least that I'd be uncomfortable without it, which is probably worse. What's the saying? That people don't like to have their comfortable boats rocked? I think mine has just been rocked big time. I am coming to understand it is possible to like something and hate it at the same time. Hmm?

It raised another big issue: how was I supposed to act when I saw Jake's house for the first time. He makes it out to be very plain, small and simple. Hmm? I just had an interesting thought, feeling – something. My house is cold and I'm betting his house is warm. I'm not talking about heat, of course, I'm talking about . . . the feeling the place has or gives off or represents or however it should be said.

I watched Jake start down the other side of the rise before I turned back to the house. I went straight to my room, gathered all the plates and such onto the tray, and took the elevator to the first floor. I went right to the kitchen and left the

tray at the spot Florence had indicated to Jake, earlier. By then she was gone for the day. I tore off a piece of paper towel and printed a note on it: *Florence – Thanks for the goodies and dinner. It was great! Jake say thanks, too. He really likes you. - Ford*

I hoped it didn't give her a heart attack when she read it in the morning.

I felt like a swim, but Alfred didn't allow that unless there was somebody with me to keep watch. It wasn't that I always behaved according to his rules when I was out of his sight, but for some reason that seemed to be the way to go, that night. I was beginning to believe that at least some of Jake's effects on me were not the sort I was expecting.

Back in my room, I propped myself up in the window seat and watched the sky grow dark. I wanted to call him and tell him thanks for the great afternoon, but for some reason that didn't seem right. That would make it seem like I was depending on him to make me happy. In some ways I was, of course, but we had made it a two-way pact.

I was used to proving my intellectual superiority over others by getting the best grades, but that day, maybe for the first time ever, I had proved my physical superiority over somebody – I smoked Jake in a foot race – well, I could have. I always figured I'd have felt terrible if I had lost to somebody like that. Not Jake. He had clearly been happy for me.

And down in the clearing with the Bobcat, I think I was brave – and compassionate. I know I felt badly for the animal once I saw he was in pain and my determination to help him overpowered my fear. Whether or not that was really a wise decision or not, I'll have to think about. It could have killed me. Jake was, too, of course – brave, I mean. The day before in the creek my first thought was that he was plain crazy to move right out into the water that way as soon as he saw the kid hanging from the branch. He couldn't have made a well thought through plan in that instant. Then I saw the look on the kid's face and listened to the terror in his screams and suddenly put my own fear out of mind and I followed his lead. Either we were both crazy or we were both brave. I'd go with brave. The bravest thing I'd ever done before was get a filling in my tooth.

Suddenly, I felt pretty good about myself – I'd been brave with 'Bobby' and I'd done what it took to help him. I'd won a race, and I'd even taken time to tell Florence, thanks. I needed time to begin understanding about those kinds of good feelings. MY good feelings had most often come when others did things for me. Hmm. I could make good feelings for myself by being helpful to others. I certainly had Jake to thank for that. That meant I could make myself feel good just about any time I wanted to. How dumb could one kid have been all those years. Wow!

As the last hint of light disappeared in the west, and the stars broke through as tiny, shimmering specks, I wished Jake was there to see it. He'd have probably appreciated it more than I did. I probably understood a lot of things about the universe out there that he didn't – nebula, black holes and such – but the best side of life seems to be about a whole lot more than knowing things – facts, I mean. It has been a really big, two and a half days with this new kid. Did I mention I have a new friend? I have a *great* new friend.

I'm sure I'm not as important to him as he is to me, but that's okay for now. I'm sure he has other friends – although he never mentions them. I wonder why. One reason I think kids don't like me is because I'm rich. Maybe they don't like him because he's poor. What's wrong with kids?

I smiled, remembering that once again we hadn't set a time to meet the next morning. I'd be there early. I needed to take tools from the workshop to use in installing the carpet – several box knives to cut it, chalk to mark where to cut out around the openings, the box of tacks, a rollup measuring device, and maybe a second hammer in case we both might need one at the same time. I'd carry it all in my old wagon. I got it for Christmas when I about four and I remember how Alfred pulled me in it up and down the hall that night before I went to bed. I remember laughing and laughing just for the joy of it. As long as I was using the wagon, I'd also take a blue, fitted, denim sheet for the single mattress that would arrive on Monday. I had ordered it special from a western store.

It made me realize that I was very near the point when I could sleep over-night in the treehouse – if Jake's father would allow him to stay with me. It was another of Alfred's rules.

That one I had no problem about – especially after the visit from the big pussy cat. I found I was eager to go to Jake's and see his house and meet his father – the two things I figured had been so important in raising him to be such a great kid – great person, I guess, really.

While I stood in the shower that evening, I began wondering what kinds of things Jake told his father about me. I supposed they would have been things he liked about me, but suddenly, I wasn't sure what those things might be. I was told I was good looking and well-built, but those weren't things that most guys really cared about. I know I talk a lot – maybe he likes that. I do have good ideas and he mentioned that about me once. I don't put him down. I do put other people down – I know that. I have to stop that even if it's mostly unintentional, which will make it even harder to do.

Alfred says people put others down to make themselves look good by comparison. I'm thinking that when I get to the place I really like myself, I shouldn't have that need any more – to put others down in order to build myself up. Interesting! I think I just confirmed that I don't like myself – well, that I haven't liked a lot of things about myself, anyway. That's not entirely correct either. I often tell myself I don't like things about other people – like when they tease me or shove me around or make fun of me. I always laid all that on them when maybe some of it really was on me.

Billy once told me people don't like no-it-alls. It came up when I asked him why he didn't talk about his great career as a racecar driver. *No-it-all. Bragging.* I suppose they all fit into the same category. I know I spend a lot of time talking about stuff other guys don't know about and I know I tend to correct them when they make mistakes. But, I always figured I was just helping them. I'm beginning to think they don't see that like I do. They probably think I'm putting them down and I really never intend it that way.

I have always prided myself on the way I spend lots of time thinking about important things, but I guess I've missed thinking about the most important thing of all – *me*.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The News Was Not Good!

On Saturday, we installed the carpet. It looked great and provided the soundproofing I expected – even with all the windows. Also, it was immediately cooler – both in temperature and looks! Ha! Ha! There was enough left over to put it across the ceiling upstairs. We discovered that tacking heavy carpet above our heads while sitting or kneeling was more than a little difficult and far more strenuous than you'd think. Once finished, however, Jake said it felt like being inside a cocoon. I asked him when he'd been in a cocoon. He said just before he emerged to share the 'Gorgeous Jake' with the world. The way he said it and gestured made us laugh.

We made plans to stay out there overnight on Sunday – cleared with Alfred and Jake's dad, who I still had not met. His dad got Jake a few hours of work cleaning parts at the garage during the morning on Sunday, so I wouldn't see him until two o'clock or so. I understood when he had a chance to earn some money he needed to do it. I also understood he'd offer it to his dad to help with expenses. Really, I would have preferred just giving him the money he'd earn so we could be together, but I understood a couple of things: *One*, he wouldn't take it and, *Two*, he received a sense of satisfaction from being able to earn money. I, of course, had no way of knowing how that might be. I had never earned a dime in my entire life.

Therefore, with a morning to myself, I worked in the shop – it was at the end of the garage nearest the house. My goal was to assemble parts I had gathered for the air

conditioning invention. Months before I had built a small, scale model – a foot long – just to prove to myself the principle would work. Depending on the size of the exit hole and the speed of the air movement entering the device, it cooled the air by three to seven degrees as shown on a thermometer. The smaller the exit hole, the lower the temperature, but also the less air flow, meaning less air got cooled. Largely, of course, it would depend on the speed or force of the wind blowing into the big end of the cone.

I had taken windspeed measurements up above the roof and found it varied quite a bit – from none at all to more than twenty miles an hour. There was almost always a good breeze, however. Dr. James helped me do some calculations and we figured at an average of twelve miles an hour, I could arrange the small opening to provide a good flow at a temperature that was ten to fifteen degrees cooler than outside. That would reduce 95-degree air to 80 or 85, which, on a summer day would be great. I understood it might not have the capacity to cool both floors, but I figured the number of cubic feet upstairs was only about a third of downstairs and I could block off the opening in the floor beside the ladder and keep the cooled air upstairs. I had high hopes for good results, but even if I couldn't make it work, all the fun I had planning and building it would have made it worthwhile. My parents never seemed to understand that – that I'd rather make something than just go out and buy it. I suppose that was similar to how Jake felt about earning his own money. That might mean we were very much the same, just in very different ways. Hmm?

I made good progress that morning and was back out at the treehouse by one. Right at two o'clock I heard Jake's whistle. I had been picking up the scraps of carpet that we had just tossed out the windows while we cut and tacked it in place. My trash bag was about half full. I tied it closed and sat it where I'd see it and remember to take it with me when I left.

Jake came trotting into the clearing wearing his backpack and a big smile.

"Good to see you," he said managing to be the first with a greeting.

I wondered how many times in my life any kid had ever

said that to me like that – none, maybe.

“Me you too,” I managed, stumbling all over the necessary words.

It made him smile.

“I hope you’re hungry,” he said as he slid his backpack to the ground.

“I’m a twelve-year-old boy. I’m always hungry,” I said more seriously than not.

“I got barbequed chicken. Henry – the man who owns the garage – got it for the help this noon. There was a lot left over and he asked me if I could find a way of disposing of it. He jokes a lot like that.”

He removed several Styrofoam boxes from his backpack.

“It’ll be cold,” he went on.

“We could take to the house and heat it up if you want to.”

“I like it cold, but if you . . .”

“No. Cold will be great.”

I couldn’t remember ever having eaten cold chicken, but I didn’t let on. I had come to see that in addition to learning new things from him that would become parts of the new and improved me, a big part of my new friendship was having new experiences. New experiences provided something different from facts – experiences. I guess I needed to think about that at greater length.

“Up on the porch?” I asked or suggested.

I hoped I wasn’t being bossy.

“Sure.”

We were soon sitting cross-legged on the porch floor enjoying the chicken. It was very good. I had never had anything like it.

“Do you realize we just pushed the chairs out of the way so we could sit on the floor?” he said.

It was worth chuckles.

“Alfred says boys are meant for sitting on the floor.”

We smiled. I had brought pop and potato sticks. It made a pretty good feast. He had been right – there was a *lot* of chicken.

“I bet Bobby would have liked this,” I said.

“And with all this sauce on our fingers, I’m thinking he wouldn’t have stopped at the chicken,” Jake joked.

“I’ve heard of chicken fingers but *Boy Fingers*?” I said.

It hadn’t been as clever as I’d hoped, but Jake chuckled anyway.

His phone rang. That seemed odd since he only carried it so he could contact me or, in case he had an emergency, he could summon help.

“It’s the garage where dad is,” he said, looking at the number and then answering.

He listened for some time without saying a word, and then hung up laying it in his lap. The color drained from his face. His eyes became damp.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“It’s dad. He was working under a truck up on a rack and the rack gave way and it came down on top of him. He was hurt pretty badly and he’s on his way to the emergency room. I need to go to him.”

“Of course. How far’s the hospital?”

“They’re takin’ him to the VA (veteran’s) hospital. Ten miles I suppose.”

“Follow me,” I said. “I’ll call Billy and he’ll drive us.”

“Really? Okay, I guess.”

We stowed the chicken and our backpacks inside, and five minutes later were heading out of the woods toward the house. I held back and ran beside him. I could see he was really pushing it. I felt bad for him but didn’t know what to say so I just kept quiet – also a new skill for me. By the time we arrived at the house, Billy had the limo out front, running and waiting for us.

Jake hesitated when he saw the vehicle. The rear door was open and I pushed him in ahead of me.

“VA hospital – emergency room,” I said.

We were on our way, lights flashing and no apparent regard for speed limits. I called Alfred and let him know the situation. There were tears on Jake’s face – no sobbing – just tears. My how I hoped it wasn’t really serious. Apparently, the man had already been through a lot – losing his leg in some middle-eastern war.

Still, I had no idea how to react or what to say so I just

sat there. Billy began talking from the front seat.

“The VA’s got great doctors. I’ve used them myself. How old is your father . . .?”

He continued that way the whole ride, asking questions but not necessarily waiting for answers. I saw his purpose – to keep Jake distracted. It didn’t work, but I figured it had been better than what I had to offer – nothing, nada, nil, zilch, zero.

Once inside, we made our way to the information window. Jake was given only minimal information. Yes, his father was there. He was already in surgery. Somebody would keep him informed. We should sit in the waiting area. She pointed.

“He’s in surgery. That has to mean it’s really serious,” Jake said standing back up as soon as he sat down.

He began pacing back in forth in front of me. I had no experience with such things – and by *such things* I meant consoling somebody. I tried.

“Billy says the doctors are good here.”

Silence.

Pacing continued.

“If he needs surgery, you have to be glad he’s getting it.”

Silence.

Pacing continued.

Alfred appeared just inside the front door. He looked around to locate us. I had never been so happy to see him. He would know just what to do and say. I stood and waved my arm over my head. He saw me and hurried to us.

“Alfred, this my new friend, Jake. Jake this is my . . . Alfred. Never sure what to call him.”

Alfred offered his hand to Jake and spoke to him.

“I hope I *also* qualify as one of Ford’s friends. Any word?”

“Not really. He’s here and somebody I don’t know is operating on him.”

“This VA has the best. They put my hip back together about fifteen years ago.”

“Really?” I asked realizing it had been inappropriate. This time should be about Jake and his father.

A half-hour passed. At that point, Alfred excused

himself and went to the window. The nurse reached out and shook his hand – not something she had offered to us boys. A moment later he motioned for us to follow him. The nurse led us into a private waiting room complete with cold drinks, sandwiches and donuts. He thanked her and she left.

“What’s going on, Alfred?” I asked. “Bribery?”

My hands were probably on my waist in a position I too often assumed when questioning somebody.

“Well, let’s see how can I say this. Back when I was here with my hip problem, I sort of got to know the Chief of Nursing Services and I guess you could say we have kept in contact.”

“And that person’s name?” I asked as my mind raced on ahead.

“Millicent – Milly for short.”

“And you’ve kept in contact meaning . . .?”

“Meaning I spend most every Saturday or Sunday with her.”

“I see. Hmm? Now I understand why you are so eager to leave me every Friday afternoon.”

“I’m sorry you characterize it in that way.”

“I said it very poorly. Sorry.”

He smiled at me and continued.

“So, that cat is out of the bag, now, I guess.”

“We’d rather not consider anymore cats for a while,” Jake said.

It produced his first smile since the phone call. I thought it was really funny and launched a full out laugh. Alfred remained in the dark. I spoke to Jake.

“I may have failed to give Alfred all the details about the wounded Bobcat we played with recently while nursing it back to health.”

Alfred just looked at me across the top of his glasses.

“See,” I said looking at Jake. “I told you he was the coolest old-er guy you’ll ever meet.”

“I assume you were planning to fill me in later,” Alfred said/asked/demanded/required.

“Sure. I just didn’t want it to interfere with the overnight in the tree house.”

“So, you’d risk another encounter with a deadly beast,

rather than tell me? Of course, you would. You're a 12-year-old boy. I don't know why I was even moved to ask."

An attractive, middle-aged woman entered the room after knocking to alert us of her presence. She wore a name tag I couldn't read. Alfred stood and offered her a smile. Then we stood.

"Boys, may I present Millicent Alvarez. Milly, this is Ford, about whom you've undoubtedly heard more than you wanted, and his friend, Jake. Jake's father is the patient I called you about earlier."

"You called her about my father?"

"Sometimes waiting periods are uncomfortably long out here, so I did what I could to move things along."

"Wow! Thank you."

Alfred nodded.

Milly spoke.

"To be exact, his words were, 'Get the man into a doctor immediately or you will find all the windows in your car smashed to smithereens when you leave today. He'd have never done such a thing, but it *did* get my attention.'"

She rose to her tiptoes and planted a quick kiss on his cheek. I didn't know how to react. It was embarrassing. I had never had reason to think of Alfred that way – as being normal, I suppose. Frankly, I was only glad I hadn't wet my pants over it.

Jake offered his hand to her.

"Thank you for your attention to my dad. That was very kind of you. Do you have any information? All I've been told is that he's in surgery – it's been like a gazillion hours."

"Let me see what I can find out."

She moved to a wall phone marked, 'personnel only', and dialed. She talked in hushed tones we really couldn't understand. It was a lengthy conversation. Presently she hung up and moved back to us.

"First and most important, he is in pretty good shape, considering the nature of the accident. His left shoulder was badly damaged and the doctors are just about finished working on that – successfully, they report. It's amazing what they can do with metal pins and Gorilla Glue these days."

I smiled at her Gorilla Glue reference. The others

didn't. Milly continued.

"That left arm was broken below the elbow, also. He has a concussion and several cuts on his face and head. Another twenty minutes and he should be in recovery. Then another twenty minutes and he'll be taken to a room. At that point, you can go be with him. Better than that, let me arrange a room for him right now and you can be waiting for him when he gets there."

"Thank you soooo much. I've been out of my gourd not knowing. Can Ford go with me, please?"

"Of course. I'll come back for you when things are ready."

He turned to me and laid his head on my shoulder, holding on to me tightly. He began sobbing. I held him and rubbed his back. It was all I knew to do. I realized that in that moment, I was all he had. It was a responsibility of friendship and I was glad to take it, but I felt so helpless, not knowing how to take care of him.

Alfred caught my eye. He nodded and winked, giving me a thumbs up and motioning that they were going to leave for a time. I supposed he knew best – leave us alone so Jake could cry it out and unwind without an audience. At that moment, I felt more important than I ever had in my entire life. Several minutes passed before he gentled himself back away from me. I handed him my handkerchief – I knew he never carried one. He looked around the room and spotted a couch. He went to it and laid down – curled up like a kid in his crib. He was immediately asleep. I pulled a chair close and sat quietly. He was my friend. I would stay there as long as he needed me.

CHAPTER TWELVE

We'll be Just Like Twins!

Half an hour later we were waiting in a private room.

"I don't understand," Jake said. "All the rooms I've visited here before had five or six beds in them. Dad and I can't afford one like this."

"I don't think Vets pay for services here, do they?" I asked.

Jake shrugged.

Milly returned to introduce the nurse who would be caring for Jake's dad and to say it would only be a few minutes before he arrived. She cautioned he might still be under the influence of the anesthesia so, if he didn't make sense, Jake shouldn't be concerned. He had come through the surgery fine. She also alerted us that he'd be immobilized (restrained so he couldn't move) so there would be ropes and pullies and a plaster cast down his left arm and across his shoulders, chest and back to keep him from damaging the repairs.

An orderly came and removed the bed that was in the room. His dad soon arrived in another one. Milly had been right – he looked like he'd been caught in one – or five – of Spiderman's webs.

The nurse addressed Jake.

"When he begins talking sense let me know and I'll come back and show him how to use all the gadgets."

He nodded and went to stand by his dad's side. The man's eyes flickered for some time like he was trying to wake up. Eventually they opened. His eyes landed on Jake and he spoke with slurred speech through a growing smile.

“If you’re Henry, we got a problem here,” he said.

We all three smiled.

“It’s me, dad, Jake.”

“I feel like I’m frozen inside a block of ice.”

“You’re in one humongous cast, dad. There was an accident at the garage. It sort of broke you up in several places – left shoulder and arm. You’ve been in surgery for several hours. The nurse says you are doing fine. You look like a big, white, Hulk, from the waist up.”

“My vision seems to be a little fuzzy. I’m seeing two of you.”

“No. This is Ford, my friend. He’s been taking care of me while I waited.”

“So, you are the kid who’s become the only thing my son can talk about. I figured you’d be wearing blue tights, a cape and a big ‘S’ on your chest.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Sir. Just a plain eleven-year-old.”

“Well, that seems to be debatable. Glad to meet you. We’ll shake later. Where am I, Jake?”

“The VA hospital.”

“Can’t be. This is a private room.”

At the same moment, they turned their heads and looked as the nurse entered. She had heard the comments.

“This is a room reserved for heroes.”

“Heroes?” Jake said looking back and forth between her and his dad.

She continued, addressing Jake more than his father.

“Says on his chart that your dad is the recipient of the purple heart – three times – and the Medal of Honor. He’s a VIP in every sense of the word.”

Clearly, his dad had never told him. That sounded like the man I’d been hearing about. Neither of them spoke of it. She checked the tubes and IV’s and gave him some instructions.

As she prepared to leave, she looked at Jake and me and then at his dad.

“You have two fine looking sons, Sir. Twins?”

“That’s right. Been twins for a little over a week now.”

She looked puzzled. Jake and I broke up, and worked

to muffle our outburst into our hands. We couldn't be sure if he was still confused from the anesthetic or if he was kidding with her. When he offered a wink in our direction we understood. She left, instructing us to contact the nurse's station if we had any questions or needed anything. A nurse would come and check every fifteen minutes and a doctor would be in later to provide all the details.

Jake told his father what he knew about the accident and tried to answer his questions.

"This – not being able to work – will put us in sort of a bind financially," his father said. "But, we'll get through it. I won't tell you not to worry because I know you too well, but we will get through it."

Before we knew it, the clock showed seven o'clock. Alfred and Billy appeared at the door. I introduced them to Jake's father – his name was Robert, I came to learn. Alfred spoke.

"You boys need to get something to eat. Follow the green line on the floor in the hall. It leads to the cafeteria. Take the elevator to the ground floor – 'G' on the key pad."

Alfred seemed to know his way around the hospital.

He slipped a twenty into my pocket, thinking no one had seen it. He was wrong, but nobody mentioned it.

Jake looked at his dad who spoke to him.

"Go, scat, fill your tanks. I'll be fine. It looks like the reinforcements have arrived."

Jake kissed him on his cheek. I was surprised that didn't embarrass me but between them, it just seemed right.

In the hall, we looked at each other and spoke at the same moment.

"Something's going on in there."

"Something's going on in there."

It was worth a quick smile. We didn't feel hungry but figured we needed to eat something – after all it had been like an order or something. We set off following the green line.

Before long we had filled our trays and were sitting at a table in a corner. Pie, cake, bread pudding and milk *were* the correct foods at a time like that, right? If we had room, there might be a hamburger for dessert.

"I know about a Purple Heart – what it is, I mean," Jake

said. "It's given to soldiers who get wounded in battle. I suppose I just assumed dad had one. *But three* must mean he was wounded three different times. Do you know what the other one is? I've never heard of it."

"I know it's the highest honor given a soldier – often presented by the President, himself. Let me Google it."

I did, and this is what I learned. *The Medal of Honor is the United States of America's highest military honor, awarded for personal acts of valor above and beyond the call of duty. The medal is awarded by the President of the United States in the name of the U.S. Congress to U.S. military personnel only. Very few are awarded.*

"Wow!" was all Jake could say.

"I'll say, wow! Your dad must have done something absolutely spectacular."

"He never talks about the war. I never ask. It was a terrible time for him, I know that much. I guess I really don't even want to know. Was your dad in the service?"

"I have no idea. Isn't that pathetic (sad)?"

Jake just shrugged. He was coming to understand how things were at my house. It is interesting; the distance between me and my parents had just always been there so as a little boy I just accepted it. I figured that's how it was in families – they were my parents and Alfred was my important person. It wasn't until I was six or so that I began questioning it. I talked to Alfred about it on several occasions. He always defended the fact that they loved me. His defense about why they seldom chose to spend time with me was less believable. He'd say, 'They were both so busy doing important things'. I don't think he finds that satisfactory, either.

I wondered why they were busy doing important things – things that were clearly more important than I was. If it was to make money so they could afford the oversized monstrosity they called a house, I'd have gladly traded it in for a tent if it had meant we could be a close family. If it was so they could buy me lots of stuff no boy needed, I would trade it all for just getting to play cards or dominos or checkers with them or chat over dinner with them about my day.

The older I grew, the less concerned I had grown about me and my relationship with them, and the more concerned I

became about my future relationship with my own children. How could I know how to be a good father if I didn't have a good model in my own father. I had come up with an answer, but I had never been able to make it work – find another man who I could respect and look up to and have him become my model. I had Alfred who met those criteria, but I meant somebody else – the old two heads are better than one idea.

I'd heard coaches were often good models for boys to emulate (imitate), but mom didn't allow me to go out for sports for fear I'd get hurt. I had learned that when my parents disagreed about things, mom's side always won, so I had stopped turning to dad for support.

Once, when I was looking through things in his study, I found the Year Book from his high school the year he was a senior. I discovered he was on the basketball and baseball teams. He was captain of the baseball team and made all-state in both sports. For quite a while it irked me that he hadn't been on my side where sports were concerned. He had given me equipment for Christmas – a ball, bat and glove once and a basketball another time. I could tell that caused problems between him and mom so I never asked for other things like that. I bought my tennis equipment myself – and my baseball pitching machine. I think I'm pretty good at all those things but really can't be sure. I'm hoping Jake and I can get into that during the summer. We'll be in 7th grade. I think if I find out I really am any good I'll just go out for some of the teams and face my mother's objections when they happen. Jake hasn't said if he's on teams. I'm not sure why I haven't asked. Maybe part of me is afraid of the competition. I don't know. So far, our time together has been all cooperation – except for that one race.

I've come to accept the fact that they – my parents – just are not comfortable with children and at the same time I can also accept the fact they love me in their own ways. I hate how it is, but I can accept it. When I'm a father, I'll be very different when it comes to my kids. They will be the most important thing in my life. I will always have time for them. They will never for one second have reason to not know how much I love them. It's one reason I'm so interested in Jake's dad. I need to learn how fathers should be and he seems like

my best chance to find out.

We had been gone a half hour by the time we re-entered the hospital room. Billy and Alfred had left. Jake moved right back to his place beside his dad, taking his hand in both of his. That seemed just right between the two of them.

“I’m back – well, I suppose that’s obvious, isn’t it?” Jake said. “What’s the new IV?”

“Pain medicine. When I feel the need for it, I just press this button and suddenly I feel like I’m in paradise. Don’t want to get dependent on it.”

“They put it here for you to use, so you better use it or I’ll tell on you,” Jake said not really kidding.

His dad turned to me.

“Is the kid this much of a grouch with you, Ford?”

“Never. I’m thinking that’s connected to how much he loves you.”

“An astute (smart) young man. I’m glad you’re in my son’s life.”

“I am, too, sir – well, you know what I mean.”

He nodded and turned back to Jake.

“Ford’s father has made a serious proposal that you and I need to think about and discuss.”

“Wait,” I said not thinking. “My father?”

He just nodded and continued.

“Alfred and Billy were his messengers just now.”

I slumped into a chair – one of two recliners that had been moved into the room while we had been away eating. I was fully confused. Robert continued.

“This has several parts so my explanation may seem a bit disorganized. Anyway, Ford’s father has made a proposal. It seems Billy is retiring and they are searching for what they call, a new Car Guy. It also seems he has had somebody looking into just how good a mechanic I am – I’m thinking that person is Henry. Mr. Wentworth – Ford’s father – has offered me the position. It includes a very good salary and an apartment over the six-car garage. It means you’d have to give up the couch for a bed for one in your very own private room. I imagine that will be a difficult decision for you.”

They shared a smile.

“There is one more catch to it.”

“What?”

“What?”

Again, we had spoken at the same moment. Although it probably wasn't any of my business I stood and went to stand beside Jake.

“It seems there is a service the VA offers that I was not aware of. They now can and will fit me with a prosthetic – that means . . .”

“I know what it means,” Jake said. “An artificial leg.”

“That's right. Until recently, I guess, they haven't had what I really needed. In some way, this new one interfaces (connects) with nerves in my stub and they say I should be able to learn how to make the prosthetic respond to my thoughts – like I had with my original equipment.”

I had read extensively about the advancement and could have offered lots more information, but I chose not to – the nobody likes a *no-it-all* thing I seemed to be so bad about.

Tears washed down Jake's face. More than a few of my own found my cheeks as well.

“This will call for a rib-busting hug once you're out of this contraption,” Jake said.

“I'll count on it. You know,” Robert said winking at me, but addressing his son, “if this works out the way I'm told it will, I'll finally be able to kick your butt when that's needed.”

“I may get in trouble just so you can.”

“That would be a first – *you* getting into trouble.”

“You mustn't say things like that in front of my friend. A guy my age has a reputation to uphold, you know.”

“Well, like I said, we need to give it some serious thought before I give Mr. Wentworth our decision.”

“And just how long do you suppose we need to take in making that decision?” Jake asked, making his question appear serious.

His dad pointed at the clock on the wall beyond the foot of his bed. He also put on a serious face and tone.

“Well, let's see. It reads 7:44. How about we each give it very serious thought until, say, 7:45?”

“I'm with you on that!” Jake said. “Or not even that long.”

Jake turned and offered me a hug. That time he waited

for me to indicate I was ready for it. I was.

“We really will be like twins – different parents, different last names, different homes, different looks, but twins nevertheless.”

That had been Jake's take on it. Mine was similar, but I kept it behind my smile which suddenly would not be contained.

There were lots of things about it all I couldn't understand. I figured Alfred had been the go between who set things up with my dad. That had to have started days ago for the job with Henry to have been arranged so he could check out Robert's work. Alfred had been spying on me and had known about Jake long before I told him. He'd checked him out – and his dad. It seemed the past few years he really hadn't been less concerned about my welfare – he'd just become a whole lot sneakier about the ways in which he looked out for me. Of course, he'd had the best 'sneaky teacher' in the world – ME!

All of a sudden, my man Alfred seemed to have a lot of powerful connections, including my dad. Billy would need to stay on until Robert could assume his duties. I figured a month – maybe two. Billy had been there with Alfred so he must have been a part in it all. I figured Jake would be willing to sleep on the couch in the garage apartment until Billy vacated his bedroom.

My main confusion was about my dad's part in it all. Either Alfred was a very convincing speaker or dad was a pushover. I had never thought of either of them in those ways. Like I already said, I know my parents do good things for other people without ever taking credit for them. That is THE ONE thing I really do admire about them.

I think it is time I sat my parents down and had a good, long talk with them. I will need to do some planning beforehand. I don't want it to sound like I'm putting them down, but I want them to understand my position on a lot of things about our family. If that isn't about the scariest thing I've ever come up with, I don't know what is. I'll put it off until just before school starts in September. It will give me time to really think it through and plan it all out – carefully. It will also give me time to see what Jake thinks about my sports skills.

Some of what I will have to say will depend on that. I trust Jake to be honest with me.

Did I mention I have a new friend? Did I mention this friendship thing just keeps getting better and better? I have a new friend and it just keeps getting better and better.

///

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Wrapping Things Up

I went to the hospital days to be with Jake but came home nights. Jake stayed there – they rolled in a cot for him to use. He learned meals were on the hospital so he didn't have to be concerned about expenses. Whether that was true, or my dad was taking care of it, I didn't know. Maybe someday, I'd ask. Robert had let it slip to me that he was going to be on salary from the first day he and Jake moved in. On-the-job-training while Billy was still there, he said my dad called it. They would not have the financial worries he had mentioned earlier. It just seemed a shame – unfair, even – that I had to wait 12 years to learn about this wonderful side of my parents.

"It's hard to believe all this, isn't it," his father said to Jake. "A new, steady job, a new apartment, and a new leg learning how to get along with my brain."

"I have determined that lots of good things happen when Ford is around," Jake said in answer.

I smiled, but I really didn't understand. From my stand point, it had been Jake who was responsible for all the good things. Jake had never talked much about his social life – friends, sports, other activities. I hadn't pressed him on any of that. I did eventually get the idea he didn't have friends and that he didn't like school. Now he had one friend, and that friend was determined to show him how to like school.

Eight days after surgery, Jake's dad was released from the hospital wearing his new leg, even though he hadn't

completely mastered how to use it yet. Billy had helped Jake and me move their things from their house above the river – nothing more than a plywood shack – to the apartment over the garage. On Jake’s decision, they left most things behind. The apartment was furnished. I hadn’t been up there for several years. When I first entered it earlier that week, I was amazed to see all new furniture – I mean really new, like last-week-new, furniture. I frowned in Billy’s direction. He understood the question.

“Your father has a policy. New residents up here get new furniture.”

I had no knowledge of such a policy, but then Billy had been the only one there since I was born. Still, I saw Alfred’s finger in it all. I also suddenly understood that in Alfred, I had had my ‘great man’ model all along. Billy had moved out and was staying with his sister in the city so the apartment would be all Jake’s and his Dad’s. Billy drove back and forth every day. We had completed the move two days before Robert was released.

* * *

Jake and I had just unpacked the last box up in the apartment.

“Dad insists he’ll be fine at the hospital by himself tonight. That’s his way of relieving me from guard duty. He’s probably sick of me being right there under his nose all the time. That hadn’t entered my head.”

I neither tried to confirm nor deny what he had said, but figured there was probably some element of truth in it.

“So, do you stay up here tonight – in the apartment?” I asked.

He thought for just a moment.

“I’d rather the first night here was with dad, you know?”

I figured I *did* know.

“That leaves two options,” I began. “The treehouse or my place. I’ve been wanting you to stay over at my place.”

I shouldn’t have added that last part. It sounded like I was trying to coerce (influence) him to opt (choose) for my place.

“How about yours? Billy said there’s rain coming in this

afternoon and overnight.”

“You don’t think the tree house can manage a little rain?”

“I was mostly kidding,” he said. “The tree house will be fine if it’s what you’d prefer.”

I hadn’t communicated my attempt at humor plainly enough.

“My room will be great. Easier all the way around.”

Whenever he entered my room Jake went right to the big window to look out ‘over the world’ as he phrased it. That evening we arrived there just before seven. Alfred, who’s room was next door to my living room, apparently heard us enter. We were not the quietest ‘twins’ on the planet. He knocked. I knew his knock, of course, and called for him to come in.

“Florence has a meal prepared for you young gentlemen. She needs to know if you will come down or if I should bring it up.”

Jake provided the answer.

“Let’s eat down with Florence. I really like her.”

“And you *don’t* like **us**,” Alfred asked as if he were being serious.”

“Oh, no . . .”

Alfred and I began laughing.

“Won’t you join us, Alfred,” I asked.

“Of course. It’s why I came in to deliver the question, actually. I’ve seen almost nothing of you these past several weeks.”

I turned to Jake pretending to whisper.

“It’s double chocolate cake with ice cream night and he just doesn’t want to be left out.”

* * *

Right from the start, Jake fit in very well there at the house. Everybody liked him and he seemed to like them. I got to see first-hand how he interacted with others and I learned a lot in a hurry with him right there by my side. Our Tree House Pact had been that we’d be honest as we worked to help each other – and we were. When I said something stupid he was immediately on my case. When he forgot an

ing or ly or whatever, I came down on him. We loved it. Over the summer we both changed in many positive ways. He quickly took to reading in the evening when I did. He usually slept in the apartment with his father, which was the way it should be, I knew. That was his home. Their meals were furnished whenever they wanted to join us.

We spent many hours playing baseball and basketball and tennis and we swam a lot both in the pool and at the creek. We spent some time at the tree house, but I understood it was not as important to me as it had been when it and the insects had been my only friends.

We found I was pretty good in sports. He said my best was swimming, followed in order by, basketball – Jake’s favorite – baseball and tennis. Even in Tennis he said I’d make the team at his old school. I say *old*, because of the move, he’d be going to my school in the fall. It seemed like a dream come true – it *was*, really.

As we drove by the school one day on the way coming back from accompanying his father to physical therapy – his new leg was soon working perfectly – we noticed a group of boys playing basketball on the playground.

“Let’s go join them,” Jake said. “You’ve been wanting to see how well you stack up other kids. This looks like a good opportunity.”

So, that’s what we did. It felt scary in a way, and strange in *every* way.

The boys all knew me, so they ignored us as we walked up. We just stood there quietly watching for several minutes. At one point, the ball bounced in our direction – thirty feet away from the basket, some ten feet further than the three-point line on a court floor. Jake retrieved the ball and tossed it to me in a behind his back and through his legs move that was pretty impressive. We had worked on it. I caught it, dribbled twice and shot – SWISH!

The kid’s jaws dropped. Jake moved in and corralled the ball, making a perfect layup.

“I think that’s five points in five seconds, old man, Jake said coming over and shaking my hand – that had been for show. He tossed the ball back to one of the kids, not wanting to make it seem we were trying to force ourselves on them.

“You two want to play?” the boy asked walking toward us. “That’ll make it five on five.”

“Sure. Point us in the right direction,” Jake said.

I knew the boy’s names, but Jake had told me in informal settings like that names often weren’t important – that they’d just come out when needed – so I didn’t bother with introductions. Not once did they ask me about how I had come by my skill. Not once did they hesitate to feed me the ball when I was the one with the best shot. I spread my tears across my face to make it look like sweat.

Over the next two months we got into lots of such games – not always basketball. I found I was a power hitter and got selected first when picking sides in baseball. Jake always beamed when that happened. He was never far behind and in basketball often got taken first. For a boy his age, he could handle a ball like you’d not believe. Being the two best players, almost always put us on opposite teams, but that was fine with us.

Late August arrived. Billy was gone. Jake’s dad had both his job and his new leg well under control. Often before bed, he and Jake would go for walks across the back lawn and into the woods. In Jake’s entire life, they had never been able to take walks together before. It was the greatest thing. I often watched them out my window. I turned my lights off so they wouldn’t think I was spying on them. I guess in a way, I was.

I tried hard not to meddle in the father/son side of their life, but they often chose to include me. Because of Jake’s tutoring in such matters, I almost always knew when to take my leave from them, and when I didn’t, he’d smile and me tell me to scram. It was always worth grins and chuckles. We’d throw up our arms at each other. I’m sure his dad ever understood that, but he let it be. He understood boys had their secrets.

August 31st arrived. It was the day I had set for my conference with my parents. That morning I was waiting for dad at the front door as he left for work.

“I want to talk with you and mom this evening. You set the time and place.”

He looked more than a little startled at my request, but

he offered no objection.

Eight o'clock in his study. It was set.

I had a lot I wanted to say about my relationship with them and how I wanted it to change. I had things to tell them about how I felt being a rich kid first and their son second. I had things to tell them about myself – my likes, my dislikes, my dreams, my favorite activities, that I planned to make the basketball and swim teams and that I expected them to come to the games and meets like other boy's parents did. My list was long. I was determined to be heard out.

At five before eight, I left my room and walked down to the den. I couldn't remember a time in my life when I had felt so confident in myself. I didn't knock. My intention was to walk into that room their little boy and to leave, their young man. *That's just the way it happened.*

They listened quietly and, I thought, attentively. The session lasted well over an hour. I did almost all the talking. Occasionally, one or the other of them had a question. I was determined to be polite and cordial about everything. I had had the whole summer to yell at them inside my head and that had pretty well gotten all my anger about things out of my system. As Alfred pointed out to me, I had been able to turn my anger into disappointment, and that meant it had become something we could discuss constructively.

Did I mention that once we got to know each other, my parents and I discovered we really enjoyed being together? Once we got to know each other, my parents and I discovered we really enjoyed being together.

PS: You know that platform I found in the tree – the one I used for the base of my tree house? My dad had built it the summer he was ten. He set up a tent on it that year and spent lots of nights out there with friends.

PPS: You know the swimming hole – the one with the damn? My dad and two of his friends built that the summer they were thirteen.

PPPS: You know that tennis court in the back yard. It soon came to be used regularly by two father and son teams that fought it out to the last sip of lemonade. That old court heard laughter like it probably never had before.

PPPPS: Did I mention how my life became wonderful the summer I was eleven. *My life became wonderful the summer I was eleven.*

The End