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crossroad

By Tom Gnagey

a story of mystery, romance, and renewal

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(Updated edition)

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The Family of Man Press

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CHAPTER ONE

They seemed a comfortable match – the scruffy old man and the timeworn, wooden booth, which he and his long-cold coffee shared there in the stillness of the small, isolated, roadside cafe. They were all in need of repair – the café, the booth, the old man, even the coffee by any reasonable standard.

From his dispirited appearance, one would not suspect that he was on a mission, but make no mistake, he was. It was his by design and was fueled by a just, if not entirely rational, smoldering, anger. Still, its ultimate nature was less than clear, even to him.

He removed a well-worn wallet from the pocket of his baggy pants and from it, a yellowed, folded, newspaper clipping. He labored over a deep, slow, sigh and then proceeded to carefully – tenderly, even – unfold the paper, smoothing it against the wooden, initial-carved tabletop. He lifted his chin slightly to properly position his trifocals. It wasn't as if he needed to read the words. He had read the article a thousand times during those past two years – well, twenty-one months for those who need to be exact. His lips moved in response to every, clearly important, syllable.

'January first, Webster Grove, Missouri. – At 10:05 p.m. on New Year's Eve, an accident at the intersection of County Road 89 and Becker's Trail took the lives of Betty Watson, age sixty-three; her daughter, Martha Thomas, age thirty-four; and

granddaughter, Michelle Thomas, age thirteen; all of Springfield, Indiana. A twelve-year old male is in custody for allegedly stealing a fully loaded gravel truck and, while he was intoxicated, driving it south on Becker's Trail. He failed to stop at the intersection and hit the Watson's late model Chrysler at high speed in the front passenger-side door. The truck proceeded across the road and came to a stop in the ditch in front of the Crossroad Café. Authorities report that the juvenile was treated for minor abrasions at Methodist Hospital and released. According to a source close to the family, the occupants of the car were on their way home to Indiana after spending the holidays with friends, southeast of Columbia.'

The old man's eyes teared as he kissed the tips of his fingers and ran them gently across the victims' names. With another long sigh, he carefully refolded the sheet and replaced it in his wallet - its safe haven during those difficult months since the accident took his family.

The old man was a study in contrasts. Unshaven for days, yet his gray hair was clean, neatly trimmed and combed. His shirt and pants were crinkled with wrinkles yet freshly laundered. He wore expensive, shiny, Italian shoes, yet the laces flopped, unattended. The brief smile he had mustered while ordering, faded immediately to something less than sober - more akin to somber or mournful. His striking blue eyes were framed in red - his lids puffy and his brow ever stressed.

A slender boy in his early teens appeared from between the swinging doors behind the counter. His long, white apron, stained in stripes of grease and red sauce, made him appear taller than was the case. He proceeded to the old man's booth to deliver the bowl of chili. As he placed it on the table, he rescued a handful of cellophane wrapped crackers from his pocket.

"These'll be better than the ones in the basket, there.

No tellin' how long they've been around. These are fresh."

The old man nodded.

"Thanks."

He nodded again and held his hand out to the boy for a shake as if by habit.

"I'm Jake," he said, without really ever looking the lad in the eyes.

The boy wiped his wet hands on his apron. Clearly unaccustomed to being asked to shake hands, he struggled through the process, seeming to gain some personal boost as a result. As if to prolong the moment he spoke again.

"I'm Tommy, Tommy James. Me and my Grampa we own this place."

That seemed to exhaust his well of conversation.

"I take it I came at a slow hour of the day?" Jake said motioning around the empty room, cracker in hand.

The conversation had been given new life and Tommy jumped at the chance.

"Breakfast's pretty big - five o'clock to ten or so. We do a pretty good lunch eleven-thirty to one-thirty. Afternoons, like this, is pretty slow - probably why Gramps trusts me to run it then. He's gone to town for fresh salad fixin's. After five, it'll be busy off and on 'til midnight. Mary Ann runs it from ten at night to six in the morning. I'm not usually down here then. Mostly travelers, I suppose, and the sheriff's deputies - they all stop in every night. One of 'em's sweet on Mary Ann, I think."

The boy could talk - he just needed to be pointed toward a topic. Tommy watched as Jake broke crackers into the chili.

"You do it like Gramps."

"I do what like Gramps?" Jake said, only responding so as to not appear out and out rude. His intention upon entering had been to be alone.

"Break your crackers."

"How's that?"

The lad had piqued his interest.

"You and Gramps sprinkle them all over the top. I pile 'em up in the middle and then drown them in chili from around the edges."

"I had never thought about cracker breaking techniques before, I suppose."

Silence over took them as Tommy watched Jake take his first taste. Silence continued as Jake chewed, nodding his approval.

"Very good!"

Tommy smiled, briefly - not his typical expression, Jake had observed. Jake spoke again.

"I see the light in the window advertises beer. Surely your Grandfather doesn't let a lad your age serve alcohol."

"Oh, no. Actually, we don't sell any alcohol anymore. There was a problem. We don't talk about it."

"I didn't mean to intrude on private matters."

The boy clearly didn't understand the phrase.

"Butt in, I didn't mean to butt in."

"Oh. That's okay. I'm used to it. I tell Gramps we need to take the sign down. He says we'll get to it. We don't. Gramps has a heart condition. That's why lots of stuff ain't got done around here the past few years."

"How about a glass of water, Son? The chili's delicious but it's really hot!"

Tommy left and was soon back with a glass and pitcher of ice water.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

With that, the conversation stopped, though Tommy continued to stand and watch. Again, Jake broke the silence.

"Do you recommend a motel around here?"

Tommy gave it more thought than Jake figured it deserved, but he waited and continued picking at the chili.

"If you want fancy, there's the Ritz Motor Inn, east on 89 about ten miles. If you want comfortable, Boone's Cabin

Court – it's less than a mile south on Becker's Trail. If you want really cheap with free, hot and cold running roaches – that's what Gramps says – there's Goldie's Motel north on the Trail about four miles. She has weekly and monthly rates."

"I think I'll look into the Cabin Court."

"Boone's Cabin Court," Tommy said as if correcting Jake. "You here for a while, then?" the boy went on, not posing his real question about what the old man was doing out there in the boonies in the first place.

"Maybe. For a few days, at least. I'm not really sure."

It gave Tommy no clue but then he was also a private person so he wouldn't intrude further, either.

"Well, I got dishes," Tommy said. "Always dishes – we lost our help last month. Nobody wants to work out here in the middle of nowhere. Gramps can't pay much. If you need anything, give me a holler."

He turned and disappeared back through the swinging doors.

Jake dawdled over his chili. It was exceptional – certainly more than he had expected. The boy had not offered a coffee refill and Jake had not noticed he was running on empty. Cup in hand, he made his way behind the counter to help himself. The pot was boiled-black empty.

"That's about par for the course," Jake said under his breath, more than a hint of bitterness surfacing.

As if by habit, Jake dumped the grounds, set a new coffee pack in place, and pressed the "brew" button. The aroma soon made its way into the kitchen and Tommy reappeared, clearly surprised at what he saw.

"So, you know your way around a counter, huh?"

There was growing interest implied through his still humorless demeanor.

"I've been behind a few – back in my earlier years. Hope you don't mind that I took care of myself."

"Oh, no. Sorry I didn't catch it. I just got caught up in our talking. Being a waitress really isn't my thing, you

know?"

There had been a time when Jake would have laughed out loud at the boy's remark but that time he settled for a brief smile. Tommy seemed unsure if he should remain or go finish the dishes. Jake provided an option.

"I can watch the pot if you need to stay after those dishes."

"Yeah. Okay! Gramps'll be back any minute. I better get on 'em, I guess."

"If you're a coffee drinker, I'll bring you a cup when its ready," Jake offered, immediately wondering why.

It produced the first extended grin the boy had mustered.

"Mostly, I love to smell it. Gramps says I take a little coffee with my cream and sugar. Yeah, a cup would be great."

"I'll see if I can find the right mix for you."

Again, Tommy returned to the kitchen. While the old coffee maker struggled to complete its task, Jake moved about the dining room, examining this and that. There were ten, small, square tables with four chairs each and six ancient, well-carved booths. It was in no respect unclean, but Jake imagined it would be difficult to keep such an old place looking spotless. Four, lifeless, fans snuggled tightly against the pealing, embossed, metal ceiling. The large windows across the front and the side opposite the booths were in need of a good bath as they did their best to lend a cheery air to the room. The counter across the north half of the rear was split with a walk through between equal sets of six stools on each side.

With colors muted by layers of dust, a vast amount of memorabilia from the 1940's and 50's had been tacked in place on the walls, hung from the ceiling by twine, and set haphazardly on several sets of wooden shelves. There was a small collection of black and white snapshots framed together - an historic collage of sorts - all of the outside of the place.

They traced the building's evolution from a 1930's, single, hand operated pump, gas station, through to the expanded and re-expanded present day edifice, apparently completed in the late 50's. Jake assumed that the couple - aging along with the photographic updates - was Tommy's Grandfather and Grandmother. A little figuring set Gramps' age between seventy-five and eighty.

Quite unexpectedly, Tommy's breaking voice came over Jake's shoulder.

"It's my Gram and Gramps. Gramps' dad built the place in 1928. And Gramps took it over when he was in his early twenties. He has a gravel pit, too. It's mostly rented out now. He and Gram ran the place all those years. She died when I was six. The coffee's ready. I heard it sputtering."

They returned to the counter - Jake mounting a stool while Tommy poured.

The boy took a seat two stools to the old man's left, apparently not comfortable being closer than that. Jake wasn't one to pry. Neither was he into closeness at that point. He sipped his coffee, wincing at first taste.

"Cream and sugar?" Tommy asked, having witnessed Jake's pained expression. He offered no apology or excuse.

"No thanks. I'll just tough it out."

Uneasy with the ensuing silence, Tommy began talking - all quite surprised at what he was relating to this stranger who he found so comfortable.

"My Ma had me when she was fifteen, then ran off with a carnival guy. We ain't seen her since. I figure that makes me a bastard - a honest to goodness Son of a Bitch. Probably fits me in most other ways, too, I guess."

Taken aback by the unexpected stream of self-abusive chatter, Jake struggled to find a corner-turning response.

"You seem like a pretty nice kid to me."

Tommy offered a quick glance into Jake's face and then averted his eyes to his own fingers, suddenly drumming on the counter. He chose not to respond to the comment. If

anything, his face became more somber. He labored over a sip of coffee, then continued, again needing to fill the clearly uncomfortable silence.

"I got kicked out of school about two years ago. They say I have a behavior disorder. A tutor comes by out here four times a week. She's okay. It's better than being in school. I hate the kids. I hate the teachers. I really hate the principal!"

The boy's tone left no doubt about his sincerity.

Jake tried a response.

"Seems like there are lots of things to hate around here."

Tommy again chose to move on without comment or eye contact.

"Gramps is sick - got a heart condition like I said. I guess when he kicks off, this place will be mine. I can run it, you know. I mostly run it now."

Jake recognized that it was a reflection of the lad's most important, personal concern - "What will I do if I lose Gramps?"

Jake ignored that aspect of the comment. The last thing he wanted was to be forced to console anybody. He responded to the content.

"You sure seem to know your way around this place, I'll give you that."

Suddenly, as uncomfortable with the conversation as with the silence, Tommy attempted to change directions, himself.

"Guess I've rattled off my life story, huh? Didn't mean to bore you like that."

"You're what? Thirteen . . . fourteen?"

Jake was surprised he had asked the question since it would lead to a continuation of the conversation.

"Fourteen and a half. I'm short and slight for my age - everybody says so. That only

seems to matter at school - not out here. Maybe with girls, too. I'm not very experienced with girls."

That time Jake chose not to press for anything more. The last thing he needed was a fourteen-year-old buddy or a birds and bees dissertation. The lull hung on for some time before Tommy broke the silence.

“You don’t talk much, do you?”

It was delivered much like the rest of his monologue – emotionless and without ever looking directly at Jake.

“And you never seem to look at people when you talk with them.”

It got another quick glance and the faintest hint of a one-cheeked smile.

“Suppose not,” Tommy said with a shrug. “People get on my nerves, you know?”

“Yes, I can relate to that.”

“Really?”

Tommy met his eyes with Jake’s and lingered for a long moment. It was the first-time Jake had been able to see the color of the boy’s eyes – blue.

Jake offered no further explanation and returned to his coffee. Tommy nodded as if acknowledging to himself that the old man might be an exception to his previous statement about people getting on his nerves.

His coffee finished, Jake reached for his wallet and placed a five-dollar bill on the counter. “That handle it?” he asked.

“Chili’s two ten and coffee’s eighty-nine. That’s two-ninety-nine. Gramps pays the tax.”

He moved to the old, cast iron register and counted back the change. Jake dropped a dollar bill on the counter.

“For you’re good service, Tommy.”

“Oh, that’ll go to Mary Leigh – the waitress who took your order. She leaves at 2:00. That’s why she didn’t never come back to check on you.”

Jake placed a second dollar bill on top of the first.

“Then this one is for you. It’s been nice talking with you.”

He turned toward the front windows and pointed.

"The cabin court is that way, you say?"

"Yes, Sir. Boone's. Probably best not to tell them I sent you. Like everybody else around here, they hate my guts."

Jake winced at the comment. His brow furrowed and his eyes narrowed as if it pained him, but he didn't say anything more. Tommy took note, not at all sure what it meant.

Jake slipped into his coat and gloves. It seemed far more blustery there in central Missouri than he had expected it would be in mid-October.

Tommy stood at the door watching the old man get into his car and drive away. He hadn't let himself hope for a wave, goodbye. Good thing, since none came his way.

The boy turned and looked around the room, then sat again at the counter, aimlessly stirring his cold, lifeless drink. He had recognized that Jake seemed down - blue, maybe even depressed. Depression had been Tommy's constant companion for years. He could neither feel compassion for the old man's sadness nor was he moved to do anything about it, but he did recognize its presence. As people went the old guy didn't seem all that bad.

* * *

Jake was lonely - alone and lonely - and that was the way he had convinced himself it should be. He and his wife had enjoyed thirty years together. They had raised a fine daughter and were closer than most grandparents to their granddaughter who had lost her father when she was a baby. The three women in his life had been his life. Their loss had left him empty and without purpose.

His first reaction had been that deepest kind of sadness - tripled, it seemed - that comes with the loss of a loved one. Within days, he became gripped with guilt. As if by some requirement of nature, he played the 'What if? game' over and over and over. "What if I had not flown ahead on business?"

"What if I had been driving - surely the car would not have been at that same spot at that same second." "What if we had flown into Columbia instead of driving?" The game held no potential for resolving anything. Its sole function was to increase Jake's guilt. He wouldn't acknowledge that. When that became overwhelming, he had predictably retreated into the safe haven of a soul numbing depression.

With the depression generalized and stabilized, the kind and gentle old man uncomfortably began to allow frightening thoughts of blame, hate and revenge to overtake him. In urging action, those feelings became a welcome alternative to the debilitating depression of the previous long months of physical and mental inactivity.

After several months, a plan, of sorts, had begun to emerge. As it slowly became more and more defined, it seemed to take on a life of its own. Jake became frightened. During his 64 years, his pattern of living had defined altruistic helpfulness and compassion. Forgiveness had been a relatively unpracticed requirement because he had seldom been wronged - you just didn't wrong sweet, kind, respected, Mr. Jacob Wilson.

He and his wife, Betty Wilson (the newspaper article had erred in calling her Watson) had built and owned a growing chain of small restaurants - The Comfy-Cozy Cafes - which were spread across southern Illinois, Indiana and Ohio. At the time of the accident, Jake had been in St. Louis to explore an expansion opportunity into Missouri. But that was then.

What he had more recently devised was just a bare-boned plan of retaliation, lacking substance and definition. He would fly into St. Louis, rent a car with local plates, return to the "Crossroads" area, find and confront the boy who had killed his family, and inflict some suitably severe and agonizing punishment on him.

Jake believed his life was over - that he could not go on alone. He had that one task left to perform and there his

future ended. The idea of being caught and punished for whatever he might do in the service of revenge was no deterrent. He simply did not care.

To achieve his end, however, he needed time, and that required that he maintain a low profile, fully disassociated from the accident. The name error in the article should help. He dared not ask questions that would direct suspicion toward him or alert the culprit to his presence. The method of choice for his investigation would be, therefore, indirect. He would be listening more than asking. It would take more time but time had become irrelevant.

He had no clear idea what he would do when he found the killer. The notion of confronting him was both the most exhilarating and terrifying part of the plan. He had allowed himself to contemplate any number of grotesque vengeful fantasies. They produced an odd mixture of emotions - elation with anguish, self-satisfaction with self-disgust, thrill with depression.

Mostly, he ignored those feelings, pushing them deep below the surface. He felt no need to justify his actions - before or after the fact. He was the center, the middle and the periphery of his collapsing universe, and his pain and its source were the only legitimate considerations.

* * *

The Cabin Court was just that - individual units covered with large flat slabs of native stone in tans and browns. It was a picture right out of a 1940's, "Visit the Ozarks", brochure. The proprietor was an elderly gentleman, very chatty and far too inquisitive. Jake evaded the nonessential questions, filled out the register, and paid a week's stay in advance.

"D'you wanna key?" the old man asked as if few guests ever did. Thinking it might keep the overly-friendly old gentleman from walking in on him, Jake nodded. The man seemed a bit put out that he had to search the drawer to find it. That also required putting on his glasses. "Number 7.

Here it 'tis. Cost ya a dollar if it's not returned, ya un'erstand."

Jake nodded, wondering how many had not been returned, and therefore how many former guests probably still had easy access. Oh well, he had nothing of real value with him. More than that, Jake had to wonder how the owner planned on collecting the dollar when a key left town with the guest.

That ordeal over, he parked in front of the cabin and went inside (no key necessary to enter). The main room was roughly fifteen feet square with a bathroom, kitchenette and open closet spread out along the south wall. A large window on each of the other three walls made it a bright, cheery spot. The double bed seemed comfortable at first bounce, and the chest, chairs and small kitchen table were more than merely functional - they matched at least in their antique, light oak finish.

Jake hung a few things in the closet and opened one suitcase on top of the chest. The effort necessary to transfer underwear and socks into a drawer seemed overwhelming and unnecessary, so he would live out of the bag. Lining a drawer was a newspaper page - Watson Grove Oak Leaves. That seemed like useful information.

Settled in, he thought about turning on the shower and flushing the stool to make sure they worked but couldn't muster enough interest to follow through. It had a shower. It had a stool. That was sufficient. He lay back on the bed and stared at the watermarked, pine, paneled ceiling. He assumed that originally the walls had probably also been paneled, but at some point, had been dry walled and papered. Everything was clean and the place actually smelled less musty than many of the two-hundred-dollar-a-night hotels he had frequented on business trips.

The chili returned to be enjoyed again as Jake closed the cabin door behind him and got into his car. It was time to review his situation and get on with phase one of his plan. It

was the only well-developed phase, in fact, and began with a trip to the newspaper office in Webster Grove. He would ask to read back issues in order to determine what further information he might be able to glean about the accident and the person involved. In his experience, newspaper people, especially the women, tended to provide a multitude of collateral information without having to be asked.

The 'Crossroads', as it turned out, was, as Tommy had implied, out in the middle of nowhere. The closest town was Webster Grove, almost 30 miles west. As Jake drove South on Becker's Trail, he noticed many new homes sitting on lots carved from large farms. The expansive area extended some distance back through the woods and hills. Perhaps it was those families that frequented the cafe. It was a natural and all quite automatic consideration for a person in his business.

There were numerous signs, each touting some "Daniel Boone this" or "Daniel Boone that". He hadn't thought of central Missouri as Boone territory. He paid no more attention to it. Dan was not on his agenda.

On the outskirts of town, a few hundred feet to the east of the road, sat a large lumber mill. Several tall feed mills loomed high ahead, apparently setting the skyline on the south edge of town. He turned south on Main Street - a likely route to the down town area and, perhaps, the newspaper office.

Presently, he found himself at the Town Square. The small park sported Civil War statues - North and South on appropriate, opposite sides - and a small, raised, covered band stand in the middle - its lattice-work having been in need of a new white paint job for years. Many of the huge, old, seasonally bare, oak trees may well have actually witnessed a skirmish or two between the Blue and the Gray. He shuddered at the thought. A fountain of more modern design stood at the West side of the little park, looking quite out of place in the shadows of the century old buildings, which stood shoulder to shoulder across the street that encircled the

square.

It was a peaceful, picturesque scene and Jake took notice of the fact that he had taken notice of the fact. It seemed like a lifetime since things such as peaceful, comfortable and beautiful had caught, let alone maintained, his attention.

He parked the car, snorting an appreciative, quiet, chuckle at a sign: "Six-hour parking strictly enforced Monday through Saturday." He supposed it was intended to discourage the merchants from parking there all day, thereby taking up space needed for the customers. On the other hand, would it not be the merchants who would have asked for the restriction in the first place? The absurdity would not command any more of his attention.

It had felt good to see the humor in something. Still, that feeling was immediately buried by wave upon wave of guilt and sadness. For no reason that came to mind, his eyes moistened and his lower lip quivered. Something within seemed to be punishing him for allowing even those fleeting moments of joy. The dark side of his mind screamed at him, 'Don't open cracks into the feel-good world or your mission may be destroyed. Blame! Revenge! Punish! Those are your only legitimate concerns, now.'

His mission rushed back into the forefront of his thoughts. He felt better - no it wasn't better - normal, perhaps. He dried his eyes and got out of the car. He looked up and down the street and spotted an elderly man sitting on a bench nearby, leaning forward on the cane between his legs. Jake approached him.

"Good afternoon, Sir. Can you point me toward the newspaper office?"

Taking Jake at his word, he pointed directly across the park.

"Thank you."

The old man nodded but said nothing.

Jake saw the sign on the window: Watson Grove Oak

Leaves. Closer examination revealed that it had been established in 1904 by Jebadiah Purdy. From the unkempt appearance of the window and sign, they both could have been original accouterments.

A bell clanged its tinny greeting overhead as Jake entered. A gravely voice rang out from the back room.

"Be there in a minute."

Jake would not have bet on whether it had been male or female. He picked up a copy of the recent edition from the counter and began thumbing through its four pages. It was a daily, according the mast on the front page, and claimed a circulation of 5,001. Jake assumed that figure reflected the editor's version of wit. The name of the editor, and apparently sole employee, was listed as Leslie Purdy Boone - shedding no further light on the gender of that voice, which had called from the deeper recesses of the office.

"So, what can I do for you?" came the voice again, well before a sixtyish, leathery complected version of Annie Oakley appeared through the drab, stained, green curtain-draped door behind the counter. Without waiting for an answer, she offered her hand; it was a timeworn as her face.

"You're new around here. I know everybody in these parts. Say a few words and I'll tell you where you're from."

Jake accepted her hand. He expected something of a more bone crushing nature than he received.

"I'm Jake Wilson. Just passing through."

"I'm Sam - it's short for Samantha - obviously, a misnomer. Sam's more comfortable. You're mid-west for sure. North of here, though. Not enough twang for Ohio. Not crisp enough for Illinois. I'd say Indiana - probably southern."

She was right on the money. He figured if he had thrown a few more words her way she'd have probably pinpointed his town, street and house number. It was the last thing Jake wanted to reveal, so without confirming or denying her conclusion he turned the conversation back on her.

"You play that game with all the strays that show up on your doorstep, do you?"

She looked him in the face, having sensed his reluctance and apparently accepted his right to privacy.

Always been a hobby, guess you'd say. Now, what can I do for you?"

"I'd like to examine back copies - December, January, February, and March of two years ago. I'll gladly pay whatever fee may apply."

The reporter in Sam wanted to pose half a dozen follow-up questions, but her sensitive nature sensed the sadness in Jake's eyes, the slump of his shoulders and the privacy in his manner.

"Back that far they'll be on microfilm. The reader's in the back room. You're welcome to use it. No charge. Glad to have them put to good use. That's why they're saved, you know."

She turned, hitching her head for him to follow. Jake rounded the end of the counter and followed her through the curtain.

"The reader's over there and the file's beside it. You ever work a contraption like this before?"

"Yes. I believe I can manage."

He took a seat and Sam pulled out a box containing the reel he would need. She watched to make sure he could thread the film and then returned to the desk at the rear of the room where she had apparently been working before Jake interrupted her. Then as an afterthought she said, "I'll be closing in about an hour. Open again at seven in the morning."

Jake acknowledged the information with a half turn in his seat and a nod.

First, he located the article about the accident. He chose not to linger over it and turned on, page by page, issue by issue. One article reported the theft of a truck from the James Gravel Company. Jake assumed that was the vehicle

involved in the accident - probably taken from Tommy's grandfather. No names, however. He needed the name of the boy. He had suspected that the names of juveniles might not be published. Was he defeated before he began?

Reeling on through mid-March he found no more references to the event. He sat, looking blankly at the screen as he reeled on. Hospital Notes. The headline jumped out at him. He turned back to the paper, which contained the accident article. Then on back one day earlier to the date of the accident, December 31st. He searched for the Hospital section. There it was - an Admitted List and a Dismissed List. The article said the boy had been admitted for treatment of minor abrasions and was then released.

He scanned down the admitted list. Joan Rumkouski age 49, Richard Roberts age 65, Edward Cowley age 53, Annabelle Stockley age 68 - all too old. David Dalton age 12.

"Ah ha!"

It had been said out loud and Sam peered, briefly, at the man over the top of her gold-rimmed, half-lens glasses.

He scanned to the Dismissed list. No David Dalton. How could that be? Again, Jake sat and stared at the screen. He let himself turn back to the article. "The time of day," he said, again out loud but that time quietly to himself. It came to him that since the accident happened just before midnight, the admission could have been on December 31st but the release could have been on January 1st, even if only several hours later. He didn't have to search far. The first name on that list was David Dalton age 12. Jake had the name. He was sure of it. There was no need to write it down. The name burned itself into Jake's mind.

His head shifted into detective-mode. Since Hospital Notes had been so helpful, how about Court Appearances, he asked himself. He turned ahead to January 2nd. Again, it jumped off the page at him.

"At a hearing for the Juvenile male involved in the fatal accident at the Crossroads in Blythe County on the evening of

December 31st, the boy was remanded into the continuing custody of the Juvenile Probation Office but returned home. After a thirty-day review, his placement will be determined by that office with the approval of the Juvenile Court."

It was not much help other than to indicate that at least some action had been taken against the young killer. He paged ahead, issue by issue, but found no more references to the case. He knew Sam had the information tucked away in that proudly worn white head of hers but it went against his plan to ask her outright. He would need a better approach than he had in mind at that moment so he would wait and think it through and try to formulate a strategy.

He had the name and that was what he had come for. Had the boy been sent away to some detention facility, Jake thought that would have been newsworthy enough for an article. Not having found anything more in the paper, he felt pretty certain that the boy had been put on probation and returned home permanently. That would mean he was still in the area. How many Dalton families could there be? His next job should be relatively simple - Go through the phone book and make a list of all the Daltons - then, find out about them. Tommy might even know something about a fellow teen boy.

"Thanks Sam. I think I have found what I was looking for. I appreciate your help. Sure, there's no charge?"

"No charge. Glad you found The Leaves helpful. Hope everything works out well for you."

Jake nodded and left, bothered more than a little by Sam's parting remark. How could she have known he needed to have "things work out?" Perhaps she was just fishing, he thought. Reporters thrive on that.

He left the suspicious feeling there on the street and headed back across the little park in the center of the square. In times past, he would have stopped to read the plaques under the statues and would have taken time to sit and watch the birds and squirrels, and chat with the people. Those interests had faded during the past months. He was of a

single purpose - unpracticed and uncomfortable - but all quite single minded in his search for revenge.

CHAPTER TWO

Jake awakened with a new, heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach. With it came fleeting visions from his youth - waiting to see the principal and dawdling on the way home, knowing he'd be in big trouble once he got there. It was anxiety and strangely, he thought, it seemed a welcome relief from the despair that had held him in its limiting, grim, grip for nearly two years.

For the first time in many months, he felt energized. It was like a power pump had been set in motion. He showered without a debate. He even shaved out of habit. He used his travel iron and gave his pants and shirt a once over. It was a wonderful feeling. It was a terrible feeling.

"At least I'm feeling again," he said, looking himself over in the mirror - something he couldn't remember having done for months.

He bundled up - more than necessary as it turned out - and drove to the café for breakfast. At seven a.m. the crowd he had expected from Tommy's description had already thinned out to a gathering of a half dozen older men occupying two tables shoved together near the long, narrow, side window. It was that same table of old men that was present at every small café in every small town in the country at seven a.m. every morning.

Jake removed his coat and slid into the same booth that

he had occupied the day before - in the corner, dark, protected from the conversations. A waitress approached coffee in hand.

"You're Jake, I imagine," she said pleasantly, turning up one of the top-down mugs in place on the table and filling it.

"And you must be Mary Ann."

"Close. I'm Mary Leigh. Mary Ann's the night girl."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. Even the regulars slip up. Just call us both Mary and you'll never be wrong. Thanks for the tip yesterday, by the way."

So, the boy was good to his word. That pleased Jake - well, as much as anything really pleased him anymore.

"You're certainly welcome . . . The kid around?"

"Tommy?"

"There's more than one?"

"Believe me, one's plenty! He's up to his elbows in greasy water. He said to tell him if you came in. Are you two old friends somehow?"

"Oh no. Just met yesterday. Talked a bit. He seemed quite nice. Polite and helpful."

Mary Leigh rolled her eyes without comment.

"Need a menu?"

"Yes, that would be a good starting place."

She went to the counter, called to Tommy through the swinging door, and returned with a yellowed, time-tattered menu.

"I'll give you a minute," she said and moved with the coffee to answer the chorus of spoons clinking against empty mugs at the men's table. Apparently, it was a well-established signal, not considered as rude by Mary as it appeared to Jake. The group added another table as several more arrived. Jake was taken by the amount of effort and sideline quarterbacking it required to add, what was probably the same table, added at about the same time every morning. 'You'd think they have

that down pat by now,' he thought. It should have been amusing but its tone was derogatory. Jake's focus was narrow.

Tommy appeared, smiling. A smile turned his generally nice looks into downright handsome features. Jake doubted that the boy understood that. As he approached the booth, Tommy drew imaginary six-shooters from his hips saying, "Blueberry pancakes," as he went through the motions of firing the pistols in repeated left then right sequence and blowing the smoke from his fingertips.

"You always shoot your customers this early in the day?"

Tommy noted but ignored the question as he surprised Jake by slipping into the seat opposite him. "Gramps got blueberries yesterday and it's the best thing I make."

"So, you're the cook as well as the dishwasher this morning?"

"No. Gramps is cookin'. But, he'll let me make 'em for you."

Jake had to wonder if these people knew something about him that he wasn't aware of. First, there had been the unexpected recognition by Mary and then Tommy's special attention. He couldn't figure it out. He felt the need to press the issue.

"And why for me?"

"Oh, I just meant since we're friends and all," Tommy said, his wonderful smile flashing, if only momentarily.

This just wasn't a planned part of phase one. It wasn't supposed to be part of any phase but what could he do?

"Friends. That's nice, Tommy. I'm pleased that you think of me as your friend."

Still, Jake wondered what they might know.

"So, blueberry pancakes?" Tommy asked again.

"How can I refuse. Maybe with a side of patty sausages?"

"Good choice. You got it."

Jake wasn't aware that he had really been given a choice. Had Tommy's finger been a six-shooter, Jake would have been mortally wounded once again.

Tommy slid out of the booth and then turned back toward Jake with an afterthought.

"I make 'em really thick, like good pancakes should be, so it takes a while. Cook 'em too fast and they scorch."

"I understand. I'm in no big hurry."

Jake's fingers, drumming the tabletop, suggested otherwise.

Tommy disappeared into the kitchen. Jake overheard the mumbled sounds of a brief conversation behind the doors. An old man appeared and paused behind the counter, hands on hips, surveying the room. He raised one hand, acknowledging the men at the table. They responded in unison - "Gramps". Short and stout, he was a walking advertisement for the tasty calories he'd been serving up on that corner for those past 60 years. He wiped his hands on a towel from beneath the counter and approached Jake's booth.

"I'm George James."

He extended his hand.

"Everybody calls me Gramps - even the old geezers at the table over there."

He jerked his head in their direction.

Jake shook his hand. It was more than a polite, how do you do, shake. It was prolonged and deserved the hand-on-hand treatment. Jake was confused. Gramps continued.

"You made quite an impression on my grandson, yesterday. Hasn't stopped babbling on about you since."

Jake was dumbfounded. He'd passed the time of day with a kid, and during most of that time, he had been trying to terminate the conversation so he could go back to being alone. How - why - would - could - that have impressed the boy?

"Well, he seems like a nice young man."

Again, Jake got raised eyebrows, rolled eyes, and no comment.

"If you'd rather he didn't cook for you, just say so. He's just got such a demanding way about him."

"Can he cook?"

"Oh, yes. In fact, he's becoming a really fine cook. Can make most the dishes on the menu and several he's pressing to have added to it."

"I see no problem then. Let him have at it."

Gramps nodded, head cocked. It was a duel message that Jake received. 'Yes, he'd let Tommy cook and yes, Jake really was an okay guy.'

Gramps turned and went to join the men at the table by the side window. The conversation hushed as he pulled up a chair, and a dozen unguarded glances lingered in Jake's direction. Then the hum of their conversation gradually returned to its previous pitch - frequently punctuated with rounds of chuckles and an occasional belly laugh. They appeared to enjoy each other's company. On that morning, Jake couldn't really appreciate the scene.

He drank his coffee faster than usual, perhaps subconsciously trying to alleviate that new churning, discomfort in his stomach. If that had been the reason, the coffee hadn't worked. Mary arrived with a refill, syrup and butter - a quarter pound slab on a pie plate.

"I was instructed to make sure you had enough butter," she said, clearly seeing some humor in the situation.

Jake smiled, acknowledging her explanation and attempted to engage her in conversation.

"I see lots of Daniel Boone signs around these parts. What's that about?"

"He had a home down the road a piece. It's like a tourist attraction, I guess. He's buried here, too - or at least he used to be - and I think there's a little museum - not sure where that is."

"Isn't this Jessie James territory as well? I wondered if George and Tommy might be their distant relatives."

"Can't say if they're relatives but I've heard stories

about the James gang roaming these parts. Wouldn't surprise me none if Tommy was a relative."

The biting comment seemed to give her some pleasure.

"Boone and James," Jake continued. "All you need are the Daltons and you'd have a full hand of rootin' tootin' history around here."

"No Dalton tales that I know of," she said attempting an honest answer.

She smiled and went on about her business.

As soon as he had said it, Jake realized how stupid it must have sounded - 'a full hand of rootin', tootin' history' - What on earth did that mean? He was reaching for the Dalton connection with the hope of some local, up to the minute, Dalton family gossip. It hadn't worked out that way. He would plan his next approach more thoroughly before just blurting something out. He had time and he had to keep reminding himself of that. Surely, Tommy knew the kids in the area. Jake would find a way to turn the conversation in that direction with the boy.

The raised eyebrows and rolling eyes he'd received both times he had referred to Tommy as a nice kid made him think the boy's own SOB reference might hold more real world water than he had assumed.

His feelings of uneasiness grew as he wondered why he was being treated as if he were somebody special. Surely, they had no way of knowing who he was or what he was about. His last name could not have been connected with his wife, since the wrong name had been included in the article. Still, he felt uneasy. Perhaps the guilt he felt over some of the options he was considering had led to paranoia about things in general. It reminded him briefly of the song about Santa, knowing when you were naughty or nice - an unbelievably guilt-producing concept to foist on kids, he thought.

Presently, Mary arrived with two of the largest pancakes Jake had ever seen - a full plate across and three quarters of an inch thick. Browned to golden perfection they

were topped by a dozen plump blueberries, all dusted with powdered sugar. They smelled wonderful. If they were as good as they appeared, it would be a great gimmick to draw in customers, he thought. He was surprised that Tommy had not delivered them in person – it had seemed so important to the lad.

As he buttered, syruped and sniffed his way through the necessary preparations, he spotted Tommy out of the corner of his eye. He was watching the whole procedure from behind the small glass window in the kitchen door. The boy seemed to expect rejection and perhaps it was easier to handle it from a distance – at least that was Jake's initial take on the scene.

He took his first bite, fully mindful of his audience. No play-acting was required. They were delicious – light, rich, sweet and loaded with tender, sweet blueberries. Jake nodded his approval, leaving no doubt about where he stood on the quality of Tommy's pancakes. The door opened immediately and Tommy joined him.

Unable to wait for Jake's spontaneous assessment, Tommy asked, "So?"

"Great, Tommy! These rank with the best pancakes I've ever tasted. It's your recipe, I assume."

"Sort of, I guess. I started with Gram's but to get them thicker I cut down on the liquid, added a little more butter to hold 'em together, lots more sugar, and a little more baking powder to hold up all the extra weight. You really like 'em, huh?"

"Yes, I really do like 'em."

Jake was amused at the explanation thinking it would have seemed more appropriate in an engineering manual of some kind.

Tommy sensed that Jake was being honest but playful. He wasn't used to either of those things. Gramps was a relatively humorless man – hard working and responsible, but humorless. He often said what he thought needed to be said

to placate Tommy rather than being straight with the boy. It had been a lifelong confusing approach for the lad.

"I got one on the griddle for me. Can I sit with you?"

"Certainly!"

What else could Jake say?

Tommy was soon back.

"Just one?" Jake asked.

"I eat all the time but not very much at once. Gram said I have a small stomach. Gramps said that matches the size of my brain."

The boy chuckled in a way that made Jake wonder if he had taken Gramps' remark seriously or as a joke. He bet on the former.

Tommy continued talking through mouthful after mouthful.

"Mrs. Hardy comes at eight this morning - she's my tutor. She's sort of like a friend, too. You'll like her. You and her are a lot alike. Are you married?"

The boy's direct approach amused Jake. It was a good feeling and he allowed it to remain. It was, however, the first time he had been asked if he was married since his wife had died. He had to pause and decide how it should be honestly answered.

"No. I'm not married," was the simple, uncluttered, response he chose.

Tommy nodded repeatedly as he chewed - short, sharp nods which clearly held some meaning for him.

"She's a widower."

Jake smiled at the term confusion and let it pass but continued the conversation.

"So, besides Mrs. Hardy . . ."

"June," Tommy interrupted, "June. June Hardy to you."

Jake began again.

"So, besides June June Hardy, what other friends do you have?"

"Gramps."

It was a solitary, going nowhere, response obviously intended as the full and complete answer. Jake's attempt at humor with his double June reference had seemed to escape Tommy's notice.

"Surely there must be some kids in your life - a girlfriend maybe?"

"Like I told you. I hate the kids and they hate me. It's a mutual thing."

He sopped up the last of the syrup with the final morsel on his plate.

"A girlfriend would be nice - really nice, you know - but I don't got one."

Jake couldn't just let his best lead dry up.

"There must be some guys you'd like to hang out with, aren't there?"

"Jerry Miller'd be okay. I got nothin' against him. He's new. He lives off 89 sort of catty corner from where you're staying. His parents would never let him hang with me though. I'm sure by now they've been warned about Terrible Tommy James."

With that, he stopped talking. Jake was at a loss about where to take the conversation without prying into areas he felt were none of his business, so he continued eating and thinking.

Tommy seemed surprised that Jake had not followed up by asking the logical next question. That not coming, he answered it anyway.

"I got this terrible temper. Little stuff sets me off and I yell and break stuff and attack people. It's like all automatic or something. Something inside my head I guess. They used to drag me to a shrink but I guess he gave up on me. They stopped taking me. It got worse when I hit puberty - that's what the school counselor says, at least. I don't even remember lots a what I done after I calm down. The parents are probably right ya know. That's one good reason to keep

their kids away from the crazy kid."

He nodded, again his deliberate, considered nod. It was all matter of fact, delivered without emotion or expression. It was just the way things were.

'One good reason', Jake thought. That perhaps implies other reasons. He waited for them to be revealed but Tommy left the topic.

"Mrs. Hardy's about your age, I guess. I thought you were older yesterday. You don't look as old today. Probably 'cuz you shaved."

He was observant in addition to being blunt and apparently open to a fault. His interest in matchmaking - though never stated - was unconcealed.

Mary returned with more coffee for Jake and a second glass of milk for Tommy. A woman entered the café, briefcase in hand. She was to Tommy's back.

"Mrs. Hardy's here, Mary said to Tommy, nodding toward the door.

He turned and peaked around the corner of the high-backed booth as if needing to verify that for himself. He got up and went to meet her. She administered a gentle, one-arm hug around his shoulders. He plainly welcomed the physical contact but made no move to return it. They spoke quietly for a moment before approaching Jake.

With introductions clearly imminent, Jake stood, patting his mouth with a napkin and dropping it to the table.

"This is Mrs. June Harding and this is my friend Jake."

The boy pointed back and forth, appropriately, as he spoke.

"Nice to meet you," Jake said. "I've been hearing good things about you."

Tommy beamed.

"And good to meet you," she said, pleasant and sincere in her delivery, and solid in handshake. "I'm sure I'll be hearing more about you."

Tommy gathered the dishes together and wiped the

table with his apron.

"You can just sit here with Jake while I get rid of this stuff and find my books."

Jake had the feeling that might take longer than usual. June made herself comfortable across the table and Jake returned to his seat.

"I sense that the matchmaker in him is at work," June said, cutting to the chase. "You'll have to forgive his naiveté and direct nature - often the precursors of disaster, I'm afraid."

"I got that idea earlier when I was instructed to call you June rather than Mrs. Hardy - May I?"

"By all means and I assume, Jake, that I may call you Jake."

Her warm smile and ready wit were instantly attractive. She continued.

"He called me last evening and asked me - no, this is Tommy we're talking about, instructed me - to fix my hair nice for today. He said he had a surprise for me. And here I thought that I always fixed my hair nice?"

She primped and posed. They chuckled.

"Undoubtedly, you are the surprise."

She understood Tommy. She accepted Tommy as he was. Jake appreciated that.

Mary brought June a cup, hot water and a bag of green tea.

"What? You rate a real china cup and saucer? Must have an in with the owner."

"With the wannabe owner, at least."

Jake smiled. June laughed.

"Mid-terms are approaching," she explained. Jake nodded and raised his eyebrows.

"So, Mr. Jake, you just passing through?"

She was more direct than the others had been and that produced an immediately uneasy, defensive feeling in Jake. The heavy stomach - unnoticed during the past fifteen

minutes – returned full-blown.

“Just sort of knocking around, I guess you’d say. Planning on taking in the local Boone offerings.”

Jake was particularly pleased with his quick thinking. His response seemed to satisfy June’s initial curiosity. He could tell that she would be protective of the boy so he expected the inquisition to continue later.

Tommy returned, backpack slung over one shoulder.

“So, you guys like each other?”

“Direct and impatient,” June said, hand beside her mouth, pretending to shield the comment from Tommy, who seemed to miss its meaning, anyway.

Jake responded to Tommy’s question.

“Well, as you can see, we haven’t come to blows, at least.”

Again, not fully understanding, Tommy still took it as a good sign. Tommy was many things, but being appropriately, socially, mature for his age was not one of them.

“Do you have your essay completed?” June asked.

“Almost. Sort of. Not really. I couldn’t think of nothing to write about.”

“I’ll tell you what, then. Go to the next booth and write one page about your new friend, Jake. Watch out for those pesky double-negatives.”

Tommy looked Jake directly in the face.

“I can do that!” he said with some enthusiasm.

He dropped his belongings into the next booth and got to work.

Fearing more personal questions from June and not of a mind to explore a new relationship with a woman regardless of how important it might be to Tommy, Jake stood to leave.

“Sorry to meet and run, so to speak, but I think I’ll be a distraction and I do need to be on my way. It’s been a pleasure meeting you and I must say, you fixed your hair just fine this morning.”

June smiled, primping and posing again, a hint of

embarrassment in her manner.

"It's been good to meet you, too, Jake. Hope to see you again."

"This place seems to be my sole source of sustenance, so I'm sure our paths will cross."

He turned toward Tommy.

"Goodbye, Thomas, my man. I will see you later. I'm going to suggest to George - er, Gramps - that he make you the official pancake guy around here."

Tommy smiled up at the old man, no practiced response for such a compliment evident.

"I think I'll try banana-kiwi tomorrow," the boy finally mustered.

"Why not! I'm a good guinea pig."

"Are you coming back for lunch?"

Apparently, Jake now had a social secretary.

"I'm not sure. I have some errands. If not then, definitely later on. Keep that pencil moving young man."

Jake paid his check and was soon belted into his Chrysler. He picked up the phone book from the seat beside him and opened it to the Daltons. Using the Chamber of Commerce map, also acquired from the motel, he determined the location of the first house and set out to find it. Three of the seven listings were rural and four were in town. He had decided to hit those close by first, figuring they held the greatest likelihood of producing young David Dalton.

He soon found himself reading the name, "William Dalton," on the mailbox in front of an older, two-story house set some hundred feet back from road. He drove down the lane and parked. He had prepared and practiced what he would say. His notes were on a clipboard, which he took with him for effect.

A woman in her forties answered the door.

"Good morning, ma'am. I'm taking a survey about young people. There are only five short questions and I will pay you five dollars for each answer."

"Twenty-five bucks? Ask away!"

"How many people live in your house?"

"Three."

"How many teenagers live here."

"None."

"In what town do you do most of your shopping?"

"Webster Grove."

"Do you have any teenage siblings, nieces, nephews, grandchildren, or cousins?"

"No."

"What is the family name?"

"Dalton."

"Thank you for your time. If you will just sign on this line I can pay you."

Jake handed her the clipboard, opened his wallet and removed two crisp new bills – a twenty and a five.

"I appreciate your time, ma'am."

More disappointed than he thought he would be, Jake headed for the second house some fifteen miles away. He told himself that even though he had received no useful information, he had been able to practice, and the approach seemed to have worked fine. Wearing a hat that covered his white hair and removing his glasses provided at least a bit of a disguise.

At the next door, he was met by a teenage girl, holding a baby. He presented his offer and she accepted. She had two teenage cousins named Dalton. They were both girls. He paid her and left. David was just not a girl's name.

The third stop held more promise. There were two teen-age nephews living in Webster Grove. He secured their addresses, on the pretext of paying them if they would also take the survey. They turned out to be addresses he already possessed but he would make them his first stops in town.

As he drove toward Webster Grove, he wondered how he would react if David Dalton, himself, answered one of the doors. "I'll probably wet my pants on the spot," he said out

loud. He had no intention of doing anything at that moment. He was just on a fact-finding mission. In his single-mindedness, however, he had failed to prepare himself for that possibility. He decided that merely being forewarned would be sufficient to help him maintain his composure. After all, he had waited a long time to confront the boy who had taken his family.

The first door in town was opened by a boy about fifteen or so. Jake's heart raced. His mouth grew dry. He began his pitch again, for some reason having trouble maintaining eye contact with the lad. The boy had a cousin – the same one mentioned at the previous stop. The five questions answered, the big moment was at hand. The boy signed the receipt – Jeremy Matthew Dalton, very legibly and presenting virtually no possibility of the nickname, David.

Surprisingly relieved, Jake paid the boy and left. He drove down the street and parked. His pulse was still off the scale. His face felt hot. He was breathing rapidly. He became dizzy and leaned back in the seat, closing his eyes. It took several minutes for him to recover. He looked at his watch. It was nearly noon. He was determined to finish the visits before he quit.

With each stop his anxiety level rose, feeling that his chances increased dramatically with every new door. The other boy cousin turned out to be nineteen, in the army, and serving in Germany.

At last, he had come to the final house on his list. Logically that meant it was the home of David Dalton. He took several deep breaths, then knocked. An old couple answered the door together. Suddenly his chance of success seemed to have slipped away. Although they went well beyond just answering the questions, their answers threw no light on Jake's objective. In the end, he had to cajole them into taking the money.

Disheartened and distressed, Jake headed back toward his cabin. He had not considered the possibility that his plan

wouldn't work. The boy was named Dalton. He would visit the Daltons in the area and find him. That part of the plan was supposed to be the easy part. Things had swiftly come to a full halt. No options immediately appeared to him.

Presently, he found himself on his bed staring up at the plank ceiling again. Random thoughts began appearing. The family could have moved since the accident. How could he determine if that were true? The boy might be a foster child living in a home listed under some other name. He could be from a broken home, living with a parent having or using a different - remarried, perhaps - name. The boy could have died. None of his survey questions would have tapped that possibility.

When no more thoughts would come and no more questions could be framed, Jake fell asleep. It was a restless sleep, invaded by terrifying visions, which allowed little rest.

He awoke in a cold sweat. It was nearly six. He sat up on the edge of the bed. His dilemma returned to mind. Twenty minutes and a shower later, Jake was in the car heading toward the café.

He felt better and he felt worse. He couldn't fully understand that. It was as if he had received a reprieve, which only postponed some inevitable, terrible event. After parking, he sat for a few moments, securing his composure. The café door opened and Tommy appeared, obviously impatient for Jake to come inside.

Expecting some new Tommy-original-delicacy - hamburger in orange sauce, perhaps - he entered and followed the boy to what had become Jake's booth. Tommy slid in first. Jake followed his lead opposite him.

Tommy removed a multiply folded sheet of paper from his rear pocket. Its initial resemblance to the sheet Jake carried in his wallet induced a quick wave of anxiety. What could it be?

"I wrote this about you for English today," he explained as he smoothed out the creases and slid it across the

table. "I got a C. That's what I usually get."

At the top of the page, in teacher-red pencil, Jake read, "A/F". He pointed to it. Tommy explained. "You read it 'A over F.' The top grade is for content and the bottom one's for grammar and spelling. It averages out to a C, see?"

"Si, Si!" Jake joked. "You speak Spanish, I see."

"Not really . . . Oh, I get it. That's pretty good . . . Well, read it!"

It had not been a suggestion. Jake was amused. Tommy's relationship with humor seemed marginal. Jake positioned his trifocals.

"Out loud, okay?" came a further prompt.

Jake cleared his throat.

"My New Friend, buy Tommy James. My new friend is named Jake. I don't no his last name. He is pretty old but not as old as Gramps. He says he thinks I'm nice and I think he means it. I feel good when he is here. I don't feel good very much anymore so that is very good. He looks like he is sad. I suppose I look sad to him too. I think he likes to laugh because sometimes he tries to make jokes. I don't make jokes very good. I wish he wasn't sad. I wish I wasn't neither but I deserve it. Maybe he deserves it two. Maybe we will make each other happy."

Jake wasn't sure how to respond. As it turned out, a response wasn't required. Tommy took the paper back immediately, refolded it and returned it to his pocket.

"Did you come to eat?"

Apparently, there was no discussion expected about the essay.

"Yes, I did. Something light. Have a suggestion?"

"I'd say the broccoli soup and a toasted cheese sandwich. It comes with chips and a couple of dried apricots. That was my idea - the apricots. Sweet but not too filling for at the end."

"Sounds fine."

Mary arrived, the order was placed and Tommy

returned his attention to Jake.

"So, what did you think of Mrs. Hardy?"

Not waiting for a reply, he began providing possible answers.

"She's pretty for an old - er lady. She's real smart. She owns her own house and she gets a old teacher's pension of some kind and SS. She gets fifteen bucks an hour just for tutoring me. She has a grown son in Los Angeles. He's not married. My guess is he's gay. She says he's successful. She drives a new Ford. I think she dyes her hair but she always smells good."

"Sold!"

Tommy paused and frowned.

"You made your point, Tommy. Yes, she seems very nice but I'm really not in the market for a new relationship."

All Tommy seemed to hear was 'new'.

"So, you've had a old relationship, have you?"

"Yes."

Jake hoped, but only faintly believed, that a short, straightforward answer would put an end to the discussion. Surprised, it did."

"She doesn't come by on Wednesdays - tomorrow. It's like my day off. What you doin' tomorrow?"

The boy didn't beat around the bush. His question gave substance to a more nebulous idea that had been percolating in Jake's head.

"I thought I'd take in the Daniel Boone offerings south of here."

"I ain't been there. I know where it is. He's buried there, you know."

"That's what I understand."

"I could show you how to get there - I mean if you wanted a kid tagging along."

"You've had two great ideas in less than two minutes," Jake said

"Two?" Tommy asked, plainly stumped.

"Broccoli soup and a guy's day out."

Tommy remained silent, still not sure if he had been invited.

"I got my own money. I can pay my way," he added, thinking that might have been a stumbling block.

"What time shall I pick you up?"

"Really? No kiddin'? You just say and I'll be ready. I'm a early riser."

"I'll tell you what. You get your Grandfather's permission first and then we'll discuss the details."

Tommy left in search of Gramps. Jake figured a day alone with the boy should provide ample opportunities to subtly pick his brain about the Dalton kid. They were about the same age so surely Tommy knew of him. Also, it seemed to be a rule of nature that troubled kids hung with other troubled kids. It was a purely selfish gesture and Jake knew that. He would be holding out false hope to Tommy that their relationship could be something that it couldn't be. Jake accepted that. Life wasn't fair. The kid needed to understand that. He'd just be doing the boy a favor.

Of course, deep down, Jake didn't believe a word of that, but most of what was deep down in Jake had been effectively buried there for some time. What used to be, used to be! He was, he kept telling himself, on a fully legitimate mission. Any means to that end was justified.

Gramps appeared from the kitchen and made his way to Jake's booth, taking a seat. There was no small talk. Perhaps that's how Tommy had come to be so direct.

"Tommy says you invited him to go out with you tomorrow."

"Yes - with your permission of course. I realize you don't know me from Adam and I won't be offended if you decide against it. I'm afraid I didn't bring references."

"Oh, I ain't worried about Tommy being with you. He can take care of himself - you'd better believe that. I'm worried about you. Tommy's a handful. You need to know

that he blows up every time you look at him sideways. I'm just afraid you don't know what you're letting yourself in for."

"I probably don't, but I'm willing to learn. I have noticed that he does seem to have a mind of his own. That's not all bad, you know."

"No. It really isn't. He just wears me out. When he was a little tike, I could keep one step ahead of him. Can't do that no more - not since Emma died."

"Emma was his Grandmother?"

"Yup. My wife for fifty-three years. I sure do miss her."

Both men's eyes watered. Only Jake fully understood why.

"It's okay with you then?" Jake asked, just making sure that had been Gramps' intention.

"Oh, yes. Put him in the trunk and bring him home if he acts up."

Jake jotted something on a napkin and handed it to the old man as Gramps stood up. "Here's my license plate number and my cell phone in case you need to contact us while we're away. You have somebody available to cover for the boy around here?"

"I'll handle that myself. My help walked out a while back. Happens way too often. Emma always said I was a good husband but a terrible boss. She was probably right - about the boss part, at least. I say what I think. Don't pussy foot around. Maybe that's part of the boy's problem. . . . Did Mary get your order?"

"Tommy took care it. His suggestion, in fact - the broccoli soup and sandwich."

"I think you'll like that. I make the soup fresh from the bottom up every morning. The toasted cheese is pan fried in butter and mozzarella. A tangy cheddar in-between."

"It sounds wonderful."

"The boy says you've worked restaurants before."

"Some."

"You know I'm lookin' if you take a mind to stick around."

"I appreciate the offer. It's not my intention to remain here long."

"You talk like a college man - no offense."

The remark tickled Jake.

"Well, if you won't hold it against me, I'll admit to it. Otherwise, I'll deny it to my last breath."

"It's safe with me. You're okay, Jake. It's nice to have you around for however long it lasts."

Gramps patted Jake on the shoulder and left for the kitchen. Mary topped off his coffee. Tommy returned. He had clearly been asked to stay away during Gramps' talk with Jake. That showed good sense, Jake thought.

Tommy's first words amused Jake.

"Thanks for talking Gramps into it."

Plainly, he figured there would be some resistance. Jake had to wonder why there hadn't been more than there was. Upon reflection, allowing the boy to go off with a stranger seemed improper - reckless even.

The meal arrived for Jake - a glass of milk for Tommy.

"You run on milk, do you?" Jake asked.

Tommy smiled - faintly, but he smiled.

"Probably seems like it. So, what time in the morning?"

"What is it, about an hour's drive down there?"

"About, I guess."

"Well, I'll come in about seven. We can have breakfast together here then be on our way by eight. Things should be open down there by nine, I'd think."

Tommy felt no need to give a response. He sat silently watching Jake eat. That could have been unnerving, but Jake chose to think of it as humorous. The silence did make him wonder what on Earth he'd talk to a fourteen-year old boy about for a whole day. He hadn't really known a fourteen-

year-old since he'd been one himself, fifty years before. What had he let himself in for?

It appeared a good time to establish the ground rules for the outing. Jake thought about what they should be and just how to spell them out.

"I have two rules for tomorrow and I want you to hear them and agree to them before we leave."

"Two rules? Okay. What two rules? I'll tell you right now I hate rules, though."

His tone became serious and his face somber. Jake ignored all that.

"Rule one: We treat each other and everybody we meet with respect and politeness."

Tommy was clearly thinking about it. He nodded his head.

"Rule two – and this one is really important to me . . ."

Tommy leaned forward as if that would somehow enhance his comprehension.

". . . We must, at all times . . . have lots of fun."

Tommy sat back. His reaction was only slightly delayed. It was a broad smile. The rules were not at all what he had expected. Jake continued:

"I am very serious about them both. Can you live with those rules? I need to have your word on it."

"Yes, Sir. You have my word on it."

As if it were the most solemn moment in his young life, Tommy offered his hand across the table. It was clearly an agreement to be sealed with a handshake. Jake met the unexpected hand with his own. Tommy let go only reluctantly.

"I've never heard of rules like those before."

"No?"

"Nope! I thought rules had to start with 'Don't' or 'You Can't or "Never'."

"Well, mine are different, then. I think you're up to my style, aren't you?"

Tommy nodded. His remark told volumes about his troubled past. It also had something to say about his depth of perception. The boy intrigued Jake a whole lot more than he wished were the case.

Tommy was not finished with the discussion.

"I must have a billion rules - well, I bet more than a hundred, maybe two - but I wouldn't need most of 'em if I just had your two instead."

'And this kid only gets C's', Jake wondered to himself.

Tommy thought some more. His brow furrowed.

"I'm not sure I'm going to like them though."

"Oh? Why would that be?"

"Well, they will make me do all the deciding. Do you know how much thinking a guy would have to do to really follow them? Geez!"

'You'd think he'd be making A's with ease,' Jake thought to himself, again.

"Are you saying you want to call off tomorrow?"

"Oh, no. I'm just afraid you don't really know me good enough, yet."

"I guess we'll find that out tomorrow, won't we?" Jake said with a smile.

This Jake person was the strangest man Tommy had ever encountered. He was comfortable and uncomfortable all at the same time. He thought differently about things than the people he had known before. Suddenly, it was like a scary adventure that he really didn't want to miss - like level nine of "Killer Cave Creatures" - only for real!

The next day would present challenges neither one could have imagined.

///

CHAPTER THREE

"I thought you wasn't coming," was Tommy's greeting, pointing at his watch, as Jake walked through the door at 7:02. "You said you'd be here at seven."

Gramps, appearing as nervous as Tommy appeared agitated, stepped up to shake hands.

"He's been flying high since five. If you have second thoughts, I'll understand."

True, Gramps would understand but not Tommy.

"I wouldn't miss this day for all the beans in Boston," Jake said, looking directly into Tommy's dark brown eyes.

"Me neither!" the boy added, inching himself away from Gramps' side and closer to Jake.

"I figured we should eat hearty before our guy's day out," Tommy began, parroting Jake's phrase from the day before.

"And just what does that mean?" Jake asked.

"Well, I figured orange juice, bacon and eggs and hash browns and biscuit and gravy. Patty sausage if you'd prefer."

"I imagine that should hold us well into December."

Jake winked at Gramps.

Tommy was learning that when he didn't understand what Jake meant, it was probably some attempt at being humorous. So, he nodded and smiled, then urged: "Let's sit down and get started. Daylight's burnin'."

Gramps shook his head. Mary rolled her eyes. The men turned back to their gossip of the day.

The boy was hyper. Jake wondered how a chronically depressed kid could suddenly become hyperactive. What was, was, however. He'd deal with it. He only hoped the day would still serve his own, wholly selfish purpose.

With breakfast over, they prepared to leave. Gramps picked up the check. Jake didn't protest - that would have offended the man (Rule one!). Mary took Tommy aside. With her finger wagging, Tommy nodded quite seriously at whatever she was saying.

Gramps parting remark to Tommy was more revealing to Jake than meaningful to the boy.

"Behave yourself, boy. I can still put the hurt to you."

It seemed embarrassing to Tommy. Jake had a similar reaction but hid it better.

"If it looks like we'll be later than dark, we'll call and let you know," Jake said as he followed Tommy out the door.

Once in the car, Tommy had a question.

"Do you make guys wear seat belts?"

"I sure do. Is that a problem?"

"No. But you know, even with the belts on sometimes it doesn't help none."

"I believe it usually gives one a better chance, though," Jake answered.

"I suppose so."

Tommy clicked himself in and pulled the belt tight, then reached over to make sure Jake's was also secure. Clearly, trust did not come easily for the lad.

"You ever been in an accident?" Tommy asked, as they pulled onto the highway.

"No. I've been fortunate that way. You checking up on my driving skills, are you?"

"Sort of, I guess. So, where to, first?"

"Well, I was looking at the map last night and it looks to me like there's a lot of Boone stuff along routes TT and F

between Dutzow and Defrance. You say you've not been down there before?"

"Nope. I never been much a nowhere. When I turn eighteen, I plan to go find my Ma. Then I'll get to see lots of places."

"How do you plan to find her?"

"I'll just visit all the carnivals. She'll be in one of 'em. . . . You been to lots of places, I'll bet."

"Quite a few, I suppose."

"Did you know your Mom and Dad?"

"Yes. I was lucky that way."

"How was it?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Were they nice? Did they tuck you in at night? Did they make jokes? Ya, I'll bet they made jokes, huh?"

"Yes. We had lots of jokes. They did all those things you spoke of. A lot like your Gram did for you, I imagine."

"Gram was great but she was just a gram."

The phrase was apparently intended to clear up all aspects of the topic. Jake understood some of it but guessed much more had been implied.

"Whose idea do you think you were?"

Again, Jake didn't understand.

"I'm not sure what are asking?"

"I mean who decided to have a pregnancy with you so you could get born? Your Mom or your Dad?"

"I'm not sure. I guess I always assumed they decided on that together."

"That must be pretty nice. I think I just happened - I mean I don't think my Ma or the man she had sex with were really trying to make me. If they had been, I think they'd a stuck around."

"I'm not sure what to say, Tommy. I guess you were really lucky to have your Gram and Gramps, weren't you?"

"I guess so. Life's not really that great as far as I can tell. Lots of times I wish they'd never made me."

It was not the conversation Jake had anticipated. It was not a conversation he wanted. It was supposed to remain light and fun (Rule two). It was supposed to help him find David Dalton. He needed to establish a different tack.

"Well, I for one am glad they did make you, or I'd have to be taking this trip all by myself."

"Thanks."

Again, it was a response Jake would have never predicted. He had to wonder just what Tommy thought he had said.

"Do you think Daniel Boone really killed a bear when he was only three years old?" Tommy asked, quite seriously.

There, that was more like it, light and away from the deeper offerings.

"I doubt it. It's part of his legend. As time goes by, people add things to make him seem better than he really was."

"I wish that would happen to my legend. I thought he was killed at the Alamo. How come he's buried way up here?"

"I think that was Davy Crockett at the Alamo."

"Oh, yeah, I guess that's right. The same guy played 'em both in the movies."

Tommy fell silent for a few miles, looking at the passing landscape. From the click of his seat belt, his hyperactivity had disappeared. It was both a relief to Jake and an interesting phenomenon to contemplate.

"Larry Jacks lives along in here somewhere. I broke his collarbone. He's a pretty nice kid. I had to come out and apologize."

What a strange string of comments, Jake thought.

"You must be stronger than you appear."

"Just when I get real mad and go off on somebody. The shrink said when that happens, I get all full of Old Red Ellen and it makes me strong like that. I sure wish somebody knew how to get rid of her."

"Her?"

"Old Red Ellen."

Assuming it was a corruption of 'adrenaline', Jake responded.

"I hear lots of guys grow out of it - her - at about your age."

"Really? I sure hope you're right."

"I didn't realize we'd be having such a deep conversation, today," Jake said.

"Yeah. It's sort a like talking to those shrinks except I trust you."

The boy could have talked all day and not said that. Jake wasn't in this to become a trusted confidant. A casual acquaintance was the most he wanted. Just somebody passing through - to be easily forgotten by the end of the week.

"Well, I'm glad you trust me but it would probably be better to talk with a doctor who is trained in such things."

"Nah! They've all throwed me out. I don't know if I really want to know what's wrong with me anyway. It's scary, you know."

He looked over at Jake, clearly expecting a thoughtful response.

"Well, I know about being scared."

"You do? Is that what you're so sad about?"

"You're a pretty good shrink, yourself, young man."

"No, but I can tell when somebody's sad. You're looking at the expert on sad. Gramps has been really sad since Gram died but he won't admit it out loud. I don't know how to help him. Mostly I just seem to make him sadder."

"I'm sure you've given him a lot of pleasure, too."

"I doubt that. If I did, he never told me. He used to give me lots of whippin's. He'd always say he didn't know what to do for me. That sure scared the hell out of me. He was supposed to know, you know? He was the grownup. Sorry about the bad word. I know you don't cuss."

"I'm sure that must have been scary, but I doubt if your

Grandfather meant it that way."

"So, are you going to tell me what scares you? You don't have to, but just if you want to."

Jake couldn't believe that he was about to bare his soul to a still wet-behind-the-ears, fourteen-year old juvenile delinquent.

"When my wife died . . ."

"I thought you said you wasn't married. Oh, you're not now. I see. I'm sorry."

"That's okay. When she died, I got really scared. I hadn't been without her for over 30 years. We always talked things over and made decisions together. I was . . . I guess I still am, scared that I won't be able to go on without her."

"Thirty years! That is a long time. Was she like your best friend, too?"

"Oh yes. She was the best friend any person could have ever had."

"Geez. I can see why you're sad . . . and scared, too, I guess. I never thought grownups got scared."

"That would be nice to look forward to, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah. I don't think Gramps gets scared. Do you?"

How was Jake to answer that one? Say 'no' and lie to the boy, or say 'yes' and risk severing his last lifeline - his only source of safety and security however shaky.

"How long were your Gram and Gramps married?"

"More than fifty years, I think. . . . I see what you're sayin'. When she died, it was probably like for you when your wife died. I'd never thought about that. I guess I was too busy hating her for dying."

"And, your Gramps has something more to be scared about than I did."

"I don't understand."

"He suddenly had a very precious being to take care of all by himself."

"A precious being? You lost me."

"You, Tommy. You!"

"Me precious? I don't think so! He beat me and yelled at me 'til I was thirteen. I figure he only stopped whipping me then because he wanted grandchildren."

"Now, I don't understand."

"You know, he didn't want to risk damaging my man parts."

"Oh. I see. Well, maybe. I couldn't say."

It came across as very humorous and yet very sad. Jake didn't know how to react, so he didn't.

"Do you s'pose Ma is scared?"

He didn't wait for an answer.

"She will be when I find her, I'll tell you that for sure."

Jake looked over at the boy without comment. Tommy took note.

"Sometimes when I'm really lonely or scared - usually in bed at night - I think up things I'll do to punish her when I find her - after she tells me why she didn't want me."

"Things like . . . ?"

Jake left it open-ended.

"Too awful to talk about. It's like there in the dark when I'm planning it, I hate her so much that it all seems just right, but when I get to thinking about it in the morning, it seems sort of terrible. Gram said I shouldn't hate my Ma. I don't see why not. I can't wait for the chance to go off on her."

Things had got way off track. Jake tried to lighten it.

"I'd sure hate to have you 'go off' on me, I'll tell you that, Tiger."

He administered a playful fist to the boy's shoulder.

Tommy looked Jake directly in the face.

"Oh, I'd never go off on you, Jake."

"I thought you said it was some uncontrollable, automatic thing in your brain that set you off. If that's really true, how can you promise me you'd never try to hurt me?"

The boy's sudden change of expression defined 'sheepish' - probably 'busted' as well. He'd been found out

and he knew it. He sat silently and looked out his side window. Many miles passed without a word.

Without altering the direction of his gaze, Tommy eventually spoke again.

“You going to tell Gramps?”

“No, I figure you’ll take care of that yourself when you’re ready.”

More silence. Tommy was attempting to form an explanation. Eventually he tried.

“When you’re sad, all the do-gooders show up and stick their noses into your business. When you’re bad you just get a whippin’ and they all leave you alone.”

Jake was moved to add, “And when you’re happy and kind, people want to be your friend.”

It deserved and received another extended, full-faced glance from Tommy. After a few moments, he looked away, straight ahead down the narrow, gently winding, road ahead of them.

“You ever hate anybody?” the boy asked at last.

It was Jake’s turn to become silent. Tommy looked at him out of the corner of his eye.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to answer. I shouldn’t have never asked. It’s too personal.”

Silently, Jake agreed with both of the boy’s statements. He felt he shouldn’t just let it pass, but he wouldn’t be dishonest and say ‘No’. The true answer could only lead to further problems. No easy solution appeared.

“If you turn left, right up there, it’ll take us through Becker’s Woods. It’s a pretty nice spot. I ran away to it lots of times.

“Sounds like a great place. Tell me when we reach the turn off.”

Jake felt an opportunity to change the subject.

“Ran away, huh?”

“Ya, lots a times.”

“By yourself?”

"Usually."

"But not always?"

"Me and Davy a couple a times. He's always in trouble, too."

Jake's heart began to race at the mention of 'Davy'. "You and Davy sort of like friends, then?"

"Sort of - used to be. Haven't seen him since . . . well, for a long time. We were in seventh grade last time we done it - ran away. Seems like a long time ago."

Jake wondered if he should press for Davy's last name right then or come back to it later.

"There's the turnoff," Tommy said, pointing as they rounded a bend. See, you can just make out the tops of the trees over there."

Jake made the turn.

"Yes. Looks like a huge woods. I'll bet you could hide for days in there if you wanted to."

"Yeah. Lots a pine and oak. Some permanent deer hunting platforms up in the trees. They made good hideouts."

"Do you want to stop and look around?"

"No. Not unless you do."

"I guess not."

They drove on for many miles. The road wound in and out of the woods. Twenty miles later they hooked up with the route promising Boone attractions ahead. A billboard pointed the way to various sights.

"What first?" Jake asked.

"Let's see where he lived first then where he's buried. That'll be like in order."

That required a right turn and another ten minutes.

"Daniel Boone was a great man, huh?"

"I suppose so. I guess it depends on how you define the term 'great man'."

"He was at least a pioneer, though, right?"

"That he was. I imagine when he built his house out here there weren't any other settlers within fifty or a hundred

miles."

"I'd a liked livin' back then. Nobody to bother you. I'll bet life was really peaceful."

* * *

The tour of the house and grounds took longer than Jake had expected. Tommy examined every barrel, every candlestick, every axe, and every bowl. He mounted every stump and bellied under or vaulted over every section of split-rail fence. He bought a disposable camera and took pictures.

When down to the final frame, he asked an elderly couple if they would "Snap me and my friend." It was soon preserved on film - Tommy sitting on the fence and Jake standing behind with his arm on the boy's shoulder. It was becoming more and more evident that Tommy liked to be touched but, still, would never initiate it.

There was less to see at the burial site, but Tommy collected all the free brochures and shelled out four-fifty for a book.

It was suddenly 2:00.

"I'm famished," Tommy announced.

"We passed a restaurant a mile or so back. Shall we give it a try?"

"Sure. It can't be too bad."

The statement seemed to summarize the boy's take on life - everything evaluated as shades of adversity. Jake got the idea that Tommy was not often asked for his opinion or to help make decisions, so he went out of his way to include him. At the restaurant, Jake asked him to pick a spot for them. When the menu arrived, he asked him what looked good.

Tommy reacted in a remarkably nurturing way. He took even those simple assignments quite seriously. He chose a booth, because he thought Jake preferred booths. He chose one well away from the door so 'old' Jake wouldn't have to sit in a draft. He suggested the lighter meals since that was what he had seen Jake request in the past. If this was "Terrible Tommy James" then Jake could hardly wait to meet the "Good

Tommy James."

After they ordered, Tommy resumed their conversation.

"What did you think of my essay?" he asked, tearing open a straw for his milk and, only at the last moment, refraining from blowing the wrapper across the room.

"I guess I was most impressed about how you wrote about feelings."

"That's mostly what I see in people, I guess. I liked it a lot, too. He seemed to have interpreted Jake's remark as an all-encompassing statement of approval. I'm going to save it so I can remember about you after you go away."

It was not a sad comment - just matter of fact. Jake didn't know if that were good or bad. He chose to feel relieved. He had been afraid that as quickly and as thoroughly as the lad had attached himself to him, that there would have been more emotion surrounding the inevitable separation. Perhaps by not allowing deep feelings, the boy protected himself from disappointment, separation, and loss. Perhaps that was just Jake's projection of his own position.

Tommy interrupted his reverie.

"It's only two percent, can you believe that? We always serve the full-strength stuff unless the customer request low fat."

Jake came to realize he was referring to the glass of milk.

"How's the coffee?" Tommy continued.

"Pretty good!"

"Better than ours, huh?"

"Honest answer?"

"Yeah."

"Yes. It's better."

"I wonder how they do that."

"For one thing, I imagine they regularly clean the tubing and the basket in the coffee maker."

"You know how to do that?"

"Yes, I've cleaned a few."

"Will you show me?"

"Sure, if Gramps says it's okay."

"That won't be no problem. So, how do know so much about café stuff?"

"Like I told you, I've worked in restaurants."

"Restaurant help don't wear expensive shoes, drive Chryslers and hold their pants up with fifty dollar belts."

Jake chuckled out loud. He reached across the table and ruffled Tommy's hair. Tommy leaned into his friend's big hand as if to prolong it.

"What?" Tommy asked smiling, thoroughly confused but enjoying the moment.

"You are quite the young man, Tommy James."

It didn't answer his question.

". . . and . . . ?"

"And I'm glad you're my friend."

Tommy's brow furrowed. He sat back and folded his arms. He'd had enough of the avoidance game.

"Okay," Jake began, "Now you've busted me. I've owned a restaurant or so in my day. Does that make more sense?"

"I figured that out already. So, are you rich? I shouldn't a asked that. Gram would a back handed me for sayin' it."

"Well, I'm not sure what rich means to you. I guess I'm rich enough to wear expensive shoes and drive Chryslers."

It seemed to satisfy Tommy even though it added nothing beyond what he already knew. It was probably more just getting the honest response than its content that was important to him.

"Your wife help in your restaurants? Maybe you don't want to talk about her. I'm always saying the wrong thing."

Jake ignored Tommy's self-implied inadequacy.

"Yes she did, when we were first starting out. Then, when we had our daughter, she pretty much stayed home and

took care of her.”

“I didn’t know you had a kid.”

Jake sensed that Tommy seemed disappointed - defensive, even - perhaps jealous.

“She was your age some twenty years ago.”

That seemed to help. Tommy clearly believed he could not compete.

“You loved your wife a lot, huh?”

It would not have been Jake’s choice of topics. He’d make it quick and move on.

“Yes. I loved her very much. Probably a lot like you loved Gram and still love Gramps.”

But as with most things about this boy, it wouldn’t be that easy.

“I don’t think I feel love. I mean, I know that I hate lots of people and I know how that feels but I’m not sure about love. I don’t think I love anybody, really. I don’t hate Gramps. Don’t get me wrong about that. I guess he’s kind of in a no man’s land in my feelings - like something better than hate if you see what I mean.”

“Sounds pretty confusing.”

“You’re right about that. Do you tell people when you love them?”

“Sometimes. Usually, I suppose,” Jake said, thinking through his answer as he delivered it. He had been set up.

“Gramps never told me he loved me. Gram might have. I don’t remember. Gram was a long time ago.”

“Some people have a hard time saying the words, “I love you.” So, instead they just spend their time trying to show how they feel. I’m sure that must be the way it is with Gramps.”

Tommy snapped a long glance directly into Jake’s face.

“You beat a kid every day of his life to show him you love him? I don’t think so, Jake.”

The tone was angry. The delivery, sincere and forceful.

Tommy was not an easy sell. Perhaps Jake was trying

to sell something that really didn't exist. He'd try once more and let it go. God only knew why, but he would!

"Does Gramps want you to be a good person?"

"I suppose so. Yeah."

"Does he correct you when you're not?"

"Oh, yeah! I used to carry bruises to prove it. I'd act up in class and get sent to the office so I didn't have to dress out in PE. I didn't want the guys to see."

"Why do you suppose he did that to you?"

"So, I'd behave."

The tone with which it had been delivered, changed the meaning to, "So, I'd behave, dummy!"

"Because if you behaved what would happen . . . ?"

"I don't know . . . I'd get along, I guess . . . Maybe other guys would like me better."

"If he hadn't loved you, do you think he'd have cared whether you learned how to behave and get along and have a chance at friendship and happiness?"

There was no answer. Jake had one more point to make.

"Sometimes grownups are forced to be parents when they really don't how to do it. So, they just have to do the best they know how. I imagine the only thing Gramps knew to do was to punish you when you misbehaved. When that didn't work, he didn't know what else to do so he just punished you some more. I doubt very much that he doesn't love you more than anything in the world. I'll agree his methods may have been poor - awful, even - but the fact that he kept trying, tells me he kept loving you. He didn't give up."

Jake hoped he was right. He believed he was.

Tommy remained silent and picked at his salad. Then, in something barely over a mumble:

"How should you love somebody?"

The boy was making Jake terribly uncomfortable. He didn't need this. He didn't want this. He didn't know what else to say to the boy. He didn't want to say anything to the

boy. Still, something made him open his mouth and words started pouring out.

"When you love someone, you want to be with them. You enjoy being with them. They become the most important thing in your life. You want to take care of them. You'd give up your own life if necessary to protect them. When you love someone, just thinking about them makes you feel warm and wonderful inside. You want to make them happy. Their welfare and happiness become the most important things to you. You'd give up anything to make sure your loved one had a wonderful life."

Tommy took it all in. He nodded his special nod.

"I felt a lot like that about a puppy I had once. One morning he was gone and I cried about it and I don't never cry. I didn't even cry when Gram died. The minister said she went to heaven where everything is wonderful. I wished it had me that had died. I still do, I guess."

It ended with a huge sigh. He hadn't looked at Jake while he spoke. He didn't look at him when he had finished.

They completed the meal in silence. Jake understood about wishing himself dead. Although it seemed right for him, it was disturbing to hear someone so young contemplating the same thing. It frightened him. He didn't want to be moved by it at all. This was not a responsibility he had applied for. He became aggravated with Tommy for having revealed his feelings. Nothing about the day seemed to be turning out the way he had planned.

Tommy insisted on paying his part of the bill. That aggravated Jake as well, but he tried to not let it show. He had to get control of himself. Now it was he who couldn't take the silence. Silence allowed him to think and thinking was suddenly disagreeable.

Back in the car, Jake asked, "Well, is there anything else you want us to see while we're down here?"

"I guess we've saw about all of it."

"Home, then?"

"Yeah. I guess."

There was a sudden somberness in Tommy's tone.

"I wish we could just keep going, you know?" Tommy said as Jake turned the key.

"Not for sure, I guess," Jake said.

Tommy remained quiet, choosing not to go into any details. They were soon back on the road.

"Same route home?" Jake asked, beginning to relax a bit.

"We could go up to 89 and then over west to the Crossroads. It winds around. Would take longer."

"Sounds good. Do I just follow this road to 89?"

"Yeah. Hardly any turn-offs even, according to the map."

They drove on for several miles.

"I wish I could feel like this all the time," Tommy said out of the blue.

"Like how?"

"Like this. I don't know. All calm and safe - like who I was with really liked me and wanted to help me."

He looked at Jake. Jake reached over and patted the boy's leg.

"Those are really great feelings, aren't they?"

Tommy nodded. His hand made a tentative move toward Jake's leg but was withdrawn long before it would have touched him. He sighed the sigh of all sighs and turned his attention back to the view.

It broke Jake's heart - something else he hadn't planned on. Slowly, compassion was creeping in where aggravation had reigned only a few minutes earlier. He liked that feeling and was more comfortable with it, although it was far from the fully detached feeling he had scheduled for the day.

Jake tried to turn the conversation toward some more neutral topic.

"Given much thought to what line of work you want to

get into later on?"

"I'll probably stay on and run the café."

"Have you thought about anything else?"

"Maybe running the backhoe at the gravel pit. Gramps says I could never sit still long enough. He's probably right. I've thought about being a really good teacher - good to all the kids, I mean, but I hate going to school so I'd probably really hate college. . . Something else, but it'll really sound stupid."

He turned toward Jake as far as the seat belt would allow. "I'd really like to play Santa Claus and have the little kids sit on my lap and like me. I guess that's not a real job but I'd like it."

"Sounds like a great volunteer job! It would take some pillows to make your form believable."

Tommy patted his flat, solid stomach.

"Yeah. I guess I didn't inherit Gramps' waistline."

He became thoughtful.

"Do you think you can inherit a behavior disorder?"

"I'm not sure what you mean but I'll tell you right off, I'm not very knowledgeable about genetics - that's the study of inheriting things."

"I'm supposed to be related to some really bad outlaws - probably like my great, great, great, great, grandfather and uncles - I don't know for sure how many greats. They robbed banks and trains. I just wonder sometimes if I'm this way because I inherited it from them."

Jake didn't know much about Jesse James - he assumed that was the reference - so had very little on which to frame a response.

"I'd think that after so many generations, even if it could be inherited, it would be diluted so much that it probably couldn't really effect you."

"I'd never thought about it that way."

"Do you believe a person can ever make up for really bad stuff they've did in the past?"

It felt to be the most serious topic Tommy had yet posed.

"If you mean can you ever undo bad things you've done, I'd say no. Once it's done, it's done. If a person changes his ways though, and stops doing bad things, I suppose in a way that's like making up for it - going out of your way to begin doing good things."

"Do you think a person can ever stop hating himself?"

This kid was full of heartbreaking questions that Jake didn't want to deal with.

"I suppose it depends on lots of things. If others forgive you, that should make it easier I'd guess. Hating anybody, including yourself, can't ever help any, you know."

Jake really believed that - except where he and his present mission were concerned. As he spoke, the disparity did not even enter his mind.

"It's pretty hard not to hate - for me anyway."

"Sounds like it must be. I'm sorry. I'm not sure what else to say."

Tommy nodded and again slipped into silence. The winding road required Jake's full attention.

Presently, Jake looked over to find the boy sound asleep, his head bobbing against the window. Jake slowed the car to reduce the bumps that jostled the boy's head.

Eventually, he turned left onto Route 89. It was straight and level. They would be back at the café well before dark. It had been an interesting - if not really profitable - day. It had certainly not been the day Jake had envisioned. He had to find some way of separating himself from this kid before he got emotionally involved with him. He looked at Tommy, relaxed, asleep, angelic, needy. Jake feared that it might be too late.

"Damn you, kid! Damn you to Hell!" Jake said aloud, pounding the steering wheel with both hands as tears welled up in his eyes.

* * *

As he turned off the engine in front of the Café, Jake released his seat belt and gently shook Tommy's shoulder.

"We're home. Time to rise and shine, sleepy head."

It probably wasn't phrased appropriately for a fourteen-year old, but Tommy was in many ways not yet a fourteen-year old.

Tommy roused.

"I had a crazy dream and you were cussin' at me. My shrinks would a loved that one."

Tommy took one long, heavy, breath and stretched life back into his arms and legs. He released his seat belt.

"Sorry I zonked out on you."

"Glad you could relax."

Tommy nodded that deliberate, thoughtful nod that never quite revealed the deep truth it seemed to signal.

"Thanks for . . . Well, just thanks, I guess," Tommy said, then added, "There ought to be another word, you know."

"Another word for what?"

"For 'thanks' when you really mean it. I mean, I say 'thanks' all the time because if I didn't I'd get backhanded. That's just the thing you say because it's like required, you see?"

"Yes. I think I do see. I don't know another word but I have an idea."

"What's that?"

"Well it would just work between you and me, but when we really mean, Thanks, in a special way, we could say, 'Thanks with a capital T'.

It seemed absurd but it seemed right. It struck their funny bones. The two were still chucking about it as they entered the café. Mary looked at them as if to say, 'Who are these two, happy people, masquerading as Tommy and Jake'. Gramps offered a similar look but went to meet them, extending his hand toward Jake. In the first attempt at humor Jake had witnessed, Tommy reached out and intercepted his

Grandfather's hand. It's good to meet you, Sir. I'd like you meet my Chauffeur, Jake . . . Somebody."

The boy giggled out loud. Gramps stood dumbfounded. Mary put the back of her hand to her forehead. Jake eventually shook Gramps hand, saying, "It's been a really fine day. I couldn't have asked for a better-behaved companion."

Still, Gramps found no words, so Jake continued.

"I better be on my way. Probably be back for pie and coffee later this evening. Do you have strawberry pie?"

"Afraid not. Sorry."

Gramps turned to Tommy. "Did you thank Jake?"

Jake intercepted the question. "Yes, Sir he did."

"With a capital, T," Tommy added, and proceeded to giggle himself off toward the waiting dishes.

CHAPTER FOUR

The day had tired Jake physically and exhausted him emotionally. Upon returning to the cabin, his first order of business was a nap. The nap was restful. The dream was disturbing. More precisely the dream had seemed wonderful at the time it was playing there in Jake's mind. It was only upon awakening and reflecting that it became distressful.

It had involved June and Jake and, well, it had involved June and Jake! Jake felt embarrassed. He felt guilty. Most of all, perhaps, he felt surprised. He thought his romantic feelings had been buried with his wife. That certainly had been his intention. Clearly, they had not.

Unlike most dreams, which fade so rapidly as the mind blossoms into consciousness, this one lingered, growing more and more vivid. He wanted to let it go and yet he wanted it to remain forever.

It was nearly eight o'clock. His stomach growled, momentarily distracting him. He sat up, put on his shoes and then his jacket. That piece of pie he had promised himself earlier sounded especially inviting.

* * *

Tommy and his grandfather lived in an apartment above the café. There were two large bedrooms, a spacious living area and a sit-down kitchen. A sun porch spanned the length of the rear, with floor to ceiling windows, which looked

down onto acres of trees and meadowland behind.

Tommy's room was at the front. There was a window above his study desk. He saw Jake coming from half a mile away.

Mary and Gramps were sitting at the counter. Gramps was counting the register. They turned as Jake entered. Gramps met him near the door. Mary poured a mug of coffee and took it to 'his' booth.

"If I wasn't so glad to see the boy so happy, I'd be downright jealous of you," Gramps began.

He was plainly serious.

Not fully understanding, Jake shook hands. They moved to the booth, Gramps' hand on Jake's shoulder.

"Yes, Sir. I don't think I've ever seen him in such good spirits. He came in and tackled the dishes right off. He cleaned the grill, washed down all the stainless and mopped the floor. He hates scrubbing and mopping. You tell him to do that, did you?"

"No. None of those things even came up as far as I can recall."

Gramps continued.

"When he finished back there he brought me a plate of supper - a heart-friendly salad, he called it - and a big glass of orange juice. Then - and this is the most unbelievable of all - he went upstairs to get his homework done so he could have pie and coffee with you if you came back. Like I said, I'd be jealous if I wasn't so happy."

Jake was a bit confused by the 'jealous' reference and had no response. He was as dumbfounded as Gramps. Tommy appeared on the trot. It seemed odd to see him without his white apron there in the café. He stopped beside Gramps and put his arm around the old man's waist. Mary, standing behind them and only visible to Jake, threw her hands up as if to say, 'It's all beyond my comprehension.'

Momentarily, Jake wondered if he might still be dreaming - Gramps complementing Tommy? Tommy with

his arm around Gramps? Mary apparently speechless? It had to be a dream.

Tommy released his arm and scooted into the seat. The peach pie is great. If you're into cream pies, try the chocolate parfait. Gramps makes the best in the World. He smiled up into his grandfather's face. The old man's eyes moistened and he turned away.

"I better get the register counted. You guys enjoy your pie."

"I think this was the greatest day of my life, you know?" Tommy offered to Jake once Gramps was gone.

"Well, no, I guess I wasn't aware of that. I'm glad you had such a good time."

"Oh, I didn't have a good time - No, that's not what I mean - I did have a good time but the best part was how you set me straight on things."

Jake was speechless, which worked out fine since Tommy talked non-stop for the next forty minutes. He spoke about plans and experiences, of right and wrong, of rules and changing, and schools, and of nothing at all. He relived every moment of the day in detail. "I said . . . then you said . . . then we . . . then I . . . then, then, then." He critiqued the menu at the café where they stopped and related idea upon idea about improving the Crossroad.

"I keep telling Gramps this place should really be named the Crossroads with an s. You can't have one crossroad without another or it wouldn't be a crossroad."

Interestingly absent were the things he had done since he returned to the café. Then, finally, "I've been writing a essay - that would be an essay - about our guy's day out, today. I think I just discovered the secret to those double negatives that Mrs. Hardy hates so. You can't put an 'n' word next to a 'n apostrophe t' word. Like, 'don't never' has to be 'don't ever'. Is that right?"

"I've never heard it put quite that way but, yes, I think you're on the right track. Just don't never - woops! - don't

ever forget it."

Tommy laughed out loud. Mary turned to look. Gramps turned to look. Jake shrugged his shoulders at them both.

"Well, it's almost nine o'clock. I better get back upstairs. Still a little homework left. Don't forget that Mrs. Hardy comes in the morning. I can tell she likes you. I'm not forcing her on you or anything though you know."

"I'm glad you've cleared that up."

There was another smile. Tommy reached across the table and patted Jake's hand. It had been fully unexpected, but it was appreciated. Jake suspected there might even be hugs in the boy's future.

Tommy left. Mary came with coffee.

"I don't know what you have, but you better bottle it and get rich."

She chuckled and then became serious in a confidential manner.

"Gramps and I know who you are?"

Her words sent the chill of all chills up Jake's spine. His mouth instantly became dry. Not only had his plan been a dismal failure up to then, but somehow his intentions had been found out.

Mary continued: "You're an angel and we don't know how you got here or how to properly thank you."

By then, even her relief-laden explanation couldn't stop his runaway heart.

"Really, Mary, I'm as baffled by all this as you are," Jake said, fumbling for some response.

"No, Sir! You're an angel. You'll never convince us otherwise. She leaned down and planted a quick, gentle peck on his cheek.

Jake felt himself blushing. It had all become quite embarrassing and blown out of proportion. He was thoroughly uncomfortable. He left money on the table and took his leave. There was much to think about. Sleep would

not come easily.

* * *

Jake knew he had to regain his focus. There were too many distractions. He wasn't there to baby-sit a teenager. He wasn't there to explore a new romantic relationship. He certainly wasn't there to be christened an Angel. Angel! If they could only see the evil in his heart.

The dilemma was clear. The best course of action was not. Maybe it was as simple as finding another place to stay, another place to eat, and leave the Crossroad folks behind. He had told them he was only passing through. If he didn't return to the café they'd just assume he had moved on. It would all be okay. It would be doing them a favor – cutting the cord, so to speak. He wasn't going to be there for them forever, for goodness sake! He'd change motels, complete his mission and submit to his fate.

With that plan in mind he prepared for bed and was soon asleep. He awoke to a barking dog at four thirty. Sleep would not return so he got up and made ready for the day.

With daylight breaking across the hill to the east, came the realization that the plan formulated so clearly the night before contained one glaring flaw. The best – the only – lead he really had on David Dalton was the Davy-kid Tommy had mentioned. His plan changed. He'd go back to the Crossroad one last time with the sole and specific purpose of finding out what he could about Davy – last name, where he lived.

Jake figured any one of the adults – Gramps, Mary, Mary, or June – could probably provide the information and whereabouts. He'd take his time and not press. If the information weren't forthcoming from one, he'd move on to another. He just needed to keep in mind that he was there to use them – not to befriend them – not to help them and certainly not to grow fond of them.

They would probably fawn over him again but since he truly hated that, he would turn it to his advantage. Hating them each time they did it would distance him from them.

Strong! He must remain strong and resolute.

By the time he arrived at the café, he felt prepared for his final encounter with the people there. He would say as little as possible and not be sucked into unwanted – unnecessary – conversations.

"Jake!"

The greeting had been delivered in chorus from Gramps, Tommy, Mary and the seven old men at the table. Several strangers looked up and smiled as if wanting to be a part of whatever was going on. 'Damned if it hasn't turned into Cheers,' Jake thought, making reference to an old TV series.

Jake felt obliged to wave. Coffee was waiting at his booth. Like looming giants, Mary, Gramps and Tommy swarmed over him as he sat down. Gramps, of course, shook hands. Mary readied her pad. Tommy slid into the seat across from him. It was like an unending ritual in which everyone knew their part.

Jake looked up at Mary. "Short stack – chef's choice of flavor – with sausage on the side."

Mary jotted it down, tore it off and handed it to Gramps. Tommy reached up and took it from Gramps. Standing, he looked at Jake and said, "Gramps ain't feeling so good this morning so I'll cook and he can sit."

Tommy left for the kitchen. Jake spoke to Gramps.

"You do look pale. Think you should go lie down?"

"It'll pass. Always does."

The men at the table began putting spoons to mugs.

"I better go give the old timers a lesson in manners," Mary said, patting Jake on the shoulder.

Jake was convinced that she could do just that. The men seemed to delight in the dressing down she delivered.

Gramps sat with Jake.

"I'm probably mostly just tired. The boy – Tommy – kept me up 'til two talking last night. We've never done that before – really just sat and talked. It was good – well, part of

it was good and part of it really hurt, but it was all honest talk. I'm really thankful about it. I heard about lots of things I had no idea he ever thought about. It was like talking to a man instead of a kid. We decided to make some changes between us. It's time for that. Wish Emma had lived to see it."

He sniffed and wiped his nose with a napkin, wadding it into a ball and palming it.

"I'm happy for you."

Jake tried to leave it at that.

Gramps nodded and patted Jake's hand. He got up and returned to the kitchen. Left alone at last, Jake worked on his coffee. The first refill arrived before the pancakes. Mary was predictably chatty.

"So, got a big day planned?" she asked merely making conversation.

"Guess I'll look around Webster Grove. I'm about ready to move on, I think."

"Tommy will sure miss you - heck we all will."

It wasn't intended as a guilt-laced barb but that's how it felt.

"Oh, I imagine Tommy will begin finding some friends his own age soon. That's what he should have, you know. Like that Davy he talked about yesterday - I forgot his last name."

"I know Davy but I don't think I've ever heard his last name. He's trouble - plain and simple - if you ask me."

"Well, you know better than I. Just hope Tommy finds somebody."

Mary nodded thoughtfully and left.

Tommy arrived with the pancakes just as June walked in. She went directly to Jake's booth.

"May I," she asked, indicating the seat.

"Sure. By all means." (Intended response: "Please leave me alone, Vixen.)

Jake's mouth was not listening to his head. Maybe he could use it to his advantage.

Tommy arrived and spoke: "I have one more order working, then I'll be ready for class. You're going to be amazed at all the stuff I got done."

"Take your time," she said.

Then she turned her attention to Jake.

"I see you survived the day, yesterday."

"Yes, I checked myself over this morning and I believe I'm still in one piece."

It sounded to Jake like an adolescent attempt at humor. He'd try to redeem himself.

"Actually, it was a pretty nice day. I found Tommy to be a great kid with an abundance of important thoughts and insights."

Why was he saying such things? His plan. His Plan. He had to get back to his plan.

"Tommy doesn't have many friends," June said. "He's never learned how to socialize."

The comment seemed out of place considering the positive spin Jake had just put on the boy. Still, it was an opening.

"About his friends. Doesn't he have any at all?"

"Not really. The ones he's drawn to are mostly trouble makers."

"Maybe he's not drawn to them. Maybe they're just the only ones that will have him."

Mary brought the tea fixings for June.

"You may well be right about that. I hadn't looked at it from that direction."

"He spoke about Davy yesterday. I forget his last name."

"The Davy he used to run away with?"

"That's the one."

Jake's heart skipped a beat as he anticipated finally receiving one of the final pieces of his puzzle.

"Davy Crane. Lives in a shack with his father up behind George's gravel pit."

"Crane. Davy Crane. Someway that doesn't seem to be the right last name."

"Well, just two David's his age I know around here - Davy Crane and David Brewer. Brewer's an honor role, athletic, heartthrob from a well-to-do family. I don't think Tommy's ever rated David's attention."

"I probably just misunderstood then."

He needed to change the topic before she sensed his intense interest. It was not an easy task when your world had just collapsed. He tried.

"Have you ever been concerned that Tommy might hurt himself?"

"Suicidal, you mean?"

"I suppose."

"The story is that he did try a couple of years ago. He was in therapy until just recently. I assume he got it worked out or he wouldn't have been released."

"I didn't know. He didn't say. Wow!"

"You're concerned, though, aren't you, Jake? He must have said something."

"Nothing specific. I'm probably just reading too much into a little adolescent insecurity."

Then he changed the topic again.

"It sounds like he tried to get caught up on past due assignments last evening. Not sure what got into him."

"Tommy? Past due assignments? I'll believe that when I see it?"

June shook her head. She clearly loved the boy but found him fully unmotivated regarding academic undertakings. She continued: "Tommy says you're a strawberry pie fan."

"I see I have no secrets."

"If I'm being too forward just say so, but I do bake a mean strawberry pie and can have one whipped into shape by, say, three at my place."

Yes, she was being too forward. He'd put an end to

this right away. He looked her straight in her naturally beautiful face, draped in shiny, shoulder length, graying auburn hair. He'd decline in no uncertain terms. He noticed that her eyes were hazel and he suspected she wore no makeup - the color in her cheeks seemed wonderfully natural.

"Strawberry pie? Three o'clock? Your place? . . . It sounds fine - just fine."

He couldn't believe he'd said that. He was supposed to be immune to female wiles. He did find her deep, soft voice and the graceful way she moved attractive. She sipped her tea as if there were no reason to hurry through life. She had an independent air about her, yet she was clearly a nurturing person.

She began drawing a map on a paper napkin.

"Here's the Crossroads. Go north on Becker's Trail exactly two miles. Turn east on a gravel lane and my place sits about a quarter mile back from the road."

"I suppose that might be the one with June Harding's name on the mailbox."

"You're a quick study. Just the kind I love to tutor."

There was no double message. It had just been said in fun. Jake told himself that one piece of strawberry pie a relationship did not make.

June slid the napkin in his direction. Jake felt moved to speak.

"In all honesty, I have to tell you my plans for this trip did not include mid-afternoon pie with an attractive lady. I'm still hurting from my wife's death. I may be really bad company."

"I understand all about the hurt. It's been almost three years for me. My kids are always after me to get on with life. They're right. It's why I'm tutoring. The kids just don't understand about the loss."

"So, you have more than one child. Tommy just mentioned a son."

"That's Jack. He owns a limo service in Los Angeles.

My daughter is April – she's an attorney in the St. Louis area.
You have children?"

It was a question Jake had feared and he had no answer prepared. Still, one surfaced.

"A daughter and a granddaughter. You have grandchildren?"

That worked well, he thought – right back at her.

"No. And none in sight, I'm afraid."

Tommy stumbled across the room, his arms overloaded with books, folders, papers and an open backpack. He deposited them in a nearby empty booth.

"I think that's my cue," June said.

She got up, tea in hand.

"Nice chatting. I'm looking forward to this afternoon, and rest easy – there are no webs at my place."

Jake smiled. At three, then."

Jake sat back wondering why his best plans kept falling apart. He was angry at June for inviting him. No, he was angry with himself for accepting. At least he knew he was angry. With his one lead gone, he needed time to regroup. He finished his breakfast – turned out to be apple-cinnamon – and left five dollars on the table. He had the suspicion Gramps wouldn't take his money at the register and he wasn't going to become a charity case.

He stopped at the tutoring booth long enough to say he was going into town and might not make it back for lunch. Just why he felt compelled to check in and out was not clear to him. He looked around for Gramps but he was not there. He waved across the room at Mary and left.

Jake had passed an auto salvage yard near Webster Grove. He knew it was a long shot at best. It had been so long, but the car had to have ended up somewhere in the area. In the phone book, "Billy's Towing and Salvage" was the only choice and that was where Jake was headed.

Jake pulled in – his story well-rehearsed. Billy turned out to be Bruiser. He was not the figure you'd want to meet

alone in a dark alley - six-six, three hundred pounds, unshaven for perhaps his entire forty years, with tattoos on his neck and the backs of his hands. He wore a greasy baseball hat, bill toward the back, Levis, and a black, ornately studded leather jacket.

Jake entered the small office building - the front room smaller than his cabin and unheated. Bruiser sat behind an old green metal desk piled high with papers, parts and biker magazines. Jake had been unaware that biker magazines apparently required scantily clad young ladies on their covers. Bruiser was attacking a stack of Egg McMuffins and guzzling a can of beer. Cholesterol and alcohol - not two of the usually recommended food groups.

"Whatcha need?" came his surprisingly gentle request.

"Wheel covers for a 2000 Chrysler."

"How many?"

"Two."

"Hard to come-by items," he said, plainly setting the foundation for negotiation.

Jake took that as a good sign but wasn't in the mood to play games.

"Do you have them?"

"I got 'em."

Jake relaxed a bit. It was time to launch his scheme.

"So, they're hard to come by, you say?"

"Oh, yeah. I lucked into these a couple a years ago."

"Not much call for them, then?" Jake said, in essence calling his bluff.

Bruiser, squirmed - ever so slightly.

"I can always sell 'em eventually. Gotta be patient in my business. Price just increases every year, you know."

"So, you lucked into them, you say?"

Once said, Jake counted on the man's natural need for self-importance to take him the distance.

"Accident at the crossroads. Terrible accident."

Jake felt a hint of compassion he had not expected from

this centerfold for "Motorcycle Gang Monthly." Still, he couldn't believe he had finally caught a break - maybe.

"Really bad, you say?"

Jake choked on the words, suddenly, not wanting to have the tale retold. Bruiser, unwrapped another sandwich and plunged forward.

"Three women died. Some SOB of a kid got drunk and hit 'em with a gravel truck. He must a been goin' eighty miles an hour. Fortunately, I guess, they died instantly. I heard the boy walked away with only a bruised forehead and a few cuts on his arms and neck."

Jake was totally unprepared for his own reaction.

"The poor kid!"

"Poor kid? Far as I know nothing's ever happened to him. The bleedin' liberal do-gooders in the State's Attorney's office slapped him on his wrists and sent him home. Kill three people and he's Scott free. Something's wrong with the system, I'll tell you that. I don't care how young he was, he should'a been drawn and quartered, if you ask me."

It was patently clear that Bruiser would have eagerly volunteered for the job. Drawn and quartered was not one of the options Jake had been contemplating. It bothered him that his heart seemed to be taking exception to Bruiser's position and that for the first time he sensed a seed of compassion for the youngster. Get the weed-be-gone, he thought to himself. It was a joke not intended to be humorous. 'Odd,' he thought.

"So, that kid still live around here?"

He felt it was an awkward question coming from a guy at a junkyard who was in need of wheel covers. Any impropriety seemed to escape Bruiser who pressed on.

"Far as I know. Dave or David or Davy somebody. I'm bad about names. Lives out there somewhere close to old man James'es pit."

"I suppose his parents were pretty shook up."

"Couldn't say. I do know the kid was still talking crazy when I got there - I picked up the police call and almost beat

the paramedics to the scene. The fire department had to cut him out of the truck. The EMTs were just looking him over when I got there. He was falling down drunk and kept saying something like, "It was supposed to be mean" - real crazy like. He kept trying to get back into the truck. They finally had to restrain him on a gurney. He wouldn't even listen to the cop. He was still screaming gibberish when they drove off with him."

It had provided details that Jake had never heard. In a strange way, it helped even though it did not reveal any information he could use in finding the boy. Jake wondered if, perhaps, David's name had been changed to protect him from local vigilantes like Bruiser. Tommy had reported that it had about two years since he had been with the Davy boy. It seemed to fit. Perhaps it was information that could provide a lead, somehow. He wondered if David Dalton was actually the David Crane who lived near the gravel pit.

Bruiser put the covers in Jake's trunk and gladly accepted the cash payment. His parting remark was: "Must be a rental. Nobody's trunk is ever this clean." He seemed to mean it as a joke. Jake just chuckled and did not confirm or deny it.

Theories began to spin in Jake's mind as he attempted to assemble the bits and pieces. Several things had taken place at about the time of the accident. Davy and Tommy stopped seeing each other. Gramps stopped beating Tommy. The café stopped serving alcohol. Tommy left school. Theory one: Davy somehow obtained the alcohol from Gramps' café - perhaps Tommy had even supplied it to his 'friend'. After the accident, Davy was banned from Tommy's life and Gramps took a second look at his relationship with his grandson and decided corporal punishment might not be the way. In order to keep Tommy from going down the same road as Davy, Gramps arranged counseling for Tommy. Davy's remark at the accident led Jake to wonder if Davy had actually intended to kill himself - that what he had actually said might not have

been, "It was supposed to be me," rather than mean. With Tommy's expressed disdain for life, and the frequency of copy-cat suicides, the need for counseling was further supported. Jake had heard that depressed kids tended to hang together. Davy and Tommy looked like probable partners in that theory.

The theory held together pretty well. The central problem remained - he had no incontrovertible proof that Davy - with a name change - was the David Dalton he was searching for. There just had to be a way to find out for sure.

* * *

His morning agenda had taken far less time to complete than Jake had anticipated. It was just as well. His nerves were shattered. He drove on into town in search of a cup of coffee and solitude away from his unwanted fan club.

His search ended back at the square, across the park from the newspaper office. At 10:30 the place was vacant. There being no booths, Jake took a seat at a small table toward the rear. He needed to be alone. He also had one more ace up his sleeve and thought that might be the place to play it.

The waitress was an older woman - could have easily had great-grandchildren. She moved slowly but her wonderful smile preceded her.

"We have a fresh batch of the World's Best Cinnamon Rolls just out of the oven. My own secret recipe," she chuckled. "Been making them right her for fifty-six years. They just keep getting better. Everybody says so."

Jake had come for coffee but she made them seem just too good not to sample.

"Fine, with coffee - black."

She was soon back. Her sales pitch had not been idle boasting. They were huge and delicious.

"You passing through or new around here?" she asked filling Jake's mug.

"Passing through. Actually, I feel lucky to still be passing through."

"How's that?"

She plainly didn't understand. He hadn't intended that she would.

"I came in from the north. Up there about thirty miles or so - at a poorly marked intersection - out in the middle of nowhere."

"We just call it the Crossroads."

"The Crossroads, yes, well, I was turning right off route 89 - no stop sign for me - to come south, and a gravel truck came barreling off the hill from the north. It didn't stop at the stop sign on Becker's Trail, and came close to wiping me out."

"It's a bad spot. Lots of accidents there. In fact, a year or so back, a gravel truck hit a car at that very spot and killed the driver and two passengers. So sad. It was a drunken kid driving the truck as I recall."

Having just relived the experience through Bruiser, Jake thought he'd someway be inoculated against the pain from the next rendition. He wasn't. Again, he struggled for words. Again, his first thought surprised him."

"That poor kid."

"Yeah! Not many folks around here would agree with that, though. They wanted him hung - if you know what I mean?"

Jake knew! Oh, how Jake knew! A strange thought flashed through his mind.

'When I'm finished with the kid, if I get caught, I just might find a very understanding and lenient jury around here.' He imagined Bruiser as the foreman.

It was an odd, uncomfortable, and confused sensation - to feel that slight twinge of compassion for the person he was stalking with bitter vengeance. His continuing thesis had been that a reckless killer is a killer at any age. He needed to remain steadfast in that belief. Regardless, Jake continued the conversation as if compassion were his long suit -not difficult, since it once had been.

"How will the kid ever live that down around here?"

"Time heals. It'll take more than the usual amount I imagine. I'd bet he'll move on once he gets old enough."

"You know him, then?"

"Not really. Just surmising."

"His family must be devastated as well."

"Again, I can't say. Not sure who he belongs to, come to think of it. One of the Daltons, maybe - not sure. Guess it doesn't matter to you anyway. I just babble on to anybody who'll listen. You have to forgive me. Hope you enjoy the roll. Help yourself to coffee if I don't get back to you. She pointed to the hot plate. Got lunch salads to make-up back in the kitchen."

Jake had to wonder how a teenage boy could remain so well hidden in a rural area where everyone seemed to know everybody else's business. Had it been some beloved kid from a respected family he could understand. That didn't seem to be the case. The dead-end seemed to be solidifying. That thought was disheartening - maddening, in fact!

If he would not be able to complete his mission anonymously, Jake had prepared another far riskier and probably fatal, alternative. He would pose as an insurance agent - he had the documents already prepared - who was searching for David Dalton, minor, because there was an insurance payment due him for the injuries he had received in the accident. It had slipped through the cracks and he just needed to verify the boy's identity and address in order to deliver the check. With that story prepared, he could inquire directly at both the Sheriff's office and the Juvenile Probation Office. He might use it with Sam, also.

The possible down side to that plan was that later he could easily be traced to the Dalton boy's demise and his true relationship to the event would be clear. He would have no defense but then, he really didn't care what happened to him once his retribution was complete.

If he had just had presence of mind in the beginning, he could have posed as an insurance agent from that first day at

the Crossroad Café. That way he could have interrogated Tommy or Gramps more directly about the accident should his initial plan fail to produce the information he needed.

He found himself searching out every crumb left on the plate. Under other circumstances, he would have tried to buy that recipe. As he finished his coffee he began thinking ahead. Although the fact troubled him, he was looking forward to his time with June. It would just be friendly conversation but it would be with someone who remembered the same Presidents as he did. He missed that, though he tried to convince himself he didn't need it.

He had one more stop before returning to his cabin. He left money by the register, calling to alert the proprietress as he left. He walked across the park to the newspaper office. Sam was vacuuming the rug in the front - something Jake had not been certain actually ever happened.

"Once a month, needs it or not!" was Sam's cheery greeting as Jake entered. She had shut it off to be heard. "What can I do for you today? More back issues?"

"Well, yes, actually, if you don't mind."

"Interested in that Crossroads accident a couple of years ago, are you?" she said, motioning him to follow her into the back room.

Jake was surprised - astonished more appropriately described the feeling. How could she have known? It had to have been more than a good guess.

Before he had to respond she explained.

"You left the microfilm sitting on the Hospital dismissal notes. The gadget records the last six stops the user makes - for ease of returning to the pages you've just visited. Guess I forgot to show you that gizmo. I'm just a nosy old reporter. Couldn't help but snoop. I just put one and one and one and one together and it added up to a New Year's Eve accident. I'm not looking for an explanation. That's your business. Just thought I might be able to help."

As she spoke, Jake formulated a response.

"I'm a writer - a freelancer. I heard about the accident from the motel manager and thought there might be the kernel of a story there."

Sam didn't believe him and Jake could see that she didn't, but neither said anymore about it. Sam provided the same reel as before and Jake thanked her. She returned to her vacuuming.

Jake was searching the legal notices for name changes. It was a time-consuming task. After twenty minutes, Sam asked if he wanted some coffee. He politely declined, mentioning his recent visit to the restaurant.

"Mary Jane's place," Sam said. She makes the best cinnamon rolls on the planet."

Jake chose not to get involved further in the conversation but did wonder what it was around there with waitresses named Mary.

Well over five hundred editions later, Jake gave up. No David Dalton had changed his name. In fact, no David anybody of any age had changed his name since the day of the accident. He had one question for Sam.

"The area up at the Crossroads is in this county, isn't it?"

"Sure is. I can find you the home addresses of the accident victims if that would help."

"You've been more than kind and super patient, Sam. That won't be necessary. I don't suppose you have the boy's address - that was probably quashed, him being a minor."

"That's right. You know as much about him as I do. Juvenile was particularly secretive about that one. I smelled something but the air cleared before I could get my bearings. I didn't reach the scene until after the boy had been removed. Interested in the lad, are you?"

"Just seems like his is the best story in the whole thing. I guess I wouldn't bother him anyway. He's undoubtedly been punished enough just having to live with it all."

"That's my take on it, too. Not the popular one around

her, however."

Jake shrugged.

"Well, thanks again. I'll be moving on. Nice getting to know you."

He left a skeptical Sam behind, although Jake felt she had nothing to go on that could link him to any aspect of the accident. He had intentionally made seven deliberate stops on the microfilm, after his visit to the last legal notice section, so she couldn't retrace his path that time.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jake skipped lunch and returned to his cabin. He hated having time on his hands but with the plan headed nowhere it was all he had. He went for a walk around the motel grounds thinking it might clear his mind and provide some new idea.

The owner was outside picking up sticks and small branches and piling them into a large, hand pulled wagon apparently made for that purpose.

"That windstorm the other night sure took its toll on the trees," he announced as if needing to explain their presence.

"Nice spot, here," Jake said. "You been here long?"

"Built the place in '45 after I came back from the war - South Pacific. Been here ever since. Raised a family and outlived two wives. Wearin' out number three, now."

He chuckled and shook his head.

"You might be considered an old-timer then."

"Me and George, down at the Crossroad, are about the oldest timers you can find hereabouts outside of Meadow Brook Haven up in Sidney."

He seemed pleased to be able to make that claim.

Jake repeated his fabricated story about his near accident at the intersection.

"A bad spot, for sure. Tried to get a four-way put in up there some years back. They came out with their traffic

counters and decided there wasn't enough traffic to warrant it. You'd think the sheer number of accidents up there would be more important than the daily traffic flow. Probably cost 'em more to do the survey than it would have to just a planted two new stop signs."

"Been some accidents up there have there?"

"Probably a couple a month. Never just fender benders, neither. Had a terrible incident a couple of years ago. A whole family of tourists got wiped out by a little kid who was high on something. The way I hear it, nothin' ever even happened to him. Can you imagine that? Dope heads! In my day they'd a sent him to reform school and throwed away the key."

"That kid was from around here, then?"

"Yep. Just lives up the road there, with his dad, the way I hear it. Back in the sticks, I hear tell. Don't know the family myself. I heard the mother died or ran off or something some years ago."

Suddenly Jake realized that it was still possible he could find the right family. Maybe they just didn't have a phone - and so the failure of his original plan. He could drive the roads and look for a Dalton mailbox. Could it really be that simple?"

Jake felt rejuvenated. Another window had opened for him. He was soon in his car. He traveled west on 89, taking note of every mailbox on the right side for more than ten miles, at which point the route stopped and merged with another from the northeast. Then it was back over the same road heading east. No Daltons. He wasn't discouraged. There were a dozen roads that headed north and south off 89. He would systematically investigate each one. Then he'd do the same up and down Becker's Trail, if necessary. It felt like a sound plan but would have to wait until later. It was nearly three. He turned his attention to finding the strawberry pie awaiting him at June's place. No surprise, her house was exactly where it was supposed to be.

Before he could knock the door opened.
“We don’t want any,” she said, playfully closing the door.

Just as quickly, it reopened.

“Good thing, because I’m fresh out,” Jack came back.
They chuckled – a bit nervously, perhaps.

“Living room or kitchen? June asked, taking his coat.

“Always preferred the kitchen, myself,” he said. “More homey feeling.”

“How did I know that?” she asked.

“E.S.P. I suppose,” Jake said – then playfully explained, “Exceptional Strawberry Pie.”

The remark actually made no sense anyway you sliced it, but June appreciated Jake’s attempt at humor.

“Make yourself comfortable. The coffee maker has a mind of its own. Sometimes it takes five minutes to brew and sometimes ten. Looks like it’s coming in at about eight today.”

June had a very comfortable way about her. Not pushy but certainly no wallflower. She sported a positive outlook and was clearly a very patient person. Under other circumstances, Jake felt he could have welcomed her friendship.

“While we’re waiting, here is a note Tommy wrote to you. He rewrote it four times, bless his heart – an all-time high. He wanted it to be perfect. I believe it is, in every way that really counts.

Jake unfolded it and began reading it to himself.

“Dear Jake,

Thank you for the great day yesterday. I have never really met anybody like you before. Gramps and Mary and Mary say you are an angel. I think you are just the nicest person I have ever met. That is not a put down. I am just not into the whole angel thing. I think Mrs. Hardy agrees with me. I want to be just like you – kind, helpful, positive and very

wise. (Mrs. H. helped me come up with those words but the ideas about them were mine.)

Thank you for being my friend.

Your friend,

Tommy

P. S. Don't let the strawberry pie ruin your supper. Ha!

Ha!

Jake swallowed hard, his eyes moistened. June spoke.

"Yeah! Me too. I blubbered like a baby in the car all the way home."

"I'm afraid it says a lot more about what he hasn't had during his life than what I've brought into it." Jake suggested.

"Only partly, I'm guessing," June added. "The piece he wrote about your day together included some of the wisest counsel I've ever heard. It had an immediate, positive impact on Tommy, I'll tell you that. Apparently, he was moved to have a heart to heart with his grandfather about a wide range of things. It sounds like they pretty well cleared the air and have agreed to start over. That's a real joy to see. Gramps loves him so much but has never had clue one about how to either show it or how to handle the boy."

The coffee maker sputtered its announcement that brewing was complete. The coffee was poured and the pie served - refrigerator-cold and topped with sweet whipped cream.

Both the pie and conversation were exceptional. Two hours passed. Had it not grown dark outside, as became apparent though the glass door leading from the kitchen out onto the patio, they would not have noticed. June had freely shared her life story with Jake without ever pressing for any details about his. He spoke of his restaurants and of his interests in writing, music and family life without needing to provide details about his daughter's whereabouts or how his wife had died. He relaxed and enjoyed being with a new friend. For most of those two hours, he floated well above

thoughts relating to his mission.

Before leaving, he examined the coffee maker and pronounced his prescription:

"Run a full pot of liquid - half white vinegar and half water - through four times. Then a pot of unsweetened lemonade. Finish with two pots of plain old-fashioned cold water. That should either cure it or make it leak like a newborn after her ten o'clock bottle."

Jake took his leave and returned to the café. He had not spent much time with Tommy that day and was looking forward to it. Interestingly, he thought, the usual pangs of guilt, which, in the past, had been associated with seeking fun were minimal. It wasn't that he saw that as a good thing but he did take note of it.

He wondered if his relationship with Tommy was, then, something other than fun. He wondered what there was about Tommy that drew him to the boy. He had apparently built a well-deserved, abominable, reputation. He had never been able to keep friends. He thought of himself as the lowest form of humanity - and had apparently accepted that as fact. A relationship with him seemed doomed to heartbreak. What old guy approaching retirement age would allow himself to get sucked into such a relationship? If he were to begin seeking out new friends, they should at least be his own age.

He had no answers and yet he was eager to see the boy.

Tommy met him at the door. Jake spoke first.

"How's George - er, Gramps?"

"He says he's feeling better. I got him to go upstairs and rest between about one and four. I can tell he's not up to snuff, though. He says it's probably the flue. I tried to get him to take the shot but he's just so stubborn, you know. So, how was the pie?"

"It was exceptional. It would even meet your high, Crossroad, standards of quality, I believe. I'm sure there will be a piece coming your way in the morning."

Tommy smiled and nodded. There were other things

really on his mind.

"Have a good time?"

"Yes, I had a very nice time."

"Nibble on anything besides pie?"

Tommy broke into rails of laughter. He'd set it up like a pro and they both knew it. While the boy wiped his tears, they moved into the booth.

"Thanks for the nice thank you note. I appreciate your kind words. I believe you went overboard. But, thank you."

"It's how I feel. That's what Mrs. H. suggested I write. It was my idea, I mean, but I had a hard time getting past the first sentence."

"Well, you did a fine job. An 'A over A' I'd say."

Oh, that wasn't for a grade. That was for you."

"Then it's just that much more precious."

Tommy seemed embarrassed and looked away.

"I've been wondering something," he said, eventually looking back up at Jake.

Jake waited silently. He had learned not to try and anticipate Tommy's conversation.

"I feel like I ought to tell you all about the awful stuff I've done. It's like you don't really know the real me."

Jake didn't want to become the Father Confessor. He wanted to keep things light, fun. He thought he could do all that and still be honest with the lad.

"The only Tommy James I'm really interested in knowing is the fourteen-year-old model sitting across the table from me."

"Fourteen and a half," Tommy corrected, continuing to listen, intently.

"I didn't know the five-year-old model or the ten or twelve year-old Tommys. I'm not really interested in knowing them. The Tommy I'm learning to know and enjoy is kind and helpful and a lot of fun. He has wonderful ideas. He seems to be honest and he seems to want to improve himself and his life. The details about things from your past

can't change anything I know about Tommy James at fourteen - fourteen and a half - so I'd just as soon pass on that offer."

"It's like you're saying today I'm me - fourteen and a half years old - and that I'm not any of the younger me's anymore."

"Yes. That's exactly what I'm saying. So, why muddy the water with things that are done and gone, over and finished - that are of no concern to our present relationship?"

"That's like letting me just start over living since the day we first met. Like a brand-new life."

"Yes. That's really what I mean. It's not that I'm not interested in what's been important to you in the past. I am. I just feel no need to know about your mistakes. I trust you've learned important things from them."

"Yeah. Mostly. You really are different, Jake."

"I've never felt the need to try to be like anybody else. Most times that's worked pretty well. I am who I am and people have their right to look upon me any way they please. I can't control that."

"Around here, people don't forget bad stuff."

"I'm not saying you should forget it. I'm saying you can't define who and what you are today - this minute - by what you used to be. That's what you have to do - move on. If other people can't forget and see that you've moved on, then that's their loss."

"Loss?"

"If they aren't willing to get to know the new and improved version of Tommy James, then they're losing out on your friendship, your helpfulness, your charm and your sense of humor."

It got a smile.

"I see. I guess I have to come up with some way to show people who I am now or they won't know I'm different. That's not going to be easy. I don't know where to begin."

"Well, for starters, just treat folks the way you've been treating me, the way you've treated me from that first handful

of fresh crackers you gave me."

"What?"

"That first day - with the chili."

"Oh, the fresh crackers. I don't get it."

"You treated me right. You looked out for my wellbeing. I appreciated that immediately. It made me feel good about you right from the start. I thought, 'Now here's and kind and thoughtful lad'."

"You did? Really?"

"I did. Really."

"But that was such a little thing."

"Tommy, the most important thing to learn about successful relationships is to just do the little things with kindness and good humor and to do them consistently."

"Consistently?"

"So people can count on them from you every time. They know that when they are around you, you will try to make them comfortable and feel good."

"Like you, huh?"

"Well, I hope so. That's the way I plan to be every morning when I begin my day."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Wow! Maybe I could learn to be that way usually, but I doubt if I could be that way when things build up - get tense - you know."

"Yes, I know. Maybe this will help. I tell myself that anybody can be nice, and friendly, and calm, and helpful, when things are going well between people. The true test of love and helpfulness is when the going gets rough. Just keep that in mind and I imagine you'll find it easier to hold your tongue."

"It's like I have to love harder when things look like they might heat up."

"I've never heard it put better!"

"Really?"

“Really!”

Tommy nodded.

“I’d only add this, Tommy. When integrity becomes your personal goal, you never again have to say things to others in order to defend yourself or your worth. If others seem to be trampling on you, you have to let that be their problem because you know you’re just fine as you are. If you’ve made a mistake and it’s pointed out to you say, ‘Hey, thanks for pointing that out to me. I’ll give it some thought.’ The best barometer – measure – that you’re beginning to slip a bit is when you hear yourself becoming defensive.”

“Sometimes when I get put down – well, always, I suppose – I just think it’s all unfair and I want to force them to see my side of things.”

“I understand that, but I’ll share with you a piece of magic that will handle that every single time it comes up.”

“Magic? What? Give!”

“Just decide to banish the word ‘fair’ from your thinking process. Throw it away and never let it come back. Fair is one of those go nowhere concepts because you and the other guy will always define it very differently. Fair always has a definition unique to the person using it.”

Tommy’s brow furrowed.

“I mean we each have our own take on what fair means and our meaning is almost always different from the other guys’

“I’ll try that.”

He pretended to reach into his chest and tear something out. Then he threw it away as if making a long, arcing basket into the trash container across the room.

“That was my definition of fair getting the boot.”

“You do amaze me, young man.”

Tommy smiled. He seldom asked ‘why’ to that question anymore. He just took it as a signal of the growing bond between them.

“You know the most amazing thing about our talks,

Jake?"

"What would that be?"

"I actually remember what you say. I can't remember the year Columbo discovered Florida, but I can remember just about every word you ever said to me. Gramps says it's true, too."

"I guess we remember those things that are most important to us."

"Our talks are really important to me."

"Well, the really important thing is that the people around here are already noticing the new Tommy James and they really like him."

"See how you're already rubbing off on me, Jake. You think maybe someday I'll be able to rub off on somebody else that way?"

"I'd bet on it. In fact, I'm sure that you're already doing that."

"It'll be hard but I really want to do this."

"I'm sure that Gramps and Mrs. Hardy and the Marys will all have more suggestions if you'll just talk with them about what you want to do - how you want to be."

"Oh, they're all always full of suggestions, okay."

The idea deserved a quick smile.

"So, tell them what you're trying to do - what kind of person you're trying to become - and see what they have to say. You may not have liked their advice in the past, but I'm guessing you never actually asked for it before."

"You're right there. I probably should have, huh?"

"Should haves don't get you anywhere. Start from today."

"What happens if all this doesn't make any difference? What if everybody still thinks I'm no good?"

"Seems to me you'd have two choices."

Jake became quiet.

"You want me to figure this out, I guess."

"I guess."

"Well, I could give up and say that if everybody thinks I'm terrible, I might as well go ahead and be terrible. I guess that's how I've mainly been in the past."

"That's one option - not the one I hope you'll continue to choose."

"Or . . . I could keep trying."

"Trying what?"

"I don't know. Trying to show them how I really am."

"Or, better yet, continuing to show yourself how you are," Jake added.

Tommy frowned.

"Show myself? Why? I don't get it."

"It's called integrity, Tommy. It means that you establish a set of positive, helpful values or goals for living your life and then everyday show yourself that you can live up to them. When you do, you achieve a sense of integrity. I believe that it is the finest feeling a person can possibly have."

"So, you're saying it doesn't really matter what anybody else thinks about you but it does matter what you think about yourself."

"That has been my belief all my life. I encourage you to try it on and see if it fits."

It was the boy's determined nod that proceeded the words.

"I will do that. Being a grownup's a lot more work than I thought it would be. You gotta have the meatloaf tonight. It's the best you've ever tasted."

Apparently, the discussion was over. Jake smiled his broad, seldom seen, full out smile."

"What?" Tommy asked, intrigued by Jake's new expression.

"I'm sure glad our paths have crossed, Tommy James."

"Me too, but why you? I haven't done nothing - woops, anything - for you."

"Oh, but you have, Tommy. You'd just have to be inside my skin to understand."

"Well, then, I'll take your word for it. If you're anything, you're the most honest person I've ever known. Now, meatloaf?"

"Meatloaf, yes! With catchup if that won't offend the cook."

Tommy left to prepare the order, personally. Jake sat trembling in his boots. Integrity? Honesty? If the boy only knew – and Jake hoped, he never would. Jake did believe his words spoke the truth for typical circumstances, like Tommy's, and he truly hoped they would help the boy. It did represent the way he had lived his life before . . . and it had always worked.

It wasn't until that discussion that Jake fully realized the two very separate people he had become. Had he let himself dwell on it, he would have been greatly disturbed. His saving grace was, at the same time, the most disturbing part of it all – the ease with which he slipped anonymously from one to the other. When he thought of Tommy, his heart warmed with love. When he thought of David, his heart grew cold and overflowed with the most virulent variety of hate known to man. Each Jake, produced anxiety within the other. It was a battle in which neither participant ever rested.

If Jake were aware of all this, it was only at some marginal level. Repression had become his way of life during those past two years. Don't allow anything to surface that might cause pain or confusion. Keep focused. Be single-minded. Blame, locate, and punish.

Tommy was the first real stumbling block to that approach – Tommy and now, maybe, June. He just had to remain steadfast.

Tommy arrived with Jake's meal.

"You are going to love this."

Tommy pulled a bottle from his pocket and asked, quite seriously, "How do you spell it?"

Jake was not immediately sure what he meant. He took a stab.

"C A T S U P"

Tommy smiled. "No. Integrity."

Jake returned the smile. "I N T E G R I T Y"

Tommy closed his eyes and spelled it over to himself several times, drawing it the air with his finger.

"Got it. Thanks. Can't stay. This is the big dirty dish hour."

"I understand. Go! Enjoy!"

"An order or a suggestion?" Tommy smiled.

"Always a suggestion."

Tommy nodded as if to say, 'I knew that.' He left but returned immediately. His message was short, to the point and sincere. "Thanks." He disappeared through the swinging doors.

Tommy's sense of humor was developing rapidly, but then, everything else positive about him was also. Jake felt certain that with June's and Gramps' help, the boy was going to be just fine. It may have been his true feeling. It may have been his guilt-alleviating justification for leaving the boy high and dry. He filed the pronouncement in a guilt-free zone, and enjoyed his meatloaf, green beans and boiled new potatoes. The cuisine certainly exceeded what would be expected in a roadside, greasy spoon. Now, if they could just do something to redeem the coffee!

By the time he looked up from his plate, the room had filled - several older couples stood just inside the door waiting patiently for a table. Most of the patrons seemed to know at least some of the others. It suddenly became a very comfortable setting. Jake knew he would miss it. Therefore, the sooner he could leave the better.

It was too dark to drive the roads looking for Dalton mailboxes. Before he left, Jake opened the kitchen door and peeked inside. He was met by a whistling Tommy, wet from forehead to shoes, elbow deep in a sink of dirty dishes.

"Hey! What?" Tommy asked, when he spotted him.

"Just wondered if that Daniel Boone book was handy.

Looks like I'll have some time on my hands this evening."

"Sure. On the shelf at the end of the counter - underneath. If life becomes too boring, I can always use your help back here."

Jake chose to ignore the invitation.

"I'll return it at breakfast."

Tommy nodded and shrugged as if to say it was irrelevant at the moment.

He found the book and drove back to his cabin. He made ready for bed and propped himself up to read. He spent a surprisingly interesting evening learning many things he had not known about Boone and the pioneers of East Central Missouri. It had been a difficult life - despite Tommy's suggestion to the contrary earlier in the week. Jake could see Sam and Mary Jane fitting right in. With that, he turned out the light and went to sleep.

The next morning, he rose before the sun and entered the Crossroad before either Gramps or Tommy had come down stairs. It was just Mary - with one of the two middle names.

"Hey! A early riser, Mr. Jake," she said.

A lone truck driver sat at a table in the front corner.

"I came to work over that coffee maker."

"Just brewed a fresh pot. Probably won't need another for a half hour."

"That should be time enough."

"Is there a tool box around here?"

"Under the register."

"May I borrow an apron."

"You're serious! Help yourself. Clean are under the counter. Soiled hang behind the door."

He opted for soiled and was soon at work. The process was like second nature, though he had not done it for many years. He got it apart, soaked parts in vinegar, threaded pipe cleaners into the tubes and flushed things out. The pots got a salt and baking soda scrub that made them sparkle. It was all

back together and rinsed clean before either of the 'owners' arrived on the scene. He prepared the first test pot and sat at the counter, watching it brew. No sputtering, no leaks, and glass pots you could actually see through.

The trucker, who had been watching with interest, said. "I'll trade what I have here for whatever you got, even up."

Jake smiled and poured him the first mug.

"Hey. This is great! You got a regular maintenance route you care for," he asked, quite seriously.

Jake and Mary smiled.

"Nope. Retired. Just take care of this one."

The driver accepted it as fact and went back to reading his Raymond Masters Mystery. Mary poured two more mugs and they sat together at the counter.

"Hey! This is great! Surely it wasn't just the cleaning," she said.

"It has my secret ingredient. Half a pinch of salt on top of the dry grounds before you brew. Learned that trick years ago from a waitress in a place a lot like this one."

"May I steal it?"

"Be my guest."

Jake took his first sip. Yes. Now that was how God intended coffee to be!

Half a cup later, Tommy and Gramps arrived. Mary winked as she filled a mug for Gramps. He had taken a seat next to Jake. The truck driver got up to leave. Tommy handled the register. Gramps took his first sip as Tommy began doctoring his own from behind the counter. Gramps performed the classic double take. He tried a second sip. A third.

"Okay. Who imported coffee this morning?"

It was intended more as a serious question than a joke.

"Don't you like it," Mary asked, eyes sparkling.

"Like it? It's fantastic but it ain't from here."

Tommy looked at Jake. A knowing glance passed between them. Ever impatient, Tommy couldn't hold it in any

longer.

"Jake said he had a way of fixing the brewer to improve the taste. He's probably the guilty one."

"Caught red handed," Jake said, throwing up his arms.

"It's more than just a clean pot, though Lord knows we've needed that for years," Gramps admitted.

"I only pass on my secret ingredient to the youngest partner. Thought I'd show Tommy how to give those brewers a good bath and then swear him to secrecy about the magic."

Jake winked at Mary.

"Go to it," Gramps urged.

"Personally, I don't taste much difference," Tommy said, head cocked, tongue smacking against his lips.

"You have to have some coffee in your coffee to taste the difference," Mary said, chiding the boy.

"Guess I'll have to try some straight."

He shuddered from head to foot at the thought and then continued.

"Can we get the other pot in shape before the old geezers get here?"

"I'll just bet we can," Jake answered. "Roll up your sleeves!"

Tommy looked down at his T-shirt and shrugged his shoulders. It produced more chuckles than it deserved but the folks at the Crossroad were growing to like laughing and a fully valid reason was no longer a requirement.

Jake was a good and patient teacher. One step at a time and Tommy did all the actual work. By the time the regulars began arriving, both pots were spotless and brewing at twice their previous speed.

"Now," Jake announced to Gramps and Tommy, "If you'll lend me your grill for a about ten minutes I will prepare you the finest "Paradise Pancakes" you've ever had. I can guarantee that because I'm sure you've never had "Paradise Pancakes" before."

Good to his word, he emerged from the kitchen ten

minutes later with four plates cascaded up his left arm in the fashion of all great waitresses.

"You'd make a pretty good waitress if your legs were just a little prettier," Tommy joked.

It was Gramps' inclination to jump in and call the boy down for his remark. Jake beat him to it.

"You just may have to wait until January to taste this delicacy, young man," he teased back. "And, for your information, the ladies have always thought that my legs are just fine."

Gramps understood that Jake had taken no offense. Gramps understood there was a lesson there to be learned.

One plate each for Gramps, Tommy, Mary and himself. He reentered the kitchen and returned with special syrup.

"Here's the deal, guys . . . and beautiful waitress lady . . what you have before you are pineapple/coconut pancakes, topped with sliced almonds. Use this orange marmalade syrup sparingly for the best taste."

Tommy passed the syrup to Gramps first who passed it on to Mary. Soon everyone was enjoying a gourmet treat - well, nearly a gourmet treat! They oooed and ahhhed appropriately. Gramps paused long enough to speak.

"You know the downside to this good coffee, don't you, Jake?"

"What's that?"

"Refills! Patrons are actually going to start asking for them! I'll go broke!"

Another round of chuckles. Tommy smiled as he looked at Gramps. He could not remember another time when the old gentleman had tried to make a joke.

Pancakes finished and well-complemented, Jake made ready to leave. June entered, Tommy's strawberry pie in hand. Jake whispered to Tommy who disappeared into the kitchen. She would soon be feasting on her own "Paradise Pancake" thanks to the extra batter Jake had thoughtfully prepared.

Everyone noted, but did not comment about the fact that June had arrived a half-hour early. She stopped near the door, pointing to the gathering at the counter and then to the empty booth which Jake usually occupied. Jake left his stool and accompanied her to the booth. They sat opposite each other. Mary followed with Jake's mug, freshly filled.

"My! That smells like actual coffee this morning," June said expressing surprise.

"You ever drink coffee?" Mary asked.

"Not Crossroad coffee!"

In a slow, deliberate fashion, Jake pushed his mug across the table.

"I think you'll be pleasantly surprised," Mary suggested.

She wafted the aroma toward her face with her hand.

"Doesn't smell like Crossroad coffee."

She took a tentative sip.

"Doesn't taste like Crossroad coffee. Who raided Starbucks?"

Jake and Mary smiled. Jake reached across the table thinking he would retrieve his mug. June drew it close, playfully slapping at Jake's hand and guarding it behind her forearm.

"Get your own, old man," she said.

It produced gentle chuckles between them. Jake had enjoyed her touch. That upset and confused him. He drew back.

Tommy sauntered up and addressed June.

"So, are we starting early or are you just here to woo Jake?"

Jake and June looked at each other saying, together, "Woo??"

Tommy explained.

"It's a word out a the Daniel Boone book. I had to look it up in the dictionary if you can believe I'd really do that without being forced to."

June spoke, looking at Jake.

"There isn't any wooing going on here, is there?"

"I hadn't been aware of any wooing and I've been here since six."

He hadn't said, "No there isn't." He hadn't said, "Of course not." He had said, "I hadn't been aware of any." Only Jake and June appeared to be aware of the crack that seemed to have opened.

"So, then," June said looking at Tommy, "I'm here so we can begin early. I had to change my hair appointment from this afternoon to eleven this morning."

"Getting all dolled up for somebody, are you?" Tommy giggled into his arm.

"Certainly! For my very best fourteen-year old beau!"

"Beau?" Tommy asked.

"Look it up!" she responded playfully

Tommy shrugged his shoulders and turned pink, clearly enjoying the attention. He left, with some hesitation, to get his books. Jake turned down a new mug from Mary.

"I need to be on my way. Several odds and ends I need to take care of before I leave tomorrow."

June's shoulders dropped but she put on a game face. "

Tomorrow? I guess I hadn't given much thought to when you'd be leaving. I'll tell you what, then. How about I fix an old fashioned, home cooked meal for the three of us - like a proper send off?"

"The three of us?"

June had suddenly felt the door slam shut on an extended relationship with Jake.

"Yes. You, Tommy and me. My place about seven?"

"If Tommy's game, so am I."

It was not the response June would have asked for, but it worked.

"Work out the details with Tommy," Jake added. "I'll drop by at noon and he can fill me in."

Jake left. It was his intention to drive the back roads in

search of a new Dalton house – the Dalton house. With a fresh sheet on his clipboard, he would draw out the route he traveled so he wouldn't miss a single road.

The third mailbox presented a new and unforeseen problem. There was no name on it – just a number. Jake's quick mind went to work. He knocked on the door.

"Is this the Dillard residence?"

"No."

"Do you know where they live – the John Dillards?"

"No. Never heard that name around these parts."

"Well, I had a package for them and the directions led me right here. I'm sorry to have bothered you. Would you mind giving me your last name so I can prove to my supervisor that I did make a delivery attempt?"

"Sure. Jensen, Martha and Ben Jensen."

"Thanks again. I'm sorry to have bothered you."

As he continued his inspection, Jake discovered that about one in ten boxes bore no name, so he needed more time than he had anticipated. By noon, however, he had covered everything north of 89. When there was no answer, he'd stop at the closest house, say he was looking for the Dillards that he understood lived in the house "over there," and would soon sweet-talk the actual name of the resident out of his unsuspecting informers. At one point, he smiled to himself, thinking he had missed his calling life – con man – or perhaps that was his current calling.

He returned to the café at 12:30. Again, perennially impatient Tommy pointed out that June had said he'd be there at noon. It was now half-past noon.

Jake apologized through a smile. His morning had drained him and he had nothing to show for it. Tommy had instructions.

"Since we're eating at Mrs. H's tonight, you won't want to eat much now. I've got you a corned beef on rye working – if it's not burned to a crisp by now. I'll get it with chips and a pickle, okay?"

"Sounds fine!"

"Heavy or light on the kraut and mustard?"

"Medium on both, I suppose. Kraut isn't exactly light, my boy."

"It won't be long, since you're so late."

It wasn't.

"I figure if you pick me up here at exactly 6:54 we can get to Mrs. H's right at seven."

"I'll make it a point to be here promptly, then," Jake said, tickled at the boy but not showing it.

"I gotta help Gramps in the kitchen. He's not really feeling any better today even though he claims he is."

* * *

The afternoon produced no better results than the morning. There were fewer roads off to the south and by 3:30, (3:34 to be Tommy-precise) Jake had simply run out of territory to search.

His mood tumbled rapidly. Feeling more depressed than he had in weeks, Jake laid on his bed. Tears – their source unknown – flowed down his cheeks onto the pillow. He mustered the energy to set his alarm for six, and drifted off to a pain-free sleep, congratulating himself on his decision to get all those new people out of his life the following morning.

At several points, he fought awakening, choosing instead to remain trapped in that fully useless narrow band between sleep and consciousness.

Awakening at the alarm, he was surprised to realize that he felt some better. In a weak moment, he even admitted that he was looking forward to the evening. How was he going to muster the courage to just leave these people and get them out of his life, once and for all – a very different stance than had accompanied him to sleep a few hours before.

Nevertheless, an answer came to him.

"Cold Turkey! It's like stopping a bad habit. You just have to stop – cold turkey!"

* * *

It was, indeed, an old-fashioned meal - pot roast with all the trimmings. The conversation moved along surprisingly well. June and Tommy had a comfortable relationship that easily transferred beyond the bounds of teacher-student. They felt at ease with each other and had real things to talk about - not who did what, when, and with whom.

Jake felt relieved, knowing Tommy had someone like June. He felt less negligent leaving now - or so he told himself.

Tommy's undisguised purpose for the evening was to move the relationship between June and Jake toward something more than casual. He liked them both. Perceptively, he saw them as both being lonely. It seemed only logical, then, that they should become a couple.

His choice of subject matter left little to the imagination.

"If, say, you two got married, I don't suppose you'd have kids, would you?"

June provided a matter of fact answer.

"People our age seldom have children. Would you pass the peas, please."

"So, Jake," Tommy said, pressing on, "Mrs. H is some great cook, huh?"

"She is that," Jake said, glancing at June.

Tommy took note but did not comment. June spoke.

"If those tropical pancakes Jake made this morning are a true sample of his skillet skill, I'd say he's no slouch himself."

Tommy felt things were going very well. They were complementing each other, and looking at each other, and talking with each other. This could be great. As the meal drew to an end, Tommy got up and announced that he would clear the table.

"That's sweet of you, Tommy," June said. "The pie is already on plates in fridge if you're up to serving as well."

Tommy smiled.

"You two kids just sit and talk. I'll bring coffee and take care of things."

He refilled their cups and removed the dishes. They heard him humming in the kitchen as he prepared the pie.

"He's thought of everything but the Gypsy violinists," Jake joked.

June raised her eyebrows and sipped at her coffee.

By the time the pie plates were empty, Tommy thought it was a lock. Silently counting up, he figured they had been together at least six hours in all. Surely, that was plenty of time to fall in love. He had personally fallen in love with, Candy, the August centerfold, in considerably less than five minutes.

"Jake, you can take me home and then come back if you want to. I got homework and stuff, you know."

"Homework on Friday night?" I never assign homework over the weekend," June said, teasing.

Jake was amused but, for some reason, wished he hadn't been.

Tommy struggled on.

"Oh, I mean stuff from before. You know."

"Yes. I know."

Tommy looked sheepish, but for only a moment. A few minutes of small talk later and the two gentlemen left. Jake dropped him off and he skipped to the door, fully satisfied that his plan was well on its way to success.

///

CHAPTER SIX

The ringing phone roused Jake from a sound sleep.

"Has to be a wrong number," he said out loud, reading 3:36 a.m. and deciding to ignore it. It continued ringing. He sat up and reached out to locate it there in the dark.

"Yes," he said unwilling to reveal anything about who had been reached.

"Jake, this is Mary at the Crossroad."

"Mary? What?"

"Gramps had a heart attack. It looks real bad. Tommy went along in the ambulance. He said to call you first then Mrs. Hardy."

"He'll be at Methodist in Webster Grove?" Jake asked, his wits clearing rapidly at the unexpected news.

"Right."

"You okay?"

"Not really but I'll manage."

"Call June. Tell her I'll be by to pick her up in fifteen minutes. We'll go find Tommy."

"Okay. Keep me posted."

"Just as soon as we know anything."

He hung up and slipped into his clothes. In five minutes, he was on the road. In five more, he was parking in June's driveway. He got out of the car. June met him at the door. It was the right time for an embrace - short, reassuring,

then over.

"The hospital is a good thirty minutes away," June said.

Belted in and engine running they looked at each other and sighed together.

"Poor Tommy," June said.

Jake reached over and patted her hand. He was a cautious driver and would not risk adding another calamity to Tommy's life. It would take the full thirty minutes. They discussed the worst-case scenarios and possible options. They talked about what might happen to Tommy if Gramps were to die.

"It could be messy," June said.

"Messy?" Jake asked.

"Tommy's on probation 'til he's eighteen for some of the scrapes he's gotten himself into. Plus, he has no other relatives."

"Ward of the court, then?"

"That's my guess unless Gramps has designated a guardian. I'll call my daughter once we know what's up. She practices family law in St. Louis."

The thirty minutes seemed endless. Jake was mindful of the fact that he was probably retracing the final path his family had taken. After a single tear, he put it out of mind. This was about Tommy not him.

"I remember chasing the ambulance down this road three years ago," June said. "I didn't expect to ever be doing it again."

She was speaking of her husband and Jake didn't press.

The parking lot was close to the emergency entrance – a user-friendly juxtaposition unheard of at city hospitals. Jake approached the desk as June scanned the waiting area for Tommy.

"George James – old man – heart attack – maybe an hour ago," Jake said by way of inquiry.

"You family?" the receptionist asked pleasantly.

"No, but we're all his grandson has left."

"Oh, yes. About thirteen. Very strong minded?"

"That would be, Tommy."

"Just a minute - have a seat if you will. I'll get a doctor."

Jake turned into June who had come up behind him. She shrugged her shoulders.

"No sign of him," she reported.

"I got the idea he refused to leave his grandfather," Jake explained.

"I'm sure you're probably right about that."

They moved away from the desk and took seats. A few minutes later a woman in green scrubs approached them. They stood up.

"You here with George James?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"Yes - mostly for his grandson, actually," Jake explained.

"I'm Dr. Bates. The boy will need you. Mr. James just died. The boy won't leave his side. Perhaps you could help. I certainly don't want to have him restrained at a time like this."

"Certainly," Jake said.

"Some pesky paper work, first, I'm afraid. We need your names and addresses on a relative information form."

That quickly accomplished, Dr. Bates led them through the swinging doors and into ER-2. Tommy sat sobbing, holding his grandfather's hand. June spoke first.

"Tommy, we are so sorry. We came the minute we heard."

Tommy looked up and quickly stood, falling into June's open arms. The sobbing would not subside. Jake put his arm around Tommy's shoulders, feeling all quite useless at that moment. Dr. Bates silently urged them to move across the hall to a small conference room.

Through his tears, Tommy sobbed, "One second he was

alive and the next second he was dead. How can that be?"

His question was serious. There was no answer appropriate to the moment. They sat in chairs arranged in one corner. June spoke again.

"You know how very sorry we are and you know we will be here for you."

Tommy nodded and then shook his head.

"Gramps was all I had."

He made a feeble attempt at throwing up his hands.

"Not so," Jake heard himself saying. "June and I are here and the Marys - you know they'll both be here for you, too."

Tommy nodded again and looked around. Jake provided a handkerchief. Tommy looked at him appreciatively, dried his face and blew his nose.

"Now what?" he asked sounding desperate and lost.

"First, let's get back to your place," Jake began. "We'll all be more comfortable in those surroundings."

Tommy nodded. "What about Gramps?"

June responded.

"He'll be taken to the funeral parlor. They will take very good care of him until we can get together with them tomorrow and make arrangements."

"Arrangements?"

"For the funeral," June clarified quietly, holding and patting his hand.

"I don't know how to do funerals."

"Don't be concerned. Jake and I will help you take care of everything."

"Gramps and I have a joint bank account and I have one of my own. So, there'll be money for it." He stood up. "Let's go home, okay?"

"Good idea," Jake said.

Dr. Bates had a release form waiting for them at the desk and had both Tommy and June sign it. She and the receptionist witnessed it. Releasing a body was evidently a

big deal for the hospital.

At the car, Tommy slid into the front seat where he could be between his two friends - now, his only two protectors.

The first few miles were traveled in silence.

"How long does it take to get to heaven?" Tommy asked at last.

June answered.

"Most people believe it happens immediately."

Tommy nodded.

"That's good. Gramps was always the impatient sort."

June put her arm around him and pulled him close. He rested his head on her shoulder. Few more words were spoken during the rest of the trip. As Jake turned off the engine, Tommy sat up and, looking straight ahead, had several things to say.

"We are going to keep the Crossroad open through all of this - that's how Gramps would want it. It's how he did things when Gram died. I'll need some help in the kitchen 'til I can hire a permanent cook."

"I'm there," Jake said. "It's handled."

Tommy nodded. It was meant as a thank you and Jake understood.

"I want to get the funeral on the road as soon as possible. We need to get that behind us and get on with stuff."

"We'll call the funeral director at eight and arrange to go in later in the morning," June said, trying to reassure Tommy that it could be handled quickly.

Tommy nodded, again.

"I'm not sure where there's a casket store," he said. "I didn't go along with Gramps when he did all this for Gram."

"The funeral parlor will take care of all that for you . . . for us," June said.

"I'm going to start crying all over again when I go in and see Mary, you know."

"And that's just how it should be, right now," Jake said. "Sad times call for tears. They help us get through it all. Don't be embarrassed about crying. Everybody understands about that."

Again, Tommy nodded, clearly taking Jake at his word.
"Let's go on in, then," Tommy said.

There were more tears. There were lingering hugs. Tommy told Mary he wanted the Crossroad to remain open. She looked at Jake and June. They nodded and she agreed to be there.

"It's been a long night without any sleep for you, Tommy," Jake said. "May I suggest that you and June go upstairs and get some rest. I'll handle things down here."

June shushed Tommy's faint protest and they went up to the apartment. She convinced him to just lie down for a few minutes. He was immediately, sound asleep.

* * *

At eight, June called and set a 10:00 appointment with the funeral director. She let Tommy sleep until nine. Mary had made several calls and arranged for some volunteer kitchen help. Everyone loved Gramps. Help would be no problem. Jake showered. He had been able to catch a few winks down stairs.

By 9:30 the three were back on the road toward town. By noon, the arrangements had been made for a 1:00 service the following afternoon. The casket Tommy chose was far too expensive, but that is what folks do at times like that. A retired minister friend of Gramps was contacted to write the obituary and lead the service. He had done the same for Tommy's grandmother eight years before. Men from the early morning coffee table at the café were lined up as pallbearers. Tommy had noted that since they were all so old, it would be best to have twice the usual number so they wouldn't hurt themselves. Jake saw to it.

Tommy knew what he wanted and Jake and June helped see that it happened. Neither had been to a funeral

since laying their own loved ones to rest. It was not easy. Keeping their focus on Tommy seemed to help.

They stopped at the bank to determine Tommy's financial situation. The bank account - accounts, actually - were, indeed, joint. There was also a sizable trust fund for Tommy, available upon Gramps' death. With the help of the banker, funds were transferred from savings to checking so the upcoming expenses could be handled with dispatch.

By 2:00, they were back at the Café. It had been decided that Jake would move in with Tommy for the time being. June called her daughter who had several suggestions including contacting Gramps' local attorney for the Will and any custody arrangements he may have made.

At four, Tommy's probation officer arrived, unexpected and unannounced.

"Tommy will have to come with me," were her opening words.

Tommy looked at Jake.

"I don't think so," Jake said in a strong, determined voice that no one in those parts had heard from him before. Tommy moved to Jake's side - slightly behind him.

Jake continued.

"What possible good could come by removing him from the people who love him at this terribly sad time in his life?"

"It's procedure," she said.

"Will it's a thoughtless, fully non-compassionate procedure and it won't happen," Jake snapped.

She eased herself back a half step. Tommy moved still closer to Jake.

"I have the authority," she said.

"But you're short on muscles, ma'am. I want the name and phone number of your superior now and I guarantee we will have this cleared up in short order."

At that point, a tall, thin, older gentleman in a three-piece suit entered the café.

"That's Mr. Roberts, me and Gramps' lawyer," Tommy said as a quiet aside, over Jake's shoulder.

Jake went to meet him. Tommy stuck close, making a wide circle around his probation officer.

"I'm Jake Wilson, Mr. Roberts and this is June Hardy."

"Yes. June and I have known each other forever. He kissed her on her cheek. I came as soon as I heard."

He turned directly toward Tommy.

"I am so sorry, Tommy." He placed his hand on the boy's shoulder. I'll walk you through all the legal stuff. George had everything well taken care of in case this time came."

Tommy thanked him and then said, "Well, the first thing you can do is get Miss Barry off my back."

Jake explained the situation and the impasse. Mr. Roberts set his briefcase on the counter and opened it. He removed a folder and from it a sheet of paper which he handed to Miss Barry.

"This gives me temporary custody of said minor child until such time as the permanent placement, which George has specified, can be made. If you want to file papers stipulating I am unfit for that responsibility, I'll see you in court next month. Until then, as you see, this arrangement is absolutely binding."

"I guess I'm outgunned. Tommy, you're a fortunate young man to have so many loving people in your corner. I just had to make sure - for your own good. Someday I hope you'll understand."

She turned, nodded pleasantly at June, and left.

Jake felt a tad sheepish for having come on so strong and more than a bit stupid for having missed her underlying purpose. He had grown six inches taller - make that eight - in Tommy's eyes. June had watched the confrontation with interest and finally felt she had a good handle on the real Jake - his inner workings. She was pleased with what she had seen and felt. She went on to further explain the situation to Mr.

Roberts.

"This is our plan for the next several days. Our good family friend, Jake, is going to be staying here with Tommy. The funeral is set for one p.m. tomorrow. What do we need to know or do in the meantime?"

"Sounds like you have things pretty well covered. Do you have cash for expenses?"

"Yes. We've taken care of that."

"Then I won't meddle, but call me if you need anything."

He handed Tommy his card - a far more sensitive gesture than to have given it to one of the adults. With that, his stock went way up in Jake's view.

"I do need to speak with June in private before I leave."

June motioned him to the back booth and they sat. Mary, desperately needing some way of being helpful, took them coffee. Mr. Roberts took a several-page document from the folder and handed it across the table. June scanned it as they talked in quiet voices. Nearly ten minutes passed before he left. June remained seated a few moments before rejoining the others.

Tommy had questions. His tone suggested his uncertainty.

"So, I have to go live with Mr. Roberts?"

"No," June said, beginning the explanation.

"Gramps saw to it that in case something like this happened you would be taken care of. Gramps gave Mr. Roberts all the rights and responsibilities that a parent usually has. Now, Mr. Roberts has said we can continue with our plan here, and that's that! Everything is fine for now. We do need to begin thinking about the future, but there will be time for that later on."

"So, it's cool?"

Tommy still wasn't sure he understood.

"It's completely cool." June answered.

"Good. Now, who's my boss?"

"Jake spoke. "I'd say it's June - Mrs. Hardy. You two know each other really well and seem to have worked out a pretty good arrangement between you. You should only have one boss. Does that sound okay?"

Tommy looked into June's face.

"It's okay with me. Okay with you?"

"Yes. It's just fine with me."

"Then, I think we should eat," Tommy suggested. "I am famished. I know the best thing. There's just one of Gramps' pies left in the fridge - peach, I think. I'd like us to share that right now, okay?"

Who would refuse?

"Sounds great," Jake said, assuming he was speaking for the group.

Mary offered to go fix it.

"No, thanks. I think I want to do that. You guys just have a seat. You could get everybody some of the Crossroad's new and improved coffee, though."

"Sure."

Mary's tears flowed more easily and more often than her thick skin would have seemed to allow.

Patrons cooperated by not arriving during the pie break. It was eaten mostly in silence with the usual comments about how good Gramps' pies always were. Through it all, Tommy remained silent, looking from face to face, as others spoke.

Mary gathered the dishes and left the others together in the booth.

"I'm going to say some words at the funeral," Tommy announced. "Gramps said some over Gram and I'm going to say some over him."

"I think that's a very special thing to want to do," Jake said, "But I'm sure nobody feels it's required of you."

"I do and I guess that's what's important. I don't know what to say, though."

"You don't need to say much," Jake suggested.

"Maybe it's best not to plan anything. Just stand up and speak from your heart. The right words will come. When nothing else comes to mind, just stop."

Tommy nodded his thoughtful nod.

"That's probably right. Okay, now you guys need to get some sleep. Mrs. H, why don't you go home a while. You'll be able to rest better there."

"I think that's a real good idea," Jake agreed. "I'll walk you to your car."

Jake motioned to Mary with his head so Tommy wouldn't be left alone. She took June's seat.

June and Jake left the café. June had things to tell Jake about the conversation she had with Mr. Roberts. Gramps had designated June as his only choice for permanent guardian. The legal work had been completed just a week before, but Gramps had not gotten around to talking with June about it.

"Rich - Mr. Roberts - says that since I didn't sign agreeing to it, I'm not legally bound, but if I do sign, it will become legal. What a dilemma!"

"First, don't worry about that now. Like Tommy said, get some rest. Things will work out. You know that. After you've rested, call and talk it over with your daughter. She'll help you look at all sides of this thing."

"That makes sense. Thanks."

She drew Jake's head down and gently kissed his cheek.

"I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't been here."

Her lower lip quivered and she got into her car.

Jake stood and watched her safely across the intersection, and then went back inside. Tommy was sitting backwards on a counter stool still looking out the front window.

"A kiss, huh?" he said quietly.

"Between friends," Jake explained.

"Friends are good," Tommy agreed.

Jake walked toward him and opened his arms. Tommy slid off the stool and readily accepted them. They stood together quietly for some time, eventually separating when a patron entered.

* * *

The small, redbrick, colonial chapel was filled to capacity. Flowers filled every available space across the front of the room. Tommy had insisted on arriving early so he could see Gramps before the service. At that time, he had removed the tie and unbuttoned the collar of the shirt in which Gramps had been dressed, saying he had only ever seen Gramps in a tie once in his entire life and wasn't about to have him have to spend eternity trussed up in one.

As the service began, Tommy sat between Jake and June on the front row. The organist played traditional funeral selections – the kind that seemed designed to make one feel sad, as if that were necessary. The music stopped. The minister stood and said a few predictable words of welcome to those gathered.

"George's grandson, Tommy, has some things he wants to say."

June squeezed his hand and Jake patted his knee. Tommy stood, but rather than going to the pulpit, he chose to stand down on the floor, beside the open coffin. He took his time, plucking a carnation from the blanket of flowers that draped the foot of the coffin. He held it to his nose.

"For all of his gruffness, Gramps really liked flowers. I'll bet most of you didn't know that."

He placed the flower into the casket.

"That's the best combed I've ever seen his hair, but I guess I'll leave it that way. Gramps wasn't one for appearances. Gram used to get on his case about that."

He continued to look into the coffin as he spoke.

"Gramps and I had a strange relationship. I know, now, that we loved each other, and the other night we finally

got around to telling each other so. I'm glad that happened. He worked hard all his life and was mostly an honest man."

The initial thoughts were random but they flowed naturally and unhurried.

"For a lot of my life I didn't like him very much. We seemed to have this thing we did - I'd be bad and he'd get on me - I mean he'd really get on me. Now, I know that's the only way he knew to love me - to try to make me stop being bad and help me become a better person. But, like I said, Gramps and I left all of that behind us the other night.

"After our talk that night, after I was in bed, he came into my room and kissed me on my forehead. It's the only time I can remember that he ever did that. I wish I'd a kissed him back."

He hesitated and then leaned down and kissed the old man's forehead. The women sobbed openly. The men cleared their throats and looked at the ceiling.

"I'm not sure what I should be saying. My new friend, Jake, - he nodded in Jake's direction - "said to just talk from my heart. Jake said something else. He said that as we grow up, we go through being different models of our self. Like at six years old I was a different model of me than I was at eight or twelve or now. And that once you become a new model, you're never those older models again. We have to forget about the old models in people we know and just accept the new one.

"Gramps was really old - 79. I figure in all that time he must a gone through really lots and lots a model changes."

The remark was met with quivering smiles and silent chuckles, through a sea of tears.

"Well, I just have one last thing to say, I guess. Most of you people have all known me since I was just a baby. You know I've done some pretty bad stuff. Right now, I'm trying real hard to change into a new model of Tommy James. Jake and Mrs. Hardy have showed me that life shouldn't just be about me but it should always be about us. They've showed

me that there is really just one thing that's important about living and that's to be helpful to others and to make other people's lives better. That's the new model of me I'm trying to build and I hope you will help me by trying to put the old models out of mind. I'll understand if you can't, but I know that all of a sudden I got a whole lot happier when I decided to let go of the old models of Gramps and just see the new one we talked about that night. If you can do that with me, I think you'll be happier, too."

He looked into the coffin one last time and then closed he lid. He returned to his seat but stood up immediately, turning back toward the gathering.

Thanks a lot for coming. I knew people liked Gramps. I just didn't ever think about how many of you there were."

He returned to his seat with a long sigh, searching again for June's hand. It was waiting.

The minister stood, his eyes moist.

"I have preached hundreds of funerals in my day, but if I were to string together the most meaningful lines from each one of them, it would not begin to approach what we have just experienced. I won't try to add a single word."

He looked directly at Tommy, who really didn't understand his meaning.

"Thank you for those wonderful words from your heart. It's clear that we are all going to benefit from the new model of Tommy James. Your grandfather would be so very proud of you."

Tommy assumed from the minister's words that what he had said had been okay. The organ music began again. To those who paid attention to such things, there was a new briskness to the tempo and crispness to each note. If Rock of Ages could be upbeat, it was. The usher escorted Tommy, June and Jake up the isle to one of the two front doors. People seemed reluctant to stand and leave. It had been a special time they would not be able to leave behind.

Then, one or two at a time they filed by Tommy saying

whatever it is you say at a time like that - neither party ever remembers. Many of the women administered hugs - the men, hearty, silent, handshakes. It all looked to be according to tradition, but that afternoon 227 people left that chapel new and improved models over those who had entered - well, 226 for sure - Jake's position was still in doubt.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

During the next several days, the routine remained much as it had been before, with Jake fitting in where Gramps had been, both upstairs and down. An ad for a full-time cook had been placed in the paper. There had not yet been any responses.

Five o'clock Wednesday morning found Jake at the kitchen table in the apartment, sipping coffee as he wrote in his diary. It was something he had not done regularly for some time, though the fact he brought it along on his trip suggested his good intentions.

As he read over what he had just entered he was struck by the fact that it was all about nouns - people, places and things, with few comments about his feelings, desires or outlook. 'Hardly the proper contents for a diary,' he thought. The words he chose to describe Tommy and June revealed his deep affection for them - though specifically that was not mentioned. 'June is a tender, sensitive, comfortable lady. . . . Just the thought of Tommy makes me smile. He is a diamond in the rough, fully unaware of his positive potential and in need of loving but firm direction.'

He also wrote about the failure of his search to find David Dalton and described him as 'the only person I remember ever really hating - but I'm still convinced that's justified since he did kill my wife, daughter and

granddaughter right here on that cold New Year's Eve two years ago.'

Tommy wandered out of his room stretching and sniffing the aroma of the coffee. Jake closed his diary.

"What ya doin'?"

"Just catching up a bit in my diary."

"Diary? I thought just girls kept diaries."

"Sometimes guys call them journals I guess. By either name, it's the same thing."

"You write every day?"

He turned a chair around backwards and sat, his arms and chin propped on its back.

"I try to. Haven't kept up very well the past month or so. Like I said, I was catching up."

"You write about Mrs. H?"

"What a person puts in their diary - or journal - is private, but yes I wrote about her just like I wrote about you and Gramps and the Marys."

"Yeah, I know they're private. I shouldn't a asked. Maybe I should start keeping one." That was quickly followed by, "I hate to write so it's probably not a good idea."

"I got the idea that you actually like to write - you always put down great ideas - it's just that you hate to have to make it 'Mrs. H' perfect. The thing is, when you're writing for yourself, who cares if it's perfect? Just write like you talk. I'd think you'd have a lot of fun if you gave it a shot."

"Yeah! That's right. That is how it is. I like to think about stuff and if I wrote it down then I'd never forget about it."

"It's interesting for me to go back and read what I wrote years ago. It's like a very private connection to my past. A person tends to forget how he used to think about things."

"Like the new model can't remember how it was being the old model?" Tommy suggested more than asked.

"Yes, that and more."

"I think I'll do that. I'll need to get a special notebook

just for that. Oh, by the way a woman called last evening about the cook's job. I told her what we paid and what we expected - that we would work out a straight shift from six to two-thirty with a half-hour break. She was interested enough to come for an interview. She'll be here at nine this morning. I hope that's okay that I did that."

"Sounds like you handled it like an old pro," Jake said.

"I didn't figure just talking to her would do much good so I told her I'd have her cook two things - one thing from our menu and her own specialty. I figure we need to know how good she is at cooking; not how good she is at talking."

Jake smiled. "And here I've been doing it wrong all these years."

"What? You don't like my idea?"

"Oh, no. In fact, it makes total sense. I just can't believe I've been doing it backwards for so long."

"You bein' straight or you puttin' me on?"

"I'm dead serious. No put on."

Jake raised his right hand to re-enforce his words.

"When I'm kidding you, Tommy, there will be no doubt about it, okay?"

"Okay."

"What are you planning to have her prepare?"

"The two hardest things to get right are steaks - well done but not dry, and mashed potatoes - firm and creamy but no lumps. I thought a steak dinner."

"The better I get to know you, the more you amaze me, young man."

Tommy blushed and headed for the shower, peeling off his sweat shirt as he went. At the door, he stopped and turned back.

"It's like when I have a question about how do something around here I just close my eyes and I can see how Gramps would a done it. It's like he's still sort a with me, you know?"

Jake smiled again.

"Believe me, that part of him will never die. Treasure it."

Tommy continued on his way, not sure he fully understood. He didn't, of course, but eventually he would.

Jake put his diary in the drawer of the table beside his bed. He called to Tommy that he was going on down stairs. Tommy was in the shower, singing at the top of his lungs - the song went unrecognized by Jake. Singing was clearly not going to be Tommy's road to fame and fortune.

In the café, Jake found only Mary and a sleepy traveler, trying to wake up by draining a pot of coffee, one slow cup at a time. Jake started fresh hash browns on the back of the griddle and made up the white, sausage gravy. He put the night's dirty dishes to soak in the sink. They needed a small, automatic dishwasher - he'd talk with the 'proprietor' about that.

Running the café required maintaining a balance between allowing Tommy to feel in control - the boy felt that was his responsibility - and seeing that all the behind the scenes things got taken care of - ordering, paperwork, payroll, accounting.

A fourteen-year-old boy should not be tied to, or feel responsible for running a café. A fourteen-year-old should be out laughing with his friends over pure foolishness and crying in his room over love affairs gone wrong. Those were the necessary ingredients of being a teenager. Those were the things that laid the ground for healthy adult relationships.

With no age-mate friends with whom to laugh and no girls to break his heart, Tommy's life was in immediate need of a quick fix. Jake was at a loss. He'd have to count on June's assistance. She was still well connected with Tommy's generation.

* * *

Tommy decided it would look better if Jake - an adult - conducted the interview. He watched with interest from the sidelines. Her name was Maggie. She was in her mid-thirties,

single and the mother of a fifteen-year-old daughter. Jake felt sure Tommy would think that was a plus. They lived halfway between the Crossroad and town. She was eager to demonstrate her skills in the kitchen and commented on what a great idea she thought it was. Jake appreciated her self-confidence. Tommy appreciated what he took to be a compliment.

Jake served the steak and potatoes to Tommy. His reaction was clear.

"Don't let her get away. This is even better than Gram's."

The necessary paper work completed, Maggie officially became part of the Crossroad family. She would begin the following morning.

"It's like a dream come true," she said on her way out. "I love to cook. It's close to home. The pay is right and you all seem so nice. I just can't thank you enough."

She left beaming.

Tommy's take on it was amusing to both Jake and Mary.

"Geez! I've never seen anybody so happy about having to go to work!"

Jake felt a tease coming on, so he began in the typical, play-yard, singsong, fashion. "Maggie has a daughter. Maggie has a daughter."

Tommy turned a full 180 degrees to look at him.

"Daughter? My age? Is she good looking?"

Jake addressed Mary.

"Do you sense some very slight interest, perhaps, on the lad's part, Mary?"

"Perhaps a tad, Sir," Mary answered in the worst English accent Jake had ever heard.

"This is like a game of keep-away, guys," Tommy said. "Give! Give!"

Jake broke down and told him what he knew, which wasn't much but that was plainly enough to keep a grin on

Tommy's face for the rest of the morning.

June had begun working the counter and register from about 10:30 through the noon rush. Previously, she had just stayed on after tutoring. That day, being Wednesday with no tutoring, she arrived a few minutes late. Tommy met her at the door.

"I was worried when you didn't get here," he said, clearly concerned.

June looked at her watch.

"Two and a half minutes late, Mr. Worry Wart. I can only imagine how you'll be when your teenage daughter comes in an hour late from a date."

"I'll only have sons, then," was Tommy's quick comeback.

"Yes. Boys never get into trouble, do they?"

June ruffled his hair and administered a full out bear hug, which he returned - tentatively, but it was returned. Touching those you love was new to him, but he seemed cautiously willing to learn. It put tears in Mary's eyes. Jake blinked his own away.

Still mulling over her last comment, Tommy got in the last word.

"Maybe I'll just settle for a dog, then - old and neutered."

Jake and June shook their heads and chuckled. Mary walked away hands in the air. The intent of his comment had been more serious than any of them realized. He shrugged and sat on a stool. June sat beside him.

"I have two pieces of news for you."

She directed the words at Tommy but included Jake with a quick glance.

"News?"

"Yes."

"Good or bad news?"

"Good, I hope."

"You and Jake are getting married?"

June raised her eyebrows and ignored the comment, though her heart did privately quicken.

"Item one:" she began. "Will Newhouse is a 4-H Club leader. I was talking with him this morning and he said that he and the members would be happy to have you join their group."

"I ain't raisin' no pigs!" came Tommy's definitive response.

"These days it's a whole lot more than farm things. They take field trips to places like St. Louis, and have lots of fascinating branches - camping, cooking, art, writing, crafts. Here, Will sent along a brochure. Just look it over when you have time. I know some of the kids. I think you'd like them."

"They'd hate me."

He gently pushed the brochure back in her direction.

"There are some very pretty girl members!"

He reached out and reacquired quick custody of the brochure. He gave it a cursory once-over, and slipped it into his back pocket.

"How about item two?"

"I spoke with Mr. Bell."

"Principal Bell - the guy I hate more than anybody else in the entire universe?"

"Yes, that would be the same Mr. Bell."

"What about?"

Quite clearly, Tommy's defenses were being mustered.

"About gradually working you back into school."

"I like it here with you, just like it is."

"And so do I, Tommy, but it's not really what you need. You need to be with kids your own age."

"They all hate me."

"Some of them used to dislike you, but if I recall that was not their fault."

Tommy looked directly into her face and nodded his thoughtful nod.

"It would be real scary. I don't know if I could do it."

"Well, here's one idea - one plan - for you to think about, okay."

Tommy nodded and folded his arms as if ready to listen but not ready to do so unprotected.

"See how it goes at 4-H for the next two months - November and December. That's a small group. When you make some friends there, they'll be like a beginning group of friends at school. Then in January, when second semester begins, Mr. Bell suggested that you just attend three classes in the morning - one of which can be PE if you want - and then we do the rest of the work here like we've been doing. When everybody sees how well that works, then by next Fall, you'll be ready to go back full time as a regular Sophomore."

"You make it sound like it's going to work. I don't think you understand how it is there. They really hate me - even if it is my own fault - they still really hate me. They'll make my life hell - pardon that."

June looked up at Jake like one tag-team member desperately reaching out for another. He understood.

"You're absolutely right, of course," he began. "They'll all be remembering the old model, Tommy. It will be hard work to show them the new one and make them believe it's for real."

Jake's words were met with silence from both Tommy and June. Then, presently, "I'll think about it. Wait! Do I really have a say in any of this or has Bell already done it to me?"

June responded.

"It's not a done deal by any means. In the first place, Mr. Bell will have to appear before the school board and convince its members they should allow you back for this trial period."

"Bell - Mr. Bell - said he'd do that?"

"It was his idea."

"For me, Terrible Tommy James? - he gave me that name, you know."

"Yes, for you, the new and improved model, I assume."

"Mr. Bell? Your talkin' about the principal, Mr. Bell?"

"Yes. The Mr. Bell you hate more than anybody in the whole world."

"Entire Universe," Tommy corrected, all quite seriously.

June patted his hand.

"Just think about it. When you have questions, we'll help you find the answers."

Tommy sat in silence for several minutes, then, still looking at the counter top, he began speaking in a quiet, thoughtful voice.

"Mr. Bell was at Gramps' funeral. He didn't stop and say anything, but I saw him sitting on the aisle in the last row. I sure didn't expect he'd be there."

Both June and Jake decided to let that go. Tommy needed to put his own meaning to it and neither wanted to influence his interpretation.

"Enough of this down-time, guys," Jake said, clapping his hands in an obvious change of tone and tempo. "We need to get ready for the hordes. Beautiful Lady June, Salads. Handsome young Tommy, Soups. Stunning Miss Mary, table set-ups."

"And what about Cranky Old Jake?" Tommy asked, a near-smile working its way across his face.

"A well-deserved cup of coffee for gentle and thoughtful old Jake who's been slaving away down here since five-thirty."

The humor was appreciated as everyone scrambled to get the routine back to normal.

* * *

Since that terrifying call on Friday night, Jake's hate-filled, self-absorption had slipped into second place. There had been virtually no time to think about his mission let alone to plan the next steps he might take.

Tommy's words of love and forgiveness - those said at

the funeral – returned again and again to haunt Jake, partly because he knew they were true but more powerfully because they were Jake's own words turned against him.

He was forced to wonder if there was, perhaps, a 'new model' David Dalton out there somewhere. More than that, he wondered if he would – could – allow himself to recognize it and give David the kind of second chance about which he had preached to Tommy.

Tommy had accepted the concepts so easily and quickly. But, then, 'he only had to forgive a few spankings', Jake told himself. 'I'm dealing with a far larger hurt – a far larger crime – three dead loved ones!'

Jake wished that Tommy had not spoken at the funeral and yet he was proud of the boy for having done so. He wished that he had not said what he had said to Tommy about new models, love, and forgiveness, and yet he was proud of himself for having done so.

Jake could not remember a time when he had been so confused. His anxiety level rose and with it, a host of associated terrible memories and feelings. He pushed the coffee away. He had no appetite. More than anything at that moment he wanted the familiar shroud of depression to return and to envelop and protect him, to whisk him away from all that had taken place during those past ten days.

June seemed to have things well under control for Tommy. The new cook was competent. She would be able to run the kitchen. Tommy would soon have new friends. It was definitely time for Jake to leave.

Tommy reappeared from the kitchen and stood across the counter from Jake.

"I was going to ask if you'd take me into town after lunch died down so I could get a diary notebook, but you look terrible! Are you sick?"

"Just a little off my feed, I guess. Nothing to be concerned about. Let's see how I feel after lunch, okay?"

"Yeah. Sure. Anything I can do?"

He reached out and felt Jake's forehead and then his own.

"I don't think you have a temperature."

It could have been humorous. It wasn't.

"Maybe June should look at you."

"No. No June, Tommy. I'll be fine. Please don't bother her with this."

"Okay, but I'm going to keep an eye on you."

In a reaction, unconsciously borrowed from the boy, Jake nodded thoughtfully.

"I think I'll just take a little walk out back. The fresh air should clear things up."

Jake left through the front door and walked around the side of the building.

In the kitchen, Tommy approached June.

"I think Jake's back to feeling pretty sad again - like when I first met him."

"Oh. I guess I hadn't noticed," she said wondering to herself what had prompted Tommy's conclusion.

"I hadn't neither 'til just a few minutes ago."

"Really? Well, maybe the funeral brought back sad feelings from when he lost his wife."

"Maybe. I hadn't thought a that. Did it make you do that?"

"For just a short time, I suppose, but it passed. I have too many wonderful memories of Jim to let such things keep me down for long."

"You still love him - Jim - your husband?"

"He's not here to love, Tommy. I love the memory I have of him. I'll always love him in that way."

"So you're not ever going to get married again, I guess."

"I didn't mean it that way. If the right person comes along, who knows what might happen?"

"Do you think Jake could be that right person?"

"You certainly don't beat around the bush, do you? . . .

I can't say, Tommy. I hardly know him and anyway the kind of relationship you're talking about has to be a two-way venture - the same feelings from both people."

Tommy sighed.

"Guess it's more complicated than I thought."

June didn't respond.

"I'm just so afraid I'm going to lose him if I don't find some good reason for him to stay."

June understood the feeling but, of course, would not voice it.

"Well, you knew from the first time you talked with him that he was just visiting - passing through, I believe is how he put it."

Tommy knew that was right but, still, he didn't like to hear it. It frightened him.

"We don't really know much about him," June added.

"He may have a special person in his life already, back home."

"I hadn't thought about him having a life somewhere else," Tommy said, his own spirits suddenly sinking. "I guess I can ask him."

"Would you want him to ask you a lot of personal questions about your past?" June asked.

It had been the wrong question.

"I tried to tell him about all that stuff once but he didn't want to hear. He said he liked me the way I was and didn't need to know any of the bad stuff from before."

June tried again to make her point.

"And Jake is happy about you without knowing any of those things . . ."

She stopped, hoping Tommy could complete the idea.

". . . then I shouldn't need to nose into his private life either." Then he added, "You know what, though?"

"What's that?"

"It sounds to me like you're sweet on him."

June blushed, and swished a towel in his direction. Tommy took that as a good sign. She changed the subject.

"What's the soup today?"

Tommy ladled out a large spoonful and gave her a taste. "OOO good! Minestrone?"

"Yup. Gram's recipe. Her parents were 'Eyetalian'."

"It sure tastes like it came straight from the old country."

Tommy took it as a compliment although he wasn't entirely sure what her reference meant.

A half-hour had passed when Jake reentered through the back door.

"My that soup smells delicious - Minestrone?"

"Yup. Straight from the old days," Tommy answered proudly.

"That's Old Country, Tommy," June prompted.

"Oh well. It's great where ever it's from," Jake said, saving face for Tommy.

"See, Mrs. H. It's good where ever it's from."

June and Jake looked at each other and shook their heads.

"What?" Tommy asked, smiling.

"You're a joy, Sweetie," June said reaching out and pinching his cheeks.

"Well, I could be even more of a joy if you'd clue me in to what makes me that way."

It was another serious question, so Jake attempted a serious answer.

"It's just you being the natural you. If we started to analyze it or describe it, it might disappear."

"So, I'm a natural joy. That's pretty cool. Thanks."

It had not been the exact message Jake thought he was sending but perhaps it was even more accurate.

As the day progressed, Jake began feeling better. It wasn't until a little after two that he and Tommy were able to leave for town in search of a diary - make that, journal. The noon rush seemed to be holding its own, but the dinner hour had become far busier than before. Tommy was the first to

comment on it.

"So, who's coming in?" Jake asked. "The regulars more frequently or new folks?"

Tommy thought. "New folks, now that you ask."

He paused.

"Lots of folks who were at the funeral, actually."

"I'd say they must have been really impressed by what you had to say that day."

"I don't understand that. I wasn't impressive. I just talked from my heart. Maybe they just feel sorry for me."

He turned his head to look out the side window. His voice trailed off into a mumble.

"Nobody feels sorrier for me than I do, I guess."

Jake wanted to let it go. He didn't want to get suckered in to another 'save Tommy's psyche' discussion. He didn't even really want to be dragging the kid to town. He had to wonder why those speeches worked so well inside his head but as soon as he opened his mouth, it all came out differently.

"So, the Tomster's feeling sorry for himself, is he? I can certainly understand why you are sad about your loss but what's to be sorry about?"

He had said it. He couldn't understand why, but he had said it, and worse than that he was about to say more.

"Sometimes grief and self-pity get confused at times like this."

Tommy rode on in silence. Jake's mind continued screaming at him. Suddenly he wondered if, perhaps, he was actually speaking to himself rather than Tommy. Grief. Self-pity. Blame. Revenge. It was a terrible cycle in which to get caught – justified or not. He would not let go of that justifiable possibility. At least Jake had a target for his anger. No one had caused Gramps' death so Tommy had no one to vent against.

Tommy spoke again in a low voice.

"You're going to leave me pretty soon, aren't you?"

It was a reasonable question – inevitable, even – but,

again, one for which Jake had not prepared himself. It's difficult to think about the needs of others when you're wallowing in the mire of your own dark concerns.

"I'll always be your friend. I'll never be further away than the phone."

All he had were clichés so he stopped.

That made it a lock for Tommy. Jake was leaving. In his short life, he'd lost everyone he had loved, or at least everyone he could have loved. He had certainly lost everyone he needed to count on - depend on. His mother had never been a part of his life and his father was a mere, lifeless, shadow, never seen, never touched. Then Gram and Gramps. Now Jake. Life seemed very scary and perilous at the moment. Life had never seemed worth the trouble it caused and now . . . He didn't voice those concerns and Jake, suddenly overtaken with his own revelations, didn't ask.

A few miles later, Tommy spoke again.

"So, the way I get it, Mr. Roberts owns me and Mrs. H is my boss. That's all okay, I guess. But who takes care of me? I used to think I didn't need nobody but there's all the paper work and stuff I don't know how to do. It sounds like I gotta go back to school so I can't be around the Crossroad as much. Who's going to help me with all that?"

It was another reasonable question with which Jake had chosen not to deal. He had no answer. All he had was an honest response.

"I don't know but I'm sure June and Mr. Roberts will see that it all gets taken care of. That's all I can say. I'm just being honest about it."

"Can I be honest with you, then?"

It seemed a strange question to Jake from a boy who always just seemed to say anything that crossed his mind.

"Of course."

It was a sincere response. His attention shifted from himself to Tommy. He felt it happen. It was the strangest sensation he had ever experienced.

"I'll just say it this one time because I don't want to . . . Well, let me just say it. I've been thinking a lot about love these past few days. I'm pretty sure I know how it feels now - since that night Gramps and I had our talk. This is hard and I don't know why. Anyway, I love you, Jake, and it's going to be awful hard to just have you walk off. If that makes you feel bad, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that. But I had to tell you sometime and I got no idea how much longer you'll be around. I figure with the new cook, you'll probably take off right away so I had to tell you today."

By the time Tommy finished, Jake's face was well washed in tears. A new something - he couldn't define it - was welling up inside him. He pulled off the road and stopped the car. He undid his seat belt and turned toward Tommy.

It was a quiet, strong voice that Tommy heard.

"Come here, son."

He reached out his big arms. Tommy clicked his seat belt away and melted into Jake's embrace. His cheeks were damp as well. Neither spoke for a long time. It was a moment of bonding - a moment when love swelled from their hearts and flowed between them. Jake spoke first.

"This is going to sound cruel, son, but I have been trying so hard not to get attached to you. I have another life and other matters to pursue - to get on with. When my wife died, I promised myself I would never get emotionally attached to anyone else again. I could not risk the hurt from another loss.

"But no matter how hard I've tried - and you can't imagine how hard I've really tried - you have captured my heart and my soul. I love you, too, Tommy - more than anything in my world right now - and I'm just going to have to find a way to accommodate that - to fit that in."

He pulled away slightly so he could look Tommy squarely in the eyes. The panicky, despairing, voices in his head screamed, 'Don't do this! It's not a part of the plan. You

dare not make any such commitments.' But his heart would not listen.

"I promise you, Tommy, that I will not leave you. I don't know how the details will be worked out, but I am going to be here for you. I want to be here for you more than anything I can imagine."

They laughed, nervously and quietly into each other's well drenched faces. They held each other tightly again, then, eventually separated.

"Gramps would like this, you know," Tommy said attempting to dry his face with his sleeves while continuing to look up at Jake.

Jake nodded, wiping his own face with his handkerchief.

"Well, young man, we have lots of things to think about and lots of plans to make."

Tommy didn't take his eyes off Jake's face for the rest of the trip.

* * *

That evening, after they got ready for bed, they sat across the kitchen table from each other, each writing in their 'journals.' Jake was aware that Tommy was snatching prolonged glances at him. He wasn't sure why, but if it represented something other than idle curiosity about his features, he was sure it would soon surface. It did.

"More coffee, Jake?"

"One more splash would be great," Jake said, removing his glasses and rubbing his eyes.

Tommy drained the pot into Jake's cup and returned to his chair.

"Can I ask you something?"

Jake was privately amused, since again it seemed out of character for Tommy to ask permission to do anything.

"Certainly, if I have the right not to answer it."

Tommy gave the disclaimer more thought than Jake would have expected. Then the boy spoke.

“Heaven!?”

It was a single word, delivered in a crisp, clear tone that did not clearly define it as statement or question but it made Jake immediately uncomfortable just the same – not the concept but the questions relating to it. He tried to clarify what Tommy meant.

“And what about heaven?”

“You know. Where is it? What is it? Where did it come from? How do people look there? How do you get to there from here? How do you know it’s really there? Just stuff like that.”

Just stuff like that! The boy had been having some deep thoughts – the same thoughts that man had been having since the desire for a heavenly place first emerged in human consciousness. Jake’s first inclination was to defer the question to June – women tended to have a better handle on such things than men, he thought.

Tommy gazed into his face expectantly. After all, Tommy was convinced that Jake knew everything – well, everything important about life, at least.

Jake would be honest, and hoped his response would not be too disappointing. For sure, it would not be fully satisfying.

“You will find, in life, Tommy, that there are many questions that can’t be answered completely. That is something we just all have to learn to live with.”

“Not the beginning I’d hoped for, Jake.”

It reflected not so much major disappointment as mild disenchantment.

“I know, but you want me to be honest, right?”

“Right.”

“What I have to say on the matter is only one opinion. I’d suggest that you also talk to June and the Marys maybe even Gramps’ minister friend.”

“They’re on my list.”

Jake was again amused. He continued.

"Well, I have no way of knowing intellectually if there is a heaven. I can't feel it, or see it, or smell it, or taste it. To believe in heaven one just has to have faith that it's there."

"What's faith?"

The question had been unanticipated and Jake took time to formulate his response.

"Do you believe I'm going to be here for you from now on, regardless?"

"Of course."

"What proof do you have of that?"

Silence. Furrowed brow. Pursed lips.

"None. I just believe in you, Jake."

"That's faith."

More silence. Smoothed brow. Pouty lips.

"I think that's different," Tommy said, at last.

"Oh?"

"Ya. I know you. I know how you've been with me. I can, like, predict the future because of all that. I ain't had heaven do nothin' for me before so I can't be so sure, you know?"

Even more silence. Then Tommy had another more practical question. He began with a qualifier.

"Let's just say there is a heaven – just so we can talk about things. Gram used to say you had to be good to get into heaven. Gramps said that because I was so bad, I'd never make it. Gram said that you had to help out other guys and stuff like that in order to get there. She said that living so you could get into heaven was the main job people have. Do you believe that or would you believe that supposing there is a heaven?"

The suppositions made the question unanswerable but Tommy couldn't know that and he needed some satisfying response. Jake would try.

"I think there can be nothing more fully and shamefully selfish than being good, and leading an upright life for the paramount purpose of getting yourself into heaven."

Tommy's look signaled neither agreement nor disagreement. He twirled his hands silently as if to say, 'Go on. I want more'.

"What I do know, Tommy, is that I believe mankind is a pretty special and wonderful form of life - regardless of its origin - and I think it deserves to continue."

"I'd never thought about that, I guess."

"Well, that's one of my basic beliefs about this world - the one that I can sense around me. And I believe that as a member of this marvelous human species it is my intrinsic responsibility to help make life better - safer, happier, more productive and meaningful, more love-filled - for the people I come in contact with. So, when I'm being what you referred as a good person, it is solely to help improve the human condition. That much I know is useful and essential. That is important to me. I believe it is my built-in responsibility to my species. If there happens to be a heaven, and if being a good person happens to be the way to get there, fine. But if there is no heaven, I've still done what I believe are the right things during my life - things that will leave the world a better place than I found it, things I can be proud of every single day."

"Integrity, huh?"

"Integrity, yes!"

"I learned long ago, Tommy, not to worry or stew about unanswerable questions or unsolvable problems. Live a helpful life, improve the lot of others, base your life on love, and every night you will feel your reward just bubbling away, warmly, deep inside."

"So, you don't know if there is some kind of life after you die, but since you can't know, you don't spend time worrying about it."

"That's right. But remember that's just my opinion, and opinion is all any answer to your question about heaven can possibly be."

Tommy seemed comfortable with Jake's attempt to

speak to his questions.

"Well, Jake, if there is a heaven, you'll get to be there, I know that."

"Thank you, Tommy. I suppose that's about the highest compliment one person can bestow upon another."

"Some people seem pretty sure about heaven," Tommy added, expressing more than a hint of skepticism with Jake's take on it all. "Gram sure did."

"Some folks are terrified to think that someday they'll just be no more, and a belief in heaven brings them comfort. Other people just think the concept of heaven makes good sense. Don't get me wrong, Tommy. I'm not saying there is no heaven. I seldom deny any possibility. I'm just saying that I refuse to expend my energy being concerned about what to me is an unanswerable question, when there are so many other things that need my time and attention."

"I'd sure like there to be a heaven," Tommy said, reflecting on the conversation.

"Then allow for that possibility - probability, even - in your thinking. Just don't dwell on it at the expense of other good things you can be doing along life's way."

"I can do that. There's something really funny about it though, you know?"

"What's funny?"

"If there isn't a heaven, I'll never know I was wrong but if there is, you will know you were wrong."

Jake just nodded. He'd not try to push that thought one way or the other in the boy's thinking but it was humorous in a way - perhaps more insightful than humorous.

"You know what I like the best about you, Jake, besides that you showed me I was worth loving?"

Jake choked on that unexpected entry, but still managed to ask, "What's that?"

"You never tell me how I have to be or what I have to think. You just, like, float the possibilities in the air in front of my mind and let me work on them. I hope I can be like that

for my son."

Those last three words hit Jake's heart like a bolt out of the blue – for my son. It wasn't just the words. It was the intonation – for MY son, as if Tommy had fully accepted Jake in the role of his father. More amazing yet, Jake felt ready to accept that role – no inner arguments, no desperate scramble toward separation. Just a willingness and determination to love his way through whatever their future together might bring.

He looked at the clock over the sink.

"My goodness, it's going on eleven, young man, better get to bed."

Tommy grinned, closed his notebook and sighed. I'm going to like writing and talking like this. Can we do it right here every night before bed?"

"I'd like that, unless, of course, one of us is out late on a date with a foxy lady."

Tommy smiled, choosing to think that meant two very important things. First, that Jake understood he was rapidly becoming a young man and second, that Jake had his eye set on romancing Mrs. H.

"So, Tomster, are you too old to get tucked in?"

"Probably, but I suppose that's a lot like writing in my diary. Who else has to know?"

Tommy received the tucking of his life. There was tickling. There was giggling. There was the delightful flailing of arms and legs. Most importantly, there were smiles, commitment and trust. The parting kiss to each other's foreheads seemed natural and right, as did Jake's parting remark as he turned off the light at the door. "Good night, son."

Jake lay awake, trying to shake the last vestiges of his bitterness and make room for his new loved one. He still had much work to do. Tommy dreamt of laughing, tear drenched smiling faces, and, oddly, of a fine, friendly, old, neutered dog sitting on a puffy, white cloud.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was eight a.m. Mary had sensed it earlier. A few minutes after arriving, June sensed it, also. She was sitting in the booth next to Jake, across from Tommy.

She folded her arms.

"Something's up, Gentlemen," she said sounding like a parent confronting two mischievous little boys.

"Up? Something?" Jake said, feigning ignorance and looking at Tommy - both faces the forced pictures of innocence.

"What could she be talking about?" Tommy said trying his best to follow Jake's lead but champing at the bit to let it out of the bag.

"So?" June asked again, but in a more demanding tone, as she looked back and forth between them.

Tommy giggled. He would break first, but then everybody knew that.

"Well, it's like this," he began, "Jake and I have decided to get married!" He bent over in laughter and was soon on his back on the seat, holding his stomach, knees up in the air, laughing uncontrollably.

June looked at Jake, her brow furrowed and her head cocked. Playfully, she scooted away from him a few inches. Jake was chuckling so hard that he couldn't immediately

respond. He had certainly not anticipated Tommy's description of the relationship but understood that for him it represented the formation of an indestructible family relationship.

As Tommy sat up, Jake began the expanded version of the explanation. He looked directly into Tommy's face as he spoke.

"Tommy and I have decided that we want and need each other and that we want to share our lives on a permanent basis. So, I am going to find a way to stay here - not sure just what that will involve yet - but it can be worked out. It will be worked out."

"That is wonderful! Mary and I knew it would happen, of course. We just wondered why it was taking so long."

Mary brought June's tea and spoke as if only to June.

"Men are really quite slow you know."

She tapped the side of her head and winked.

Mary nodded what appeared to be her genuine agreement.

"I'll need to go back and rearrange some business things and take care of the house. I'm not sure when, yet, but when I go it will take at least a week, maybe longer. I'll begin the process from here by phone."

"I'll be okay here by myself while you're gone," Tommy said, with visions of playful 4-H girls sneaking up the outside steps to visit him each night.

"You mean you'll be okay in my spare bedroom while he's gone," June said.

Tommy grinned. He was being taken care of, even if not entirely according to his druthers. He stood up and draped his arms around Mary who had returned with the coffeepot.

"Me and Mare will have things under control here this evening, so why don't you two kids plan a night out together - you deserve it after the stresses and strains of the past few days."

It was a smug, know-it-all, expression that remained after the offer, and one which was effectively mimicked by Mary, who added a firm, dramatic, nod for emphasis.

"Tommy," June said as sternly as she could, considering the light mood of the moment, "You take care of Tommy, and Jake and I will each take of ourselves."

Jake jumped in.

"Actually, it might not be such a bad idea. I happen to know the proprietor of a small café in town and I imagine I can still get a table for two."

"That does sound nice," June said.

"Seven thirty?" Jake asked.

Tommy and Mary turned their heads toward June, expectantly.

"Seven thirty? Fine."

Jake looked up at Tommy and Mary.

"The 'kids' have decided to take you two up on your kind offer, provided you'll promise to be in bed by ten."

Tommy, his arm still around Mary's shoulders looked into her face and said: "Well, it'll be my first time, but if Jake insists I'll sure give it a try."

Mary slapped his face - a bit harder than merely playfully - shook off his arm and left to attend to a table.

Jake looked at the boy over the top of his glasses. June shook her finger.

"Inappropriate?" Tommy asked, sheepishly

Jake responded.

"Well, not an inappropriate fantasy for a 14-year-old male, I suppose, but, yes, definitely an inappropriate comment."

"I should apologize?"

"Fully and completely," June responded, not entirely sure she understood or agreed with Jake's comment.

Moving to change the subject, Tommy said, "Time for school, Mrs. H. I'll go get my stuff - right after I talk with Mary."

The apology must have gone well because, from across the room, June and Jake witnessed the friendly hug which concluded the discussion.

Tommy turned and left for the apartment, thinking – as he took the steps two at a time – that if Mrs. H. and Jake ever did get together, he'd have to start calling her Mrs. W. It was a pleasant thought but not one to dwell on at that moment.

* * *

It had been one of those exceptional days when everything had gone right. Jake was thinking it and June commented about it as they drove back toward her place from town after an enjoyable evening together. It had been a comfortable time – fun, even. More than that, they each, privately, sensed a bond – an easy, pleasant fit.

During the afternoon break, Jake had driven to Becker's Woods for a head-clearing walk. A dramatic change had occurred inside him during those past several days. His former, all-consuming, interest in tracking down and punishing the Dalton boy had suddenly shrunk to a formless, lingering, irritation in the back of his mind. He needed to think about that. He needed to understand that. He needed to determine what to do about that. He needed to know if it were real – through and through, and forever, real – or merely camouflaged for the time being by recent events.

He spent time thinking about David Dalton. He conjured up an image of how he might look. He examined the feelings that engendered. He tried to separate images of the present-day, more mature, fourteen-year old young man from the former, irresponsible, twelve-year old, killer.

For the first time, he allowed himself to imagine the terrible guilt and the feelings of remorse that must be consuming the youngster – feelings the lad would have to carry with him every day for the rest of his life. Whereas Jake's feelings were deep sorrow and loneliness – recently, well wrapped in self-pity and a sense of unfairness – such feelings paled in comparison with those the boy had to

awaken to each and every morning.

Permitting such thoughts required a new perspective – one against which Jake’s subconscious had been fighting an exhausting battle during the course of those many months. It was, Jake concluded, as if a heavy blanket of hate-driven revenge had encapsulated the real Jake.

The real Jake had never been a hater. The real Jake had never been a blamer or one to contemplate unspeakable revenge. Suddenly, all of that became part of some fading, nebulous, distant nightmare. Previously, powerful and vivid, it had recurred to haunt him every night and to drive him blindly every day, month after month, but it was leaving. He felt it draining from his spirit, acquiring its new, and more appropriate, home among the other lifeless, rotting compost there on the dank, woodland floor he trod that day.

Jake allowed himself to recall the emptiness – the vacuum – that his loss had created within him. It was terrible – the hurt, the pain, the loneliness, and the fear. It was that terrifying void into which he had welcomed the hate. Just to have it there, provided immediate relief from the devastating nothingness. He had not evaluated it for its fit or reasonableness, or for the harmony or dissidence, which it induced. He had simply – mindlessly – welcomed it for the bulk – the peace, of a kind – that its mere presence furnished.

Jake had to wonder about that void. It represented his loss, of course. More than the loss of his precious family, he began to understand that it represented the loss of his ability – his willingness, perhaps – to love. The revelation was simply extraordinary!

It brought more questions. From where did the recent love arise? Was it a force that issued out of Tommy’s being and called forth Jake’s dormant ability to love? Was it a force from within himself which, when it encountered the hapless, needy, lad, fought its way to the surface and demanded to be acknowledged and acted upon? Had it emerged from some more universal love force that had been sitting patiently,

waiting in the wings?

Jake was a pragmatist. He would accept and appreciate the fact that love had returned into his life - by whatever route - and with it, purpose, direction and his long-missing feeling of completeness. He had entered the woods accompanied by - haunted by - the specter of David Dalton. He left the woods alone - lightened of his burden and eager to engage life again. He felt a freedom and determination he had not known for those many months. A sense of connection and pride had unseated the heavy burden of detachment, disgust and fear. Jake felt needed by another, and what could possibly be more important in life than that?

There was a final set of wonder-filled revelations that had met him on his drive back to the café that afternoon. He discovered that he could think about his family without tears. He could acknowledge his loss and sadness without being devastated and debilitated. The long elusive images of his wife's beautiful eyes, his daughter's long, golden hair, and his grandchild's endearing smile, returned as comforting memories to be called up and savored rather than suppressed and feared.

So, although he agreed with June that it had been a wonderful day, she had no way of knowing the grand, and life-renewing extent to which that had been true for him.

As they approached the Crossroad Café on the way back to June's house, they noticed several sheriff's cars parked askew in front of the café. One at a time - properly parked - was expected at night but three peaked Jake's interest and he turned in to investigate.

A deputy met him as he opened his car door. June hurried to join them from around the front of the car. The deputy recognized her immediately and addressed his remarks in her direction.

"No easy way to say this. Gramps' grandson has been in an accident and he's in critical condition at Methodist."

"An accident?" they asked in unison.

"It gets worse. Looks like he intentionally drove himself in a pick-up off the cliff up at the gravel pit."

"The Crane boy - Davy - who lives behind the pit, was out there with his girlfriend and saw it happen. The girl friend called it in. Davy's hysterical. Beats all.

Neither Jake nor June could make sense of it. Things were looking up for Tommy. He was happier than June had ever known him to be. It was unthinkable that he would do such a thing. Surely, it was some kind of mistake. But why would he have been up at the pit when he was supposed to be asleep? There were only questions and no hint of answers.

"I'd suggest you get to the hospital ASAP. I'll take you in the squad car. We can be there in less than twenty minutes."

Those twenty minutes produced no answers. They would have to wait to hear Tommy's explanation if he was in any shape to give it.

Upon arriving, they were ushered into the familiar conference room. Dr. Bates, the doctor they had met earlier, soon entered. Jake and June stood to meet her.

"He's in surgery. Quite honestly, things do not look good. It's hard to venture a guess as to the prognoses - 50-50 at best."

"50-50 regarding what?" Jake asked.

"To live," she said in a soft, sad voice. "He has numerous broken ribs; his left leg is broken in two places and right leg in one. His arms are both broken. There appears to be massive internal damage - that's what is most life-threatening. Miraculously there seems to be no cranial damage."

"He's in surgery now?" June asked, really just reaffirming what she had been told, as she tried to set things straight in her mind.

"There are three surgeons working on him. He's really in excellent hands. By pure chance, Dr. Davis, a thoracic specialist from Mayos is here to do a seminar tomorrow. He's

heading the team."

"So, we just wait, I guess," Jake said, looking from Dr. Bates to June.

The doctor nodded, sympathetically.

"Any idea how long it will take?" June asked.

"Many hours – five, six, seven? I just can't say. You can use this room as long as you need it. The cafeteria runs 24 hours a day. It's down the hall to the left. Sleep on the couches here if you want. I'll keep you updated as I learn things."

They thanked her and she left them alone. Jake took June into his arms and they cried together. The receptionist entered with cups and a pot of coffee.

"Let me know if I can do anything else," she said.

"I guess I need to call Mary back at the café," Jake said.
"Is there a phone I can use?"

"Use the one on the wall by the door. Dial seven for an outside line."

Jake told Mary everything they knew and asked if she had any idea what had happened. She recounted that it had been a slow evening and Tommy said goodnight soon after nine and had gone upstairs. It was the last she had seen of him. Jake suggested she close the café and go home or come and join them if she preferred. She declined, saying being busy, there, was better than sitting elsewhere worrying. She would contact the other Mary.

Jake then called Mr. Roberts, Tommy's attorney.

Finally, the two new friends sat close, exhausted and worried.

"I am so glad you are here," June said patting Jake's hand and leaning her head against his shoulder. "I don't do emergencies very well."

Jake put his arm around her and pulled her close.

"We'll get through this okay. It's just a matter of taking one thing at a time – handling things as they come up."

The first progress report came down at 1:15. The bone

breaks were all severe, and were requiring surgery and pins. The prognosis for them to heal and return to full function was reportedly very good, however. The struggle in the O.R. was still with the internal damage. His spleen and gall bladder had been damaged beyond repair and had been removed, as had a small section of lacerated intestine. A rib had punctured his right lung, but that problem was under control. He had been given four or more units of blood but most of the internal bleeding had finally been stopped. His heart remained weak but functioning. Regardless of those positive reports, the ultimate outcome was still very much in doubt.

Just knowing those things helped, however. June managed an hour of sleep. Jake sat, watching her and making notes about things he needed to take care of. A busy mind seemed to help. Earlier, as he had been contemplating the rebirth of his capacity to love, he had neglected to consider the downside - the thoroughgoing feelings of helplessness, distress, and fear when a loved one is in danger.

3 a.m. The second report.

"He is still hanging in there. His heart stopped once but was restarted easily. The surgeons seem pleased with how things are proceeding. I am going to have a room prepared for him, now. It needs to be private."

"By all means. Private. The best of everything. Money is certainly no object, here," Jake said.

"We don't have an intensive care unit in this little hospital - aside from the cardiac unit - so we outfit individual rooms as the need arises. I have a special duty nurse on call. We're small but we're very good here at Methodist. If he needs more, we'll transport him to St. Louis once he's stable."

She left.

"Sounded more hopeful - preparing a room - calling in a special nurse, don't you think," June said, looking into Jake's face for reassurance, and getting it.

4:30 a.m.

Dr. Bates reappeared accompanied by another, very

tired looking surgeon.

"This is Doctor Davis," she said.

He shook their hands.

"I think his chances are pretty good," Dr. Davis reported. "It was about as bad as I've ever seen, but then I'm not used to fresh, unstabilized, ER cases. We're going to keep him heavily sedated for the next 36 hours. There won't be a need for both of you to stay with him during that time. He'll remain asleep. When he rouses, it will be only for a moment and he won't really know what's going on. Divide it up in shifts so you can both remain fresh. Eventually, when he finally comes around, he'll undoubtedly need you. Are you the grandparents? I failed to ask."

"We're all he has," Jake answered remaining a bit evasive.

It appeared to satisfy the doctor.

"He's in recovery and I expect he'll be there for another hour. Get breakfast or take a walk. When he's settled into his room, we'll page you."

With thank you's and sighs of relief following them through the door, the doctors left. Another long embrace. More tears - this time of relief rather than fear.

They took the doctor's advice and went in search of the cafeteria. Neither was hungry. They settled for soup and toast.

With their immediate concerns about Tommy's survival lessened, their thoughts turned back to, "why?"

By then, that it had been anything other than intentional made no sense, but that it had been intentional made no sense either. Why would he try such a thing? Why would he want to kill himself? During those past several days, he appeared to like himself and his life better than ever before. He had accepted with some eager anticipation the offer to join the 4-H club and had talked about how he wanted to sit down with the principal soon to clear the air - the bad feelings - between them. He knew Jake was staying. He

knew June would always be there for him. So, why?

"Too much change, too soon?" Jake asked searching aimlessly for anything.

"Maybe, but I wouldn't think so," June answered with a shrug. "Most of the changes are the very ones he's dreamed about all his life."

"Could it be that his mother found out about Gramps and called him last night and something went wrong?" Jake asked, again grasping at straws.

"There was a report several years back – maybe more gossip than a report – that his mother had died of an overdose in California. If the story is correct, Gramps had been notified, but I assume he chose not to tell Tommy. Neither of them ever brought it up with me. Like I said, it may be pure gossip."

"I'm sure Tommy doesn't know," Jake said. "He still harbors a fantasy about finding her someday and having it out with her."

"I didn't know," June said, disturbed at the thought.

"Hot water and hard rice," Jake said out of the blue. He pointed at the soup. "Could do as well at a Chinese laundry after a wedding."

It earned a half-smile from June and got the same from Jake.

* * *

They were on their way back to the conference room when the page came. "Mr. and Mrs. Wilson to the front desk, please."

They smiled into each other's faces.

"You'd think Tommy had set that up intentionally," Jake said.

He put his arm around June's waist as they rounded the corner and approached the desk.

Tommy was out of recovery and settled into his room at the end of the hall on the southeast corner of the second floor.

The initial sight was gut wrenching. June clung to Jake and squeezed his hand as they stood in the doorway surveying the distressing scene within. Tommy's arms and legs were in casts. One leg was elevated by a weighted chain and pulley. He was surrounded by tubes – in his nose, in his mouth, from the bottom of an eighteen-inch-long incision on his abdomen. An IV dripped rapidly, feeding a clear liquid into the back of his right hand. A respirator was strapped across his bare, hairless chest, and a modesty towel draped across his mid-section.

The nurse approached them.

"I'm Carla, Tommy's special duty nurse. There will be three of us on three shifts for a few days. The regular staff is available, also. He's getting the best care available."

"A respirator?" Jake asked, pointing.

"Not functioning. Just there as a precaution in case he experiences breathing problems."

Jake privately interpreted that to mean the doctors fully expected that there would be respiratory complications.

Tommy groaned every time he exhaled. His face, around his nose and mouth, was black and blue.

"I thought his head hadn't been damaged," June said, pointing in circles around her own mouth and nose.

"Probably from procedures that were necessary in the O.R. I imagine they'll be pretty well gone by the time he wakes up."

"How long until then?" Jake asked, having forgotten through his exhaustion what he had been told.

"His chart calls for heavy sedation for a day and a half. He may fade in and out a bit during that time but mostly he'll just sleep. With the massive trauma that he's experienced, he'd probably sleep even without the sedative. It will help keep his muscles relaxed, though. The doctors like the muscles to stay relaxed during recovery. He'll be in significant pain for some time. It would be a good idea for you to talk to him for a few minutes several times each hour.

Hold his hand, pat his shoulder or rub his chest while you speak. He'll hear you and know you're close. That usually helps. Provides a sense of security."

Whether it helped or not, it made Jake and June feel as though at last there was something they could do. They stood near the head of his bed, to his left side. Jake reached out and grasped Tommy's shoulder, gently kneading it.

"This is Jake, Tommy. June is here with me. You're going to be fine. We'll be right here for you. Your job is just to rest and heal. We'll take care of everything else."

"June ran her fingers through his hair.

"We love you Tommy. Remember that we love you."

It was all she could manage through her sobs.

Richard Roberts, the attorney, stuck his head into the room, wincing at the sight. He motioned them out into the hall. It was decided that Richard would take June home so she could rest and freshen up. He would relay the latest information to the people at the café. Jake would stay with Tommy until June returned mid-afternoon

Jake kissed June on her forehead and she left. He returned to the room.

Carla demonstrated how the recliner worked and suggested that he rest.

"June is your wife?" she asked, seeming confused by the undefined relationships.

"Not yet," Jake said, baffled by his selection of words and silently putting it off onto his weariness.

"Plans then?" Carla said trying to continue the conversation based on the misinformation Jake's slip had just supplied.

"Not yet," Jake said again.

Carla remained silent and looked puzzled.

"We're both good friends of Tommy. She is his guardian. I've been staying at his place to take care of him since his grandfather died last week. June and I are good friends."

"The poor Dear!" Carla said, referring to Tommy. "I didn't know about his grandfather."

Jake nodded and took a seat. He tipped back. It fit, comfortably. He closed his eyes and was soon asleep.

11:30: Jake was awakened by a gentle tapping on his shoulder.

"Tommy seems to be rousing," Carla said. "It's a good idea if you're there in case he opens his eyes."

Jake rubbed his own eyes, looked at his watch and sensed that he reeked. He pulled at the front of his shirt shaking his head.

"Sorry about the rank aroma."

"Don't give it a second thought. I've smelled far worse - I'm a nurse and a mother."

Jake approached the bed and gently rubbed Tommy's chest in slow circles. It seemed to cause the boy's eyes to open. He struggled to focus them.

"Hi, Sport. Good to see those beautiful brown eyes open, again."

Tommy tried to swallow - unaware that it was a tube in his mouth that was making it difficult. He looked into Jake's face.

"What you doin' in heaven, Jake?"

It was, briefly, humorous, but more significantly it was terribly sad.

"You were in an accident and now you're in the hospital. Things are okay."

"But I'm s'posed to be in heaven."

His eyes closed. His wrinkled brow smoothed. He was again asleep.

"He knows you're here, now. That should help," Carla said, trying to reassure Jake that things were looking up despite the nature of the exchange.

Jake leaned down and kissed Tommy on his forehead, then moved toward the door. "Would you like some coffee?" he asked Carla.

"Sure! That would be great."

Jake nodded, turned, and left, the picture of exhaustion.

Tommy's comment had confirmed Jake's fear that the boy had attempted to kill himself. Still, why? All he had was conjecture. Had he decided he would be too much of a burden for Jake or that to ask him to give up his life to come to the Crossroads was too much of a sacrifice? Had he decided, in his boyish naiveté, that he wanted to join Gram and Gramps in heaven? Had their conversation the night before somehow propelled him into this? Was it the prospect of having to return to school that had overwhelmed him? Guesses, and probably poor guesses, were all he had.

Finally, Jake realized that he was hungry. He stayed in the cafeteria long enough to eat a ham salad sandwich – superior to the soup by a long way. He then got two large coffees to go, stuffed creamer and sugar into his pocket in case Carla required either or both and returned to the room, only then realizing he had forgotten a spoon.

It was well after noon when he got back. A doctor was just leaving – one Jake had not met. He introduced himself and the doctor said the predictable things.

"The boy is doing pretty well, considering. Not out of the woods yet, though things are looking up. You just have to be strong for him and hang in there."

It could have been a recording – probably significantly less expensive if it had been.

At 2:00 the second shift nurse arrived – Wilma. She was an older woman – a bit more brusque than Carla, but had a competent, take-charge air about her.

At 3:00, June returned. They talked in the hall for some time. The café was remaining open. The new cook had a friend who was able to cover the opposite shift. Jake was not to worry.

After a brief time together at Tommy's side, Jake kissed June – a quick, soft, peck to her lips – and left. He would drive her car and be back by midnight to relieve her.

* * *

Each hour, each day blended blindly into the next. He was doing well enough that the tubes had been removed from his throat. On Tuesday morning, a few minutes after midnight and only moments after Jake's return, Tommy again opened his eyes. The sedative was wearing off a little behind schedule. It had been almost forty hours since he had entered the room.

Tommy looked around as if not remembering his brief conversation with Jake the day before.

"You were in an accident, Tommy," Jake repeated. "You're in the hospital in town. You're doing fine. You've been sleeping for several days. It's early Tuesday morning, just after midnight."

Tommy looked down at himself.

"Looks like I got a little banged up."

"It seems so," June said, smiling into his face.

Tommy continued to look around the room in silence as he worked to unscramble his fuzzy thoughts and began remembering what had happened. Presently, it all rushed in upon him. He looked directly up into Jake's face.

"I'm not supposed to be alive."

"We know that. We're not sure why, but we assumed that you intentionally made this happen."

Tommy nodded, wincing in pain from the attempt. He began speaking in slow, labored phrases, as if needing to say it precisely, but struggling against his still clouded mind.

"You left your diary on the kitchen table. I know I shouldn't have. I know it was a terrible thing to do but I looked at it. I wish I hadn't but I couldn't stop. I read lots of it. I feel like I love you more than anybody I've ever had in my life, Jake."

He stopped and tried to swallow.

"When I read the part about your family - how they died and all - I knew right away it was all over between me and you and I didn't want to live anymore."

Jake shook his head. He didn't understand but said nothing.

"Where's my billfold?" Tommy asked. "Did you find my billfold?"

It seemed an odd request at that point in his story, but the nurse retrieved it from the top drawer of the stand beside the bed. She handed it to Jake.

At that moment, Tommy first realized that he was in casts and unable to reach for anything.

"There's a paper inside. I put it there just before I ran off to the pit. I wanted it to be found on me after I was dead. Read it."

Jake's hands were shaking. He didn't understand why.

"It appears to be a birth certificate," Jake said without really reading it.

"You have to read it and remember, Jake, I really do love you."

Tears began pouring from Tommy's eyes. He began sobbing. The nurse moved to his side, opposite Jake.

The adult's present, sensed the odd combination of thoughts in Tommy's last sentence. Jake read the child's name inscribed on the certificate, "David Thomas Dalton. I don't understand. How did you obtain David Dalton's birth certificate?" he asked.

"When Gram and Gramps took me in as a baby they started calling me Tommy James so I'd grow up with their last name. Gram liked the name, Tommy better than David. My Dad's name was Dalton, I guess."

The boy sobbed uncontrollably for a long moment.

"Don't you see, Jake, I'm the David Dalton that killed your family."

Suddenly June understood. She, of course, had known about Tommy's involvement in the accident that had killed three women but she had no reason to associate that with Jake because he had never discussed how his wife had died. She put an arm around Jake and smoothed the tears away from

Tommy's cheek with the back of her other hand. Tommy looked away and cried out loud.

Jake stood stunned. He re-read the document, top to bottom. He swallowed hard and let his own tears flow. He folded the paper and put it back into the wallet, handing it across the bed to the nurse.

During that time, Jake's thoughts fell into place quickly. He was surprised and pleased at that. He took it to mean they were honest and sincere. He cleared his throat.

"Please look at me, Tommy."

"I can't."

"Then please listen to me very carefully."

Tommy managed a single, short, nod.

"You aren't going to understand some of what I'm about to say, but we'll talk it all out later. The other afternoon I buried David Dalton in Becker's Woods. That's the part I'll have to explain. I had let myself grow to hate that boy. I'm sure you read about that. I am thoroughly ashamed of it. It drove me to think and plan terrible things. It consumed my life. It stole my very soul. But all quite unexpectedly, something wonderful happened to me. I was able to let go of that hate because I had found a wonderful new love - a love that forced all that hate away. It was the love I found for a person who made me feel whole again. A person who gave renewed purpose to my faltering old life. A person I enjoy being with and one for whom I would give my own life in a second if that were necessary. A person I have come to know as Tommy James - the new, improved, current, inquisitive, loving and loveable model of Tommy James."

Slowly, the still sobbing Tommy turned his head toward Jake. Their eyes met and silently held each other's gaze for a long time. Jake saw only the boy he loved. Tommy saw absolute forgiveness and unmistakable love.

Chins quivering, faint smiles found their ways across both tear-soaked faces. Tommy still needed to hear it, so he asked, "We're still married, then?"

“Forever and ever, son. Forever and ever.”

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