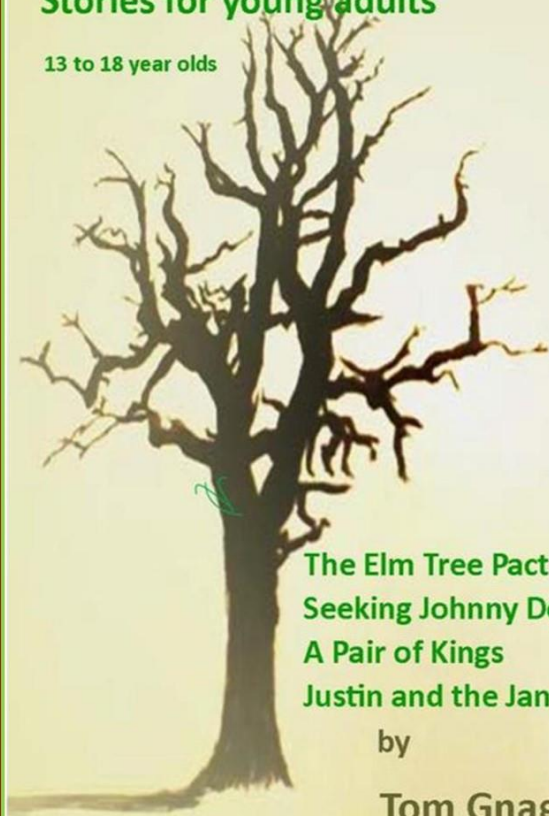


# FOUR ENCOUNTERS

Stories for young adults

13 to 18 year olds



The Elm Tree Pact  
Seeking Johnny Doe  
A Pair of Kings  
Justin and the Janitor

by

Tom Gnagey

# **FOUR ENCOUNTERS**

**Stories for Teens**

**By**

**Tom Gnagey**

**The Family of Man Press**

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**The Elm Tree Pact**

**A Pair of Kings**

**Seeking Johnny Doe**

**Justin and the Janitor**

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**STORY ONE**  
**The Elm Tree Pact:**

**Questions of Life or Death**  
**Four, teen, misfits contemplate premature ends**  
**to their lives.**

**By**  
**Tom Gnagey**

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## **SECTION ONE: The Encounter**

It would have been difficult for any one of the four to explain the origin of the group. They certainly were not friends. They attended the same high school but didn't live near each other. They didn't share classes or activities. In the beginning, most didn't know the others' names – Johnny knew Kathy; they had attended the same summer swimming classes when younger. If anything could be given credit for the assemblage, it would be the fire that broke out on Fourth Floor West that Monday morning during second period.

The alarm sounded and the entire wing of the large, old, brick building was evacuated. None of the four had any friends to seek out and cling to during the, frightful, confusion. None even had anybody to be concerned about in the face of the catastrophe. Once outside, and after some initial, relatively aimless, wandering, the four found themselves sharing the meager shade offered by the ancient though dead Elm tree on the side lawn. The school year was nearly over and a searing, early June, heat wave had set in. They sat, by design, as far from one another as the limits of the shade allowed.

“Kathy? That you?” Johnny asked tentatively.

“I'm Kathy. Do I know you? Oh! Johnny? Is that you?”

“Seems so, at least that's what people keep calling me,” he said.

If any of the others thought it had been clever, none reacted.

At that point, the conversation – if that had qualified as a conversation – died an abrupt death. None of the four was into conversing – small talk or otherwise. It had only been Johnny's surprise at seeing Kathy that provoked his

unexpected inquiry in the first place.

"I'm Lamont," said the other boy with a shrug. "Not that anybody cares, I understand."

Johnny offered an anemic nod in his direction.

The fourth – a girl – at that point the lone, not yet named, stranger, was moved to introduce herself.

"I'm Annie. Not sure why I feel the need to mention it."

Her words had not been directed at any one in particular. None of them were moved to acknowledge her.

From their seats on the parched, brown, grass, they watched the fire grow larger and more violent, blowing out glass and whipping columns of flame and smoke from the windows to high above the roof.

"Looks like a gigantic funeral pyre," Johnny said, caught up in the moment, his private thoughts again escaping across his tongue.

"What's a funeral pyre?" Lamont asked.

"It's like a bunch of brush and things that'll burn really hot. In India, or someplace like that, they put a corpse on top of it and light it on fire. That's how I want my rotting corpse to be taken care of. Fire. It leaves things clean as a whistle. No trace of the remains to clutter or disfigure the world."

"That's awful," Kathy said. "Everybody should have a good Christian burial."

"I'm not a Christian. You still going to force me to leave this life according to what you believe is right?"

She ignored the question.

"What are you if you aren't a Christian – a Jew?"

"Atheist."

"My preacher says nobody is really an atheist."

"I guess he hasn't met me, then."

"Are your parents atheists?"

"Methodists – many days there seems to be some difference. Mom's at the church every time the doors are open. She believes all quite mindlessly what she was taught as a kid. Accepts whatever the church fathers tell her she should believe. She put no original thought into her religion whatsoever. I can tell that Dad's a doubter. He attends on Easter and Christmas. Used to drag me along. Gave up on that in recent years. For him it's more like a safety net I think

– in case in the end there turns out to be something to the god stuff he at least wants to have a foot in the door. I'm sure he sends a check every month. Insurance you could say."

"I still don't understand."

"I've always been one to simplify my life. Most people use up far too much energy worrying about whether they're going to be rewarded by heaven or punished in hell. We atheists don't have to invest all that time in worry because we don't believe either one exists. Life simplified, see."

"What do you think happens to your soul when you die?" Kathy asked.

"Don't believe in souls. I think it was Socrates who invented it – decided it would be a good idea if man had one. For me it's just, 'what you see is what you get' – flesh and blood is what I see; so, there's no place for unprovables like a soul or a mythological afterlife. Strictly simple."

"But everybody knows we have a soul."

"I'm not into arguing the point. I believe what I believe. You can believe what you believe. I'm not going to argue about anything, anymore. Life is all pretty worthless – nothing about it is worth having words over, certainly not concepts that can't possibly be proved either way."

Silence lingered on for several minutes. They stared into the growing flames.

"I believe in Heaven and Hell," Lamont said at last, "and I'm goin' to Hell. No doubt about that. I quit fightin' it a few years back. I figure I've done so much bad stuff the Devil will welcome me with open arms – I'll be like his poster child, ya know. Sometimes I get the urge to cut right to it and get this dreadful livin' thing over. All people do is hurt me and all I do is hurt them back. "

"It's a sin to kill yourself," Kathy said.

It may have been as much a question as a statement.

"And why would somebody who thinks like I do about myself be concerned about committing one more sin?"

Kathy didn't have an answer. It had probably been rhetorical anyway. Annie had a question. She directed it to Kathy who, in those initial minutes, had surfaced as the authority on Christian beliefs.

"You think everybody that kills himself goes to hell?"



“A boy from our church committed suicide a few years back,” Kathy said. “At his funeral, the minister said that at his age he wasn’t responsible enough to be held accountable for what he did. He said God would make a place for him in Heaven.”

“I wonder how old you have to be before God thinks you’re responsible.”

“He was sixteen.”

“I’m fifteen. If your minister is right I still got a little time, then.”

“You thinking of suicide?” Johnny asked, immediately realizing it was unlike him to inquire into anybody else’s life or thoughts that way.

“It’s crossed my mind. It shouldn’t have. I know that. But life sucks and I get so angry when I think that I’m going to have to just keep on living this sucky life ‘til I die of even suckier old age. It’s not fair.”

“That seems to be three of us,” Johnny said, seemingly allowing himself a mild degree of interest in the others. It was an odd and somewhat uncomfortable feeling but he pursued it anyway. “What about you, Kathy?”

“Well, life stinks – there’s no doubt about that. My brother is the big jock hero – always on the honor roll. My younger sister is treated like little miss perfect princess. I struggle for C’s and never get picked for anything – pep squad, the class play; my church even turned me down as a volunteer aid for a fieldtrip for the kindergarten class. I got no friends. Never had a boyfriend. Never even been asked to make out by one of the sex-crazed lug nuts on the football team and they hit on every nobody girl in school. If I’m this bad at being sixteen, how am I ever going to be any good later on in life?”

Again silence. It was partly the silence that inevitably occurs among less than practiced conversationalists. It was largely, however, a silence of indifference.

The building burned on. The firemen with all their trucks and hoses and ladders and tricks of their trade were clearly fighting a losing battle. It had moved down through the third and second floors to engulf the first as well. Johnny was fascinated by the way the fierce flames turned the solid stuff of

the building into nothing. It seemed right.

“Suppose anybody got caught in there?” Lamont asked, the first time any hint of concern for others had been offered.

“It would be a great way to go,” Johnny said. It sidestepped the question.

“It would be terrible,” Kathy said. “Your hair would catch on fire and you’d feel your flesh burning and smoke would fill your lungs and you’d start choking knowing you only had seconds to live. That would be horrible.”

“That would be wonderful,” Johnny said, clearly energized enough at the idea that he was moved to stand up and take several steps forward. He held out his palms to see if he could feel the heat and took a deep breath of the heavy air, trying to get a sense of how it would feel to have smoke filling his lungs. If he were to have that experience, he was convinced it would be like a wonderful moment of proof that life was finally about to be over.

Teachers fanned out among the students with clipboards asking each one to sign so there would be a list of those known to have made it out safely. They were told to go home and await further information to be posted on the school’s website.

“I think I’ll come back tomorrow morning about this time and look things over,” Johnny said.

It really hadn’t been an invitation. It had been a simple statement of fact. He didn’t feel enough of an attachment to any other human being to initiate a get-together for any reason. He wondered why he even mentioned it; thinking out loud again, perhaps.

None of the others committed themselves. They signed the sheet and went their separate ways feeling no need to offer each other parting words. It had been but a momentary collection of strays drawn together by the feeble shade offered by the dead – though, perhaps, once robust and proud – Elm tree. No one else noticed the group breaking up, just as no one else had noticed its coming together.

## **SECTION TWO: The Players**

Johnny drove to Jackson Point in his late model car – too expensive and too powerful for any sixteen-year-old boy to have. It had been a birthday present from his father. The Point, as it was called locally, was a high cliff that overlooked the city. Johnny was a thinker. He often sat on the grass, dangerously near the edge, looking out into the emptiness of space that hovered invisibly there over the city. He spent the time thinking about things that were important to him – hovering space, life, death, happiness, unhappiness, the purpose of life, why parents would choose to bring children into such a sad and hurtful world, and other issues that would not leave his mind alone. Sometimes, like that day, he would drive the car close to the edge and rev the engine estimating where a car might land below if it raced off the cliff at full throttle. With a full tank of gas, it should produce a magnificent explosion.

His thoughts were interrupted by a text message. ‘John. Hope you are ok after the fire at school. Dad.’

“Do you suppose he is actually that stupid or does he have to sit around and edit his texts to make them appear that way? He ‘hopes’ I am okay – ‘I’ in his thoughts today, being John, not son. He doesn’t ask me to call and confirm that I’m ok. He doesn’t ask about casualties among the students. I could be burned to ashes and he wouldn’t know ‘til the cops knocked on the door later tonight. I ought to disappear for a few days and make him sweat. Oh, that’s right he doesn’t sweat. He perspires – that’s apparently a prerequisite for admission to Yale. It wouldn’t accomplish anything. I’d just eventually get the ‘grow up and be responsible’ lecture. His summa cum laude brain would miss the real message – ‘Tell me you love me, Dad. Tell me how you would have missed me if I’d have been fried in the fire along with the rats and

cockroaches.’ And Mom? She hasn’t even inquired and it’s been three hours since it hit the news. Can’t interrupt whatever she’s doing – might not earn enough points to be hospital volunteer of the month for the billionth time.”

He revved the engine repeatedly. He checked the gas gauge – full. He backed away from the edge to a distance the length of a football field. It seemed as though the time had come to leave his problems behind.

\* \* \*

Kathy walked directly to church. She sat at the back of the mostly darkened sanctuary as she often did when feeling down – well, more down than usual. She tried to pray. Nothing came. She tried to formulate some questions for God but couldn’t find any that seemed appropriate.

“Asking God if I should end my life is no better than asking a kid if he wants a spanking. There could be only one answer. I’ve asked for guidance out of this dark place so many times and no suggestions ever come to me. The boys have ignored me. The cheerleaders ignored me. The drama club ignored me. The Sunday school teachers ignored me. I just need to face the fact that God is ignoring me as well. Maybe that’s my purpose in life – to be everybody’s object to be ignored. I suppose the kids today at the Elm Tree didn’t really ignore me. In an odd sort of way and without saying so they more or less accepted me as their equal. It was like they said – like by default – ‘Our pile of manure is your pile of manure,’ and they let me stay and pick my spot – like one more horse fly. I wonder if being an equal among nobodies is a step up from being a nobody among somebodies. If they’re the best I can do for friends, then I have to accept the fact that I have no future. They didn’t indicate they cared for me. At best they just didn’t push me away. I wasn’t even important enough to be pushed away. Maybe the Lamont kid has it right. At least he’s found a way to get others to pay attention to him. Mom would probably see this as a chance for her to get some attention – sympathy, pity. Her ‘precious’ daughter hurt or killed in the school fire. Poor her – Mom, of course, not Kathy. My sister would be happy that she’d finally have our room all to herself and my brother really wouldn’t care one way or the other. Our paths never cross. We don’t pass a

dozen words between us during a week. If Dad would shed a tear it would be in private.

She unzipped the pocket on the side of her backpack and removed a small, hand-wrapped, foil covered, packet. She peeled it open revealing half a dozen pills.

“The article I Googled said three this size should do me in – all six will certainly take care of things. I’m sorry, God, but I’m so tired of all this and clearly you could care less about me.”

She opened her bottle of water and placed the pills in her palm.

\* \* \*

Annie took the city bus directly home. She lived further from the school than the others. Her mother – a single parent – wouldn’t be home from the cafe ‘til after five. She would come through the front door, toss her purse on the couch, empty the tips from the pocket of her apron onto the table and sit down to count them. Annie would hurry to get her a beer before she screamed at her for being a lazy @&#% kid, unappreciative of her mom’s hard work. She’d count out five dollars and push it aside for Annie’s lunch the next day then retreat to the couch, kick off her shoes, light a cigarette, and lose herself in a TV rerun she had seen dozens of times. Annie would make supper, do her homework, and go to bed early hoping sleep would come easily and free her from the nightmare that had become her life.

That evening there was a change in the routine as Annie mentioned the fire at school.

“Part of the school building burned down today.”

“When do you go back?”

“Not sure. Have to watch the school’s web site.”

That was the conversation. More than usual by twenty-two words, but nothing that told Annie she was important, or wanted, or loved, or would have been missed.

The lack of interest in her wellbeing by anybody after the fire, coupled with the generally depressive tone set by the kids at the Elm Tree, made her wonder if the time had now come.

Her fantasy was to run a bubble bath, light several candles, turn out the light, slip her shoulders down under the

comfortable, warm, bubble covered, water, and cut her wrist. She figured if she left a small stream of water running, the blood would have mostly been flushed away through the overflow opening by the time her body was discovered the next the morning. She didn't want her body soaking in blood all night. She really didn't know if it would make her mother sad. She hoped it would. She hoped it would make her cry and scream and run crazy out into the street. That's what she wanted. She tried to hold onto that as the truth of how it would be. Deep down, she doubted it, but Annie seldom visited her 'deep down'.

The razor blades were in the medicine cabinet. She entered the bathroom, sprinkled bath salts into the tub, lit four candles, and adjusted the temperature and flow of the water.

\* \* \*

Lamont had committed dozens of crimes – purse snatchings, muggings, petty theft, stripping cars, burglary. He had never used a gun though had acquired one several months before – a .22 caliber hand gun. His father, a banker, had – time and time again – insisted to the police and prosecuting attorney that the boy was just going through a phase – sowing his wild oats – and that he would soon outgrow it. 'It' had been going on since he was ten. He continued to buy his son's freedom.

Lamont had stuff – not as much or as expensive as Johnny, but a good deal more than any teenager needed. His mother had died giving birth to him. He figured his dad held that against him – and used it to explain the distance between them. It wasn't that the two of them had a bad father/son relationship – they didn't really have a relationship at all. His dad was seldom home. Since the time Lamont had outgrown babysitters, he would not have noticed his father's absence since he was seldom at home either.

Lamont's fantasy about his final moments was a Bonnie and Clyde scenario. It would be just him shooting it out with a dozen cops. In his final act of brave defiance, he would step out into the open, run toward them firing his gun wildly, waiting for the peace to come as he was finally mowed down in a hail of bullets. Just thinking about it excited every inch of his being.

He went home and waited for dark. He slipped the gun into his jacket pocket and left his house – just as he had done on several previous dry runs. This time it seemed to be the real thing. He walked the streets for some time, searching for exactly the right place and time. His heart raced. Oddly, in preparing for death, he felt wonderfully alive for the first time in years.

### **SECTION THREE: The Pact**

At nine o'clock the next morning the rubble was still smoldering. A noxious smell had settled over the area and attached itself to the trees and bushes and grass. Only two walls remained standing. Word was, they would be demolished as soon as the area cooled down. It had been determined that they were in imminent danger of collapsing outward onto the lawn and street.

True to his pronouncement, Johnny was there sitting on the lawn, arms set across his up raised knees, chin on his arms. It was one of his favorite thinking positions, second only to flat on his back gazing up into the night sky.

Lamont strolled up from behind and stood in silence for a long moment as he, too, studied the scene.

"It's really gone," he said.

Johnny turned slightly and nodded – just enough to offer civil recognition. Lamont took a seat back against the trunk. After a half hour Johnny began looking around – out toward Churchill Boulevard, back toward Maple and then across campus beyond the main section of the school building that had survived the fire. It wasn't that he appeared agitated – more like he was searching. It may have been to determine if the girls would come. It may have been to satisfy himself that they wouldn't. Either way there were no feelings attached to the outcome – at least it wasn't his intention for there to be any such feelings.

"Kathy, I think," Lamont said, hitching his head toward the slight, female, figure exiting the Boulevard sidewalk and heading their way across the school lawn.

Johnny turned to look and managed a minimal nod. When she arrived, he lifted his hand – not a wave – not a salute – he just lifted his hand in her direction. She nodded, giving each boy five seconds of eye contact before slipping



her backpack to the ground and sitting beside it on the grass. She wasn't given to the eye to eye thing so it had involved unusual effort on her part – planned ahead of time, perhaps.

Annie's approach across the lawn from Maple – from behind them – had gone unnoticed. She stopped just to the rear of the tree.

“Hey, Guys.”

The others turned to look. Each broke a quick, faint, smile up in her direction. She returned it, adding her own version of that ‘almost nod’ the four of them seemed to have in common. Kathy patted the ground beside her. Annie sat. It caused her to wonder if that might have been the first time anyone had ever indicated they wanted to include her. Tears made their way down her pale cheeks. She swiped at them with the backs of her hands but soon just accepted them as part of the moment. Nobody understood, yet nobody commented.

Lamont bit at his lower lip. Johnny began drumming his fingers against his elbows as his arms laid across his raised knees. Kathy opened her backpack and offered a partial pack of tissues. Annie took note of all those things. It may have been the best few moments of her life – others reacting to her pain, if only minimally.

Lamont repeated his earlier phrase, apparently for the newcomer's benefit.

“It's really gone.”

“Yeah. Gone,” Kathy said.

“So,” Johnny said continuing to stare straight ahead.

“His inflection may have merely indicated a period. (So.) It seemed to hint at a question mark, however. (So?) Johnny noticed that and felt surprised – intrigued, perhaps. A vocalized question implied a search for an answer outside of himself. An answer to what, he wondered, and why would he be looking for it from that bunch?

Lamont heard: “So, the building is really gone. Maybe the last two weeks of school will just be cancelled.”

Kathy heard: “So, I'm glad we're all here.”

Annie heard: “So, some people may not be so bad after all.”

Johnny heard: “So, why did we each decide to come

back?”

He was a thinker. He was seldom moved to include anybody else in his thinking – searching, questioning, seeking – whatever it was. To his surprise, he asked the question out loud.

“So, why did we decide to come back this morning?”

From the moment they had gone their own ways the morning before, it had been on each of their minds in one form or another. ‘Will I go back?’ ‘Will any of the others really go back?’ ‘Why would I want to go back?’ ‘How could that odd assortment of loser-strangers have become important enough to me that I’m even considering returning to be with them again?’

There were other individual questions but those covered their shared mind pretty well. No one responded out loud to Johnny’s question so he continued – thinking out loud the way he apparently did sometimes.

“I’m here because I said I’d be here. At that time I thought I wanted to come back to survey the rubble, hoping it would provide me with a rush of some kind – extend the one I got as I watched the inferno yesterday.”

“Did you get it – the rush,” Lamont asked?

“Sort of. Not like yesterday. When I got here it felt like there was something else. Not sure about that.”

Annie had stopped weeping.

“I can admit it. I came back to see you guys one more time. I know it’s sad for me to feel like you guys are the most important people in my life – I mean really sad – but that’s how it is. I’m not meaning it as a putdown or suggesting you should feel the same way. Goodness knows you probably shouldn’t. Last night it came to me. Just possibly, and way too late, I may have found somebody that could become important to me.”

It lapsed into an uncomfortable silence. No one responded to the message in her words.

A bit later Kathy spoke.

“I was prepared to kill myself yesterday but I kept thinking about you guys. It was like I felt a bond. It was like we should all go out together. It would be like we weren’t all alone at the end. That’s what I was thinking. It isn’t a

suggestion. It just seems that after sixteen years of life it's not right to have nothing – no one – to show for it. I dreamt the four of us were holding hands and skipping together across a sunny meadow into the darkest darkness I've ever witnessed – into death I imagine. Our faces were all smiles! We were the happiest we'd ever been!"

In turn the others each revealed that they, too, had moved right up to the edge of that final act but then backed off as thoughts of the gathering at the old Elm flooded their minds. Going out alone didn't seem right anymore. Something about it deserved a second look.

There were sighs. There were clandestine, corner of the eye, peeks at each other. Without statement, the strange bond burgeoned from the feeble hint it had been, into a solid commitment. Each one wondered what their next step should be.

Eventually, Johnny spoke. Clearly, he had used the silence to think things through.

"I for one don't want to die in a gun battle or with slit wrists or by putting my life to sleep with pills. It sounds like we are each committed to our own fantasy. As great as the hand-holding thing seems, I don't see how that's going to happen."

"Johnny's right," Lamont said. "I'm determined to do it my way. I've practiced it in my head a thousand times."

The girls' silent attention confirmed they held the same kinds of feelings as the boys.

"We could all promise to think about the holding hands scene at the moment we each do it," Annie suggested.

"That would be good," Johnny said. "It would be like taking each other with us in our thoughts."

"We should probably practice it for real so we get the feel for it deep down inside," Kathy suggested.

Lamont picked at the grass. He was clearly reluctant.

"We'd look pretty stupid out here holding hands and prancing around like fairies, wouldn't we?"

"You really care about looking stupid?" Johnny asked, with no attempt to hide his surprise – disdain even.

Lamont shrugged.

"You're right. I guess I'm in."

"Boy/girl/boy/girl," Kathy said.

“That’s the only way to go,” Johnny said rising to his feet, clearly ready to get on with it. “Sounds great to go for a romp with two pretty girls.”

“Pretty?” Annie asked. “Nobody thinks I’m pretty.”

“You’re pretty in all the ways that are important.”

She blushed. It had been a kind thing Johnny said. He realized that was not like him. He wasn’t one to put others down, but neither was he one with complements. He usually kept to his belief of offering no evaluative statements at all. Something about Annie’s response forced an odd feeling to the surface. He immediately pushed it away.

The others stood to join him. It became a scene out of a 6th grade, boy/girl, mixer. The girls stood stiff, thinking the boys should make the first move. The boys suddenly had no idea what to do with their hands or where to look or how to stand.

Uncharacteristically, Kathy organized them. She took Johnny’s right hand in her left, and Lamont’s left in her right. Annie, therefore, had a choice – Johnny, on one end or Lamont on the other. In her mind, Johnny clearly had a kind and compassionate side. She took his hand.

“Okay, then. Everybody know how to skip?” Kathy asked.

They each nodded.

“Let’s give it a try, then. One, two, three.”

She moved out. The others followed her lead. It was a fully uncoordinated disaster. Lamont laughed first. He couldn’t believe he had laughed. The others joined him. They stopped and just stood there still holding hands while the laughter reduced to chuckles and then, again, to uncomfortable silence. Johnny had a suggestion.

“Maybe we need to practice skipping along beside each other – no hand holding ‘til we get the hang of it.”

The others agreed, releasing their hands with some unexpected reluctance. The next effort was far more successful. Synchronizing their steps soon became an important challenge. Even Lamont left his self-consciousness behind.

Eventually they joined hands again. Eventually they succeeded. Eventually the activity even appeared light, and

coordinated, and joyful. Smiles burgeoned. Nervous chuckles ceased.

Could they actually be enjoying such juvenile behavior? They skipped back and forth across the lawn – continuing to practice well beyond the point of perfection. They returned to the tree winded, and collapsed against each other on the grass. Again, they became eleven. Again, they didn't know what to do or how to position themselves, mingled together, touching each other, as they were.

Johnny was taken with the fact that holding a girl's hand and then sitting their side against side could be so pleasant. The others experienced similar feelings. Shortly, they worked themselves away from the unplanned close contact as their old, discomfiting, feelings about proximity rushed in upon them.

"I guess we have a good idea now of what we will be thinking about at the time," Annie said.

"I'm glad we did that," Lamont said – "practiced like Kathy suggested. It was nice, you know? I, for one, would have never really understood without doing it like that."

It had been his statement. It had been his questions.

There were nods all around – for the first time full-out, meaningful, sincere appearing nods.

The new bond – and there definitely was a new bond – suddenly felt awkward – foreign, bordering on the unpleasant and scary. They had let their guards down. It had always been like an unspoken rule for each of them – 'Keep your guard up at all times or you'll get hurt in the worst ways.'

To varying degrees, each felt ashamed about allowing the self-betrayal.

There was one final piece of business for them to undertake. Suddenly uneasy and wanting to exit the scene as quickly as possible, Johnny brought it up.

"We should all do it at the same time, even though we can't be together. Knowing that will be very important, I think. We need to set a day and a time."

"I vote for night time," Lamont said. "That's how I've thought it would be."

"Night fits my daydream," Annie said.

"Night's a good time to take pills," Kathy said. "It will be

just like going sleep one last time, I suppose.”

“Night it is, then,” Johnny said having no preference one way or another. “Which night?”

“Sooner the better, for me,” Lamont said.

The others nodded.

“It’s set then,” Johnny said. “Tonight. Ten o’clock okay?”

The others indicated their agreement. Johnny stood and walked toward the parking lot never looking back. The others followed suit, drifting back toward their own worlds, alone again.

The hours passed. Morning became afternoon. Afternoon became evening. Darkness overtook the city.

As the time neared, each made the necessary preparations. Lamont was ready to enter a liquor store not far from a police station. Kathy got ready for bed and placed a glass of water and the pills on her night stand. Annie waited until she heard her mother go to bed then she prepared the bathroom. Johnny backed away from the cliff to the position he had previously determined would suit his purposes best.

\* \* \*

The clock in the city square began striking ten.

Gong,  
gong,  
gong,  
gong,  
gong,  
gong,  
gong,  
gong,  
gong,  
gong . . .

## SECTION FOUR: Five Sprigs

By nine o'clock the following morning the debris was no longer smoldering. Most traces of the firefighters were gone. A tall crane with wrecking ball had been moved into position outside the Churchill Boulevard wall. A backhoe was being unloaded not far away. White dust was everywhere – the grass, the walks, even clinging to the remains of the ancient Elm tree, which, unnoticed by anyone that morning had – remarkably – pushed a new, green, sprig out to meet the sunshine.

The first swing of the huge, iron, ball breached the wall at the point where Johnny had been sitting when the alarm had sounded.

Johnny flinched.

"I think we're sitting too close," Annie said. "We could get hit by falling bricks."

Kathy agreed. "And when they fall they will kick up dust and ash that we shouldn't be breathing."

"Girls and dirt. Never got that," Lamont offered, shaking his head.

As they had arrived some minutes earlier – one by one – they had quietly seated themselves, uncharacteristically forming a fairly close-knit semicircle there on the lawn in front of the Elm tree; it could even be described as an intimate arrangement – close, cozy, more or less face-to-face.

No words would ever be spoken about the previous night.

"I was thinking of taking in a movie," Johnny said. "A couple of good ones I hear out at West Ridge Mall. My car fits four."

"How much are tickets?" Annie asked.

"Five bucks for the noon show."

“I can make that. Saved on lunch money this week.”

“I’ll spring for popcorn,” Lamont added.

“What’s left for me to do?” Kathy asked.

Johnny smiled directly into her face.

“You will ride up front with me and hold this right hand that suddenly discovered it really likes being held.”

The boys helped the girls to their feet. As if by plan, they joined hands and skipped across the lawn to the parking lot. That time the scene did not end in shame, or in uneasy embarrassment, or in the finality of deepest darkness. Instead, it offered four glimmers of light – slender, still delicate rays, courageous enough for the first time to risk growing together in breadth and brightness.



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**STORY TWO**  
**A Pair of Kings**

**A desperate teenager and an isolated old man –  
initially strangers –confront  
terrifying and life-threatening dangers.**

**By Tom Gnagey**

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **An Improbable Beginning**

The old man's eye was still keen and his hand steady. His water colors were the best of his seventy-seven years. Old Charlie loved his new-found home in Green Mountain. He loved the lush, low, rolling, hills of Northwest Arkansas. He loved the friendly, accepting, residents of the small town and he loved the overflow of chatty tourists that carpeted the area from eight to eight most days that summer.

If it hadn't been for that one thing, his new life would have been Eden-like. Of course, if it hadn't been for that one thing he would still be in hot, arid, southwestern Oklahoma teaching art and English to mostly reluctant students in a minimum-security prison. It had been his life for more years than he chose to count – or admit.

The boy, perhaps 15, had been standing behind him, watching as the old man sat there on his canvas stool, painting in a grassy area just off the cobblestone sidewalk that wove its way in and around the many small shops and cafes that populated the gentle hillside that was Green Mountain. Earlier, the lad had spent time examining the paintings the old man had on display – suspended by clothespins from a rope strung between two trees. It had become the old gentleman's spot those past three weeks.

"You seem to be interested in painting," he said, quietly, but clearly directed over his shoulder for the boy's attention.

The boy stepped closer, to a spot more beside rather than behind him.

"Yes, Sir. I dabble myself. An artistic bent sort of runs in my family – grandfather, great grandfather. Seemed to have skipped over dad to me."

"In what medium, do you prefer to dabble?"

“Pastels and chalk. I mostly do quick portraits – some landscapes when I can muster the patience. You are very good, Sir. I could never get the hang of water color. Ten minutes into a picture and all I have is a brown slurry on a hopelessly warped piece of soggy paper.”

The old man chuckled while noting the boy’s fine command of the language.

“And I have problems with pastels,” the old man came back. “More ends up on my face and shirt and under my nails than on the paper.”

The boy chuckled as Charlie continued.

“I still make the occasional attempt. I love the softness – the gentleness – of the finished product. The look’s a lot like a water color in the end.”

The old man put down his brush, turned, and offered his hand.

“I’m Charlie – for some reason folks here have taken to calling me ‘Old Charlie’. I suppose the 18-year-old who lives inside my head, may no longer be obvious to those looking in from the outside.”

It garnered a wonderful smile and another quiet chuckle. The boy met the extended hand with something less than a self-assured grip.

“And it’s always been said I’m an old man living in a kid’s body. Perhaps that makes us more similar in age than one might think.”

‘Old’ Charlie smiled and nodded again noting the boy’s quickness of mind. He pointed to his carrying case.

“You’ll find a few pastel sticks in there. A sketch pad as well. Go at it if you like. It is a great day to be an artist here in the Ozark Mountains.

“Really. You sure?”

The old man looked at the boy over the top of his half-lens glasses.

“I don’t say what I don’t mean.”

“Sorry, Sir. I didn’t mean it as a put down or anything. Just not used to running into such generous people.”

Although the response had opened many questions, Charlie went back to painting. It was a rendering of a nearby, low, brown rock, wall and white trellis adorned with the green

leaves and purple flowers of the morning glory plant. From the hanging pictures, it was clearly one of his favorite subjects – a half dozen, each done from a different angle.

The boy, who had offered no name, found the items he required and took a seat on the grass – cross-legged to the side and slightly forward of the old man. Twenty minutes passed. Several tourists paused to look at the display and watch the artists at work – apparently preferring that to making purchases. Charlie engaged them in conversation but never pressed toward a sale. The boy busied himself and kept his words to himself.

“Well, this is pretty much what I can do,” he said standing and offering the pad to the old man.

Charlie nodded, put down his brush, and accepted it. He studied the piece from close up and from arm’s length.

“You have a real talent, young man. Do you have a real name as well?”

“Alexander. Alex. I prefer Al.”

“This is truly an amazing rendering of the old man most folks probably see when they look at me.”

Al moved closer and pointed to the eyes; in the drawing, they were peeking out over the top of the glasses.

“I tried to show the 18-year-old in the eyes. It’s like a youthful pathway into your inner being.”

“And you accomplished that with great skill. I admire your talent.”

“Really? I mean I guess you mean it or you wouldn’t have said that – like you said a while back.”

It was an awkward moment for the lad. It provided a refreshing glimpse backward for the old man. Adolescence was rightfully a time of trial and error. Looking back, it was usually remembered as a wonderful time of growth and the acquisition of new and necessary skills. At the time, however, it often felt like one endless period of embarrassment and incompetence.

“Sign it and pin it up on the line. Maybe we can get you a sale.”

“Oh, no, Sir. I intended it as a gift for you – for your kindness and conversation and such.”

“My kindness and conversation – and such – come with

no expectation of payment. Those things are always free. I'm certain if, later on, I want such a piece, you will be able to create another."

"I'm not sticking around. Sort of on a backpacking trip around the area."

"I see. Too bad. You could probably do quite well here, doing portraits of the tourists."

"You think? Sorry, there I go again. Not used to the honesty thing. You'll need to forgive me about that."

Clearly, the boy had enough misgivings about himself to keep half a dozen teenagers in a constant state of embarrassment. Charlie would not press it. He was a gentle man with a non-intrusive, live and let live, philosophy. It had been a bad idea, anyway, hinting that the boy might stick around. The last thing Charlie needed in his life at that moment was a youngster – well, anybody at all, for that matter. With his own safety and wellbeing in jeopardy, as it was, he had no business involving anybody else.

"You live here, I guess?"

It had been a question from the boy. His first real attempt to initiate conversation.

"I do. Have two rooms over the Photo Shop at the top of the hill on Spring Street."

"I haven't been up that way, yet. Just arrived. Stayed the night down along the creek. My clothes stink like my campfire."

Compared to earlier, it was like a barrage of chatter. The boy was lonely. Charlie wondered how long he had been on his adventure. He wondered why, hoping it was not an involuntary affair like his own. He sensed the boy had more immediate needs than smoke-free duds.

"About this time of morning I usually order out breakfast from the Hillbilly Café on up around that bend over there. If you'd be willing to go pick it up, I'd gladly spring for whatever you might want."

"I'll be glad to do it. But like somebody I recently met says, 'I won't take pay for just helping out.'"

It was an interesting extension of what Charlie thought he had said.

"That 'recently met somebody' also says it is impolite to

refuse hospitality when offered in friendship.”

“That ‘body’ seems to have a saying for all occasions. Thank you. I appreciate it. Tell me how we do this.”

“I give you a twenty-dollar bill. You get me the number two breakfast – 6.99 with tax and coffee. That leaves you 13.01 for something you like. That’s how we do it.”

“What if I just take off with the twenty and never come back?”

“Are you going to take off with the twenty and never come back?”

“No.”

The old man continued.

“Then why do you ask? In all of my 18 years (the boy grinned) I’ve learned that you have to trust folks until they prove they can’t be trusted. Otherwise life among others becomes a terrible burden.”

“I guess I’ve never been around a person like you. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

That few minutes extended into thirty. Still Charlie felt no concern. Al was a good boy.

Soon after, he came trotting down the hill cutting across the grass in his effort to save all of the final fifteen or twenty seconds that might achieve.

“I’m sorry for the delay. Hope you didn’t think I’d just taken off. There was a girl up there – my age, pretty, and . . .

“No further explanation is required. I do remember being fifteen and how mindlessly helpless I became in the presence of a pretty girl.”

With a sheepish shrug, he handed over one of the two Styrofoam containers. It was the wrong one of course so they made the exchange.

“I got the food after talking to her, so it’s still hot. Her name is Marilou. Her father owns a music shop.”

Charlie nodded and they sat and ate. The old man savored each bite, taking his time as he enjoyed the surroundings – nature’s vivid colors and the cool of the shade provided by the two, tall, ancient, oaks. Al scarfed his down. He clearly hadn’t eaten for some time. Charlie felt the need to know more about his story. Even more, however, Charlie felt the need for the boy to move on out of his life at the earliest



possible moment. He couldn't allow that, of course.

It was why he had ended up teaching at the prison – so many young men needed guidance and a chance to sort things out and get their lives ship shape so they could face the world with at least some renewed possibility of success. Charlie believed he had failed with his own son, so tried, in his own way, to make that right by working tirelessly and patiently with the sons of other men who had obviously done an even poorer job.

A few weeks earlier, when it first became obvious to the old man that he had to flee his previous setting, he returned to Green Mountain, the former site of a young artist's workshop he had attended several summers as a teenager. He remembered it as a safe and happy place. Although it might well be a temporary stop-over, he was glad he had returned for however long it might last. Now, what was he to do about Al, his newly encountered excess baggage?

Al suddenly realized how it must have appeared – his finishing his meal so quickly. He attempted some damage control.

"I guess I was hungrier than I thought. Hiking works up the old appetite."

"I can imagine," Charlie said trying to play down the whole thing.

Al moved on to change the topic.

"Sorry I stink so. I did wash up in the creek this morning. Had no soap. Guess I should have left my clothes on when I jumped in. They might have got cleaned up some, too."

"Where did you camp last night?"

"Just north of the gap where the creek cuts between the two hills as it flows south. Looks like there used to be some sort of campground or compound there – rock foundations, a well, things like that."

"Used to be an artist colony. During the winter a dozen or so seasoned artists did their things and then during the summer they held a workshop for young painters and sculptors. Kids came from hundreds of miles away."

The boy's expression dimmed. His shoulders slumped. He offered no explanation and none seemed obvious. He

spoke.

“I’d like to experience something like that. Boys and girls, I suppose.”

“I suppose,” Charlie said again amused at the lad’s hormonally driven thoughts even with the sudden dip in his mood.

“Stick around a while and you and I can have our own summer art colony – I’ll help you with water colors and oils and you can help me with pastels.”

Charlie was as surprised at the invitation as the boy was.

“I don’t understand you,” the boy said. “I don’t mean that in a bad way but I don’t. Somehow you knew I was hungry so you fed me. Now you’re offering to teach me. You don’t know me. I could be a murderer on the lam. I could be a runaway hiding out from my excessively controlling parents. I could have escaped from a juvy center where I was doing time for beating up old men. Your trust thing sounds good but I’d think it would get you into huge trouble.”

“You planning to beat me up?”

“No!”

“Okay, then. My trust thing seems to have worked at least one more time.”

The boy shook his head, obviously exasperated.

“I got no place to stay and don’t say I can stay with you. The last thing an old – well a man your age needs, is a teenager. It was bad enough trying to get along with folks my parents’ age. You and I would probably drive each other nuts.”

“Almonds or cashews?”

“I’m serious!”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to minimize your situation.”

Charlie turned in his seat to face the boy, square on, where he sat on the grass.

“Several things seem obvious to me, Al. You are too young to have parental permission to be on the kind of adventure you have described. So, without that, you are most likely running away from something. You are out of money or you would have fed yourself when you first got hungry. You really aren’t the camper slash backpacker type or the aroma of

wood smoke on your clothes would not bother you. Your excellent English, your pursuit of art, and your penchant for cleanliness lead me to believe you come from an upper middle class family, which includes a strong female figure. Whatever propelled you into this moment must have been of the most serious nature – so serious you believe you could not face it back wherever home is. You are a basically caring – loving, even – person as demonstrated by your concern about my welfare regarding the implementation of my proposal.”

The boy had been looking Charlie in the face as he listened. He averted his eyes toward the ground as he responded.

“You’re good. It’s all like that. What are you going to do?”

“I told you. The summer art thing.”

“You’re a grown up. Don’t you have to turn me in or something?”

“Is that something you want me to do?”

“Hell no. Sorry. I usually only swear around my guy friends.”

“I think that our first order of business is for us to see if we can get comfortable with each other. That takes a little time. We’ll ‘hang out’ as I understand your generation phrases it. As we grow to trust each other we will probably begin to share things. We’ll just see where it all leads. I assume you don’t think it wise to let your family know you are safe.”

“That’s right. Can’t do that.”

“I’ll trust you on that. How about if we do a day by day thing between us? No long-term commitment.”

“You mean so you can throw me out whenever you want to.”

“I’m sorry if it sounded that way. I meant that each evening during the first week or so we can reconsider the arrangement and determine the appropriate next step or steps.”

“I can live with that but all this seems to be on you.”

“I’m the grown up. That’s the way it should be.”

“I can’t do it that way. I’ll have to find ways to pull my own weight.”

“Then let’s consider that our third step.”

“Third? I don’t understand.”

“First, is our agreement to try each other out for a while. Second, is for you to locate my place, take a shower, wash your clothes and find a corner for your sleeping bag.”

“I see. I don’t know. Okay, I guess. One day to begin with, right?”

Charlie nodded.

“Go on up past the café. Perkins Photos. Left side of the street. Steps up to my place are in the rear. Door is not locked. Make yourself at home. When you feel presentable, come back and we will move on to step four.”

“What’s step four?”

“I have no idea. Be thinking about it.”

The boy gathered up his backpack and left. The old man sighed wondering what in the world he had just done to himself – and to the boy, should things begin falling apart.

Nearly thirty-five years earlier Charlie and his adult son, Thomas, had a fatal falling out. They had never gotten along well, but what happened became the final straw. Charlie’s father, George, had started and built a very successful, short haul, trucking company back in the mid-1940s, eventually running several hundred local trucks in the Kansas City area. After he finished college, it had been passed on to Charlie. When Thomas finished his accounting degree, Charlie brought him into the business. After several years, he discovered his son had been systematically stealing from the company bringing it near the point of insolvency. Just prior to that, Charlie had lost his wife. In his deep sorrow over that loss and the bitter disappointment over his son’s betrayal he deeded the business over to Thomas and left, never again having contact with the family. Eventually, he settled into his position with the prison where he had remained, enduring life day by day.

Several months earlier, Charlie had journeyed back to his home territory feeling the need, as old men often do, to revisit his roots. It had been precipitated by a fully unexpected birthday card from Thomas and an invitation to visit. The morning after he arrived there, he learned that his son had been killed that very morning and the police were handling it

like a premeditated murder. It was more than he could take so he cut his trip short. Upon returning to Oklahoma he learned through a friend in law enforcement that he, Charlie, had become the primary suspect in that murder. He hadn't learned the specifics of the evidence but understood he had to leave and get lost until things were cleared up. If not accomplished by the authorities, then he would need to launch his own investigation. Regardless of his innocence, he was a wanted and hunted man.

He fled to Green Mountain where he subscribed to a Kansas City paper so he could follow the investigation. It was somewhat familiar territory and held fond, safe, memories. It was out of the way and certainly would not be on a list of obvious places in which he might seek sanctuary. He could earn what little money he would need selling his paintings. He converted his considerable savings into cash and took it with him. His bank account would continue to receive the electronic transfer of his social security and be available once the predicament passed. There could be no bank accounts, credit card purchases, or utilities in his name until the problem was resolved.

The evidence against him, as he had come to understand it, looked cut and dried. Items established as belonging to him had been found at the scene. The murder weapon bore his fingerprints. Not possible and yet that was the evidence. He waited hoping modern day forensics would find ways of discrediting it. There was additional family related turmoil being reported but he chose to ignore it. Beyond his son, he didn't know how the family tree had grown.

In the meantime, he hid there on the streets of Green Mountain, finding himself exceedingly happy and content – except for that one thing.

As was his habit, at noon he packed up his things and returned to his rooms. Before going upstairs, he dropped off his newest painting at the photo shop – it maintained a rotating display of a dozen of his pictures. Sales went toward his rent.

At the top of the stairs he opened the door, quietly, suspecting the boy might have fallen asleep to make up for what he assumed had not been restful nights in the wild. He

heard him sobbing. So as to not cause embarrassment about it, Charlie clattered about and called out.

“Just me, Al. I failed to tell you I come home at noon for a sandwich and a nap.”

Al was in the front room – the bed and living area. Just inside the door to the rear was the kitchen with a small utility/bathroom off to the south.

As Charlie made his way forward, Al moved to wrap himself in a towel.

“My clothes aren’t quite dry yet. I was coming back as soon as they were.”

“Worked out fine then. Time for a sandwich and fruit.”

He managed a quick glance at the boy’s face. Al’s attempt at drying his tears had been only partly successful. Charlie made no mention of it, but did observe the newspaper open on the floor beside where the boy had been sprawled out on his sleeping bag.

“I have luncheon meat or peanut butter – crunchy variety. None of that smooth and creamy stuff. I like to fight a sandwich and show it whose boss.”

Charlie stashed his things in a corner and returned to the kitchen. Al followed shoring up his make shift garment.

“Peanut butter sounds good to me. Let me make them. What kind do you want?”

“I’ll have the same. I like butter on one slice and peanut butter on the other.”

“Never heard of such a thing. Like a PB&B, I guess.”

Charlie smiled and nodded.

“Up there in that cupboard,” Charlie said pointing. “Silverware in that drawer. The dishes you’ll find on that roll of paper towels.”

Al managed a nod and quick smile and went about the tasks.

“Milk or lemonade?” Charlie asked opening the refrigerator.

“Milk, please.”

He shrugged.

“The ‘please’ is mom’s doing – that strong female you spoke of.”

Again, his face turned sad and tears seemed imminent.

“A tough time, I assume,” Charlie said. “I’m here if there are things to talk about.”

The boy nodded and turned slightly to hide his quivering lower lip.

Charlie poured two glasses of milk and sat them on the little round table. He pulled out one chair and took a seat.

“Apples and oranges in the drawer at the bottom of the refrigerator. I’ll have an apple – please. I had a mom, too.”

Al turned his head toward Charlie and offered a smile, acknowledging the intended humor. Soon they were enjoying lunch

“No limits here on seconds or thirds. I don’t want you to go hungry. As I recall lads your age are typically on a three hour feeding schedule.”

“Pretty much. You called me fifteen down there. How did you know? I’ve always been small for my age.”

“Your body may be smallish but your brain is anything but that. I guess I averaged the two together and came up with fifteen.”

“That’s funny. You always seem to see the humor in things. I like that. I’m not used to it but I think I could get used to it.”

Silence overtook them. Charlie wasn’t about to fill the moment with idle chatter in case whatever was weighing so heavily on the boy might find its way to the surface.

“What would it take for you to kick me out?”

“That seems to be an odd question, but I sense it is an honest one.”

“It is.”

“Why don’t you just say what’s on your mind and we’ll skip that ‘what if’ stuff, okay? I can’t abide with idle conjecture.”

“I don’t talk about personal stuff – not even to my friends.”

“That’s up to you, of course.”

“I didn’t mean I wouldn’t. I was just supplying some background so when you see how bad I am at it you’ll understand.”

“Point noted.”

“For one thing, I’m disappointed about the art

workshop. I knew about it and figured if I showed up I'd find a way to get in and somehow pay for it. Looks like it hasn't been here for lots of years. That I didn't know."

"You weren't shedding tears over a missed opportunity to slap paint on a piece of canvas, Charlie said, pushing just a bit."

Their eyes met across the table and the look lingered on in silence for some moments.

Al cleared his throat,

"They say I killed my father. I didn't. I think I know who did but can't prove it and even if I could he'd likely kill me before I could do it."

"My, my! That certainly is something to spill more than just a few tears over. I am so sorry for your loss, son, and the predicament in which you find yourself."

He wanted to reach across the table and take the boy's hands in his but wasn't sure if such a gesture would be acceptable so he didn't.

"We hated each other's guts but still he was my dad. I do feel bad – worse than I ever figured I would. It's awful to think my mom believes I did it. She screamed it at me before I left. Dad couldn't stand it that I refused to be, as he put it, groomed to take over the family business. I want to be an artist and a teacher. He said that was below my station. My family is pretty rich, I guess. I always had more stuff than I wanted and less attention – love, maybe – than I thought I deserved. We were a distant bunch of people who just happened to mingle around under the same roof – at least that's how it seemed to me."

"I'm not sure what to say, Al. You seem to be reacting in a perfectly normal fashion if that's of any consolation. I assume the authorities are looking for you?"

"I'm sure they are. A cop car was coming up the drive as I was crawling out my bedroom window."

"How long ago was that?"

He counted on his fingers.

"This is Monday so it was last Tuesday. I've been walking by night, sticking to back roads. I caught one long ride, unnoticed in the back of an open truck – probably half the distance. I had this place in mind all the way. It felt so good



when I got here last night. I'd spent all my money. Figured I'd come into town this morning and find some artist who could tell me about the workshop. You were the first one I came upon. I got caught up in your work. It is so . . . it all just flows like it belongs together. The forms; the colors; the whole of it. Well, you know how things transpired from there."

Charlie nodded. Al continued.

"I have to thank you for all this. You do accept thanks, don't you?"

"I do and I appreciate it. I believe we just defined number four."

"And that is . . .?"

"Get ourselves up to date on the reality of your situation. Perhaps a newspaper from your home town will be a good place to start. The news stand here has papers from all over the country – to meet the needs of the tourists."

"I found lots of it in the paper you have in the front room."

"Kansas City?" Charlie asked, puzzled at the odd coincidence.

"Yes, Sir. Family's been there since the turn of the last century."

The old man became quiet. The boy allowed it but didn't understand. He poured more milk for himself. Charlie waved off the offer of his own refill with a shake of his head and quick smile.

"May I ask about your family business?"

"Transportation. Hundreds of employees. A family company like forever, I guess."

"In Kansas City."

"Yes, Sir."

The boy's face suggested his puzzlement at the line of questions.

"How did you come to know about this place and the art colony?"

Al's face brightened far beyond what Charlie had yet seen. Al removed his wrist watch and pointed to the engraving on its back surface.

"It belonged to my Great Grandfather. I'm told he was an outstanding artist at my age and you can see that from the

inscription. It says he won 'Best of Show' at the Art Workshop's final exhibition at the end of the second summer that he was here. See. "To William C. King, Best of Show, August, 1949, Green Mountain Arts Colony." I've always treasured this watch. My grandfather gave it to me on my 13th birthday. I guess he got it from his father – that would be the old William C. Dude. He took me aside and explained it was coming to me because he knew it wouldn't mean anything to my father. He was right, of course. Unless it smelled of diesel and had air horns dad wouldn't have looked twice at it."

Tears began flowing down the old man's cheeks. Al was uncertain how to react.

"If I said something I shouldn't have, I'm very sorry. Is there something I can do?"

At that point the old man did reach across the table and he did take the boy's hands in his.

"Old people often cry at wonderful news, son. It is something you said but it is all wonderful. Here, look at my watch."

He removed it and handed it to the boy.

"It's exactly like mine."

"Read the inscription."

"To William C. King. Best of Show. August, 1948. Green Mountain Arts Colony."

Al looked across the table, clearly puzzled. He compared the two inscriptions.

"1949. 1948. I need an explanation, Charlie, Sir."

"Let me begin by offering a clue. I go by my middle name – Charles."

"Okay, and Charlie's a nickname for Charles. If you are William Charles King, you are my great grandfather. Are you my great grandfather?"

"It certainly looks that way, great grandson. It certainly looks that way."

They stood and embraced. They allowed their tears to flow freely. Number Four would just have to wait for Number Wonderful to find its rightful place between them.

///

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Love Happens**

There were lifetimes to talk about. They packed some cold drinks and walked to Charlie's favorite spot along the creek. The narrow stream fell some ten feet over a stretch of twenty yards. The water babbled, in the storybook sense of the term, and bubbled sparkling white as it swished its way among the outcroppings of brown, Ozark, sandstone. They sat back against a fallen tree trunk on the rise above the stream, cooled by the breeze and shaded by the trees. It felt odd to Charlie, not having his paints and such with him. It felt wonderful having his great grandson beside him.

During their walk, Charlie had begun presenting the early family history as he had learned it and lived it. He recalled anecdotes about each of the people, hoping to help them come alive for the boy. He told of things up to, but just short of, his own recent dilemma with the law. He was surprised at how long he spent talking about his son, Thomas (Al's grandfather), and the problems that arose between them. He had never stopped loving him but he had allowed his disappointment to close the door between them. As is so often the case, he wished he hadn't done that now that he was dead.

Al recalled what he could of the more recent history. Charlie's son, Al's grandfather (Tom), and his grandmother (Alice) had one son, his father, Joel. Alice died soon after the birth and Tom remarried. Several years later, he and his second wife had a son, Burt. Joel and his half-brother never got along. Burt was contentious, always feeling like a second fiddle to Joel. As teens they had terrible fights some requiring hospitalization of one or the other. Al was his mother and father's only child. Burt had no family. As Al reported it, none of the members of the extended family seemed close – none

of them seemed to even like each other. Charlie hoped that hadn't begun with his walking out on Tom.

The business had flourished and the family had become wealthy. Al attended a private day academy and was consistently on the honor role. He liked learning. He hated the academy with its out dated traditions, uniforms, and all boy policy.

"Do you feel comfortable relating the circumstances of your father's death?" Charlie asked making no attempt to hide his clear hesitation.

"I guess. It was that blow from a blunt object that TV shows always talk about. We live in a huge house on three acres enclosed by a tall, stone wall. There's a locked gate with security officers on duty 24/7. When he couldn't sleep, Dad liked to walk in the small stand of timber behind the house. Early last Tuesday morning he was found dead in among the trees. He'd been hit on the back of his head the cops said. I shiver when I think about it."

"I can imagine. May I ask why you seem to be the main suspect?"

"I wasn't in my room when Mom went to tell me about Dad. I'd snuck out to meet a girl at midnight. She stood me up so I had no alibi. Later I found out her parents had caught her leaving so it wasn't like she really stood me up, I guess. She gave her folks some other story to protect me. Anyway, even when she changed it to how things really had been planned, nobody believed her – thought she was just trying to protect me."

"There must have been more than that?"

"Dad and I had one of our yelling matches earlier in the day. I guess I said I wanted to kill him and told him he better keep his room locked at night or he'd get his head bashed in. They undoubtedly found the stuff like that I'd written in my diary, too. Dad had a terrible temper. When I misbehaved or did any little thing wrong, I got a beating – and I don't mean a spanking on my butt, I mean fists to my midsection and back and face. Sometimes it went on so long I prayed he'd knock me out so the pain would stop. Several times a term I'd miss a week of school while the bruises healed. He'd say he was sorry afterward but since he kept on doing it I never believed

him. He'd try to make up by buying me stuff. I'm fifteen and I already have a fifty-thousand-dollar car sitting in the garage at home. He didn't know squat about being a dad but then I guess I didn't know squat about being a son, either."

"And your mother didn't intervene?"

"I never saw him hit her but I saw the evidence lots of times. She was as helpless about it as I was. I can't tell you how many times I planned to run away but was smart enough to know a kid can't survive by himself. This time, though, I didn't feel like I had any choice. Things happened really fast and I didn't have time to plan well – pack clothes or get money."

"You indicated you suspected somebody else."

"Uncle Burt. He is just a horrible human being. He has no conscious. Dad told stories about terribly cruel things he did to insects and little animals when he was a boy. I always figured his brain had been just been put together wrong – more like an animal than a human being. Dad never allowed me to be alone with him. I never wanted to be."

"Do you see some motive in all of this?"

"Just that Burt always hated him, I guess. It can't be to gain control of the company because that comes to me not him – dad showed me the will when I turned thirteen. I told him I didn't want any part of it and things really went downhill between us after that. I pleaded with Mom to send me away to a boarding school some place far away. As much as I hate rules and being bossed around I would have even settled for a military academy. Dad wouldn't allow it."

"I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am that life has been so difficult for you. I assume that bruise I noticed on your lower back was left over from you father's hand."

"Fist! Monday night. It's what started the yelling match. For the first time I stood up to him. I even tried to fight back but I'm not much of a fighter and that didn't last long. He is – was – an athletic man, strong and well-muscled. Still ran five miles every morning and did the weights thing every evening."

The boy grew silent and looked away toward the swirling water. They sat there in that fashion for some time. Eventually, eyes still forward, Al spoke.

"I hated him more than anything in the world but I'm

sorry he's dead. Nobody should die like that. I guess I even love him if that can also be. That came as a big surprise to me, I can tell you that."

He turned back toward Charlie.

"I've been crying a lot. I've always cried easily. This time I can't figure out what's causing it. Because he's dead. Because of how I treated him. Because I hated him."

"Or, maybe because you are alone. Bad as it was you did have a place and were provided for. But recently . . ."

Al nodded.

"That could be. Life has been really scary this past week. I feel so helpless. I'm sorry for Mom, too. I suppose she loved him or she wouldn't have stayed with him."

"And she loved you."

"Yeah. I suppose."

"What do you know about your Grandfather – Thomas – recently?"

"Nothing, really. Never see him. Never really got to know him very well. He didn't seem to like kids. He lives across town in the old family home. His second wife died a few years ago. I had to go to her funeral. First one I'd ever been to. Funerals are awful things – at least that one was."

Charlie chuckled quietly. It was out of place but the boy's take on funerals was identical to his own. It struck a humorous chord.

"I'm sorry for that. It was just how you phrased your reaction to funerals. Ditto for me."

It was worth a nod and quick, if short lived, smile from the boy.

Charlie took a deep breath and began speaking.

"Well, no good time for this but you need another piece of information – not happy."

Al furrowed his brow and made ready to listen.

"Your grandfather died a few weeks ago. Actually, it appears he was killed – murdered in fact, in a manner very similar to your father. For reasons I am not fully aware of, I am the suspect in that."

"Oh, my god! What's going on, Char. . . I'm not sure what to call you anymore. Charlie doesn't seem proper."

"Grampa would work for me. Trying to add that 'Great'

thing in front of it would seem all too cumbersome.”

“Okay, then, it will be Grampa. I like that. Something else I like.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“A couple of times you’ve called me ‘son’. I supposed you just meant it like ‘kid’ or ‘boy’ but it really felt good.”

“That would seem very comfortable for me. I’ll attempt to do a pleasant mix of Al and Son from now on.”

“I’ve decided there are three kinds of hugs.”

It seemed to come out of the blue and off the topic of his grandfather’s murder, but Charlie waited to hear more.

“Dad never hugged me in my life but Mom used to. They were more like hello or goodbye than anything special. I call them perfunctory hugs – like they come out of some obligation one person feels toward another. Then there are the hugs I have with girls – I call them romantic hugs. They seem to be designed to increase my heart rate and get my blood rushing into my groin. I really do enjoy them. They still aren’t anything like the third one. That one is like a physical transfer of love between two people – like the hug we had a while ago up in your kitchen. I don’t remember ever having one like that before. I can’t get it out of my mind. I’ve seen them in movies. I’ve wondered about them all my life. It was maybe the best thing that has ever happened to me, Sir, Charlie, Grampa.”

“I must admit there is nothing so wonderful. I have been more fortunate than you in that regard but not for many years. That first one between us will certainly live on with me forever as well. And the best part of it is that from that point forth there will be an endless supply of them.”

Al smiled and nodded and then smiled and nodded some more as it seemed to really sink in.

“I want to be a gentle person like you are, Grampa.”

“It is how you already appear to me, son. Sometimes situations force us to go out of ourselves – out of our comfort zones – to appear differently from the person who truly resides inside us. I just imagine your home did those things to you.”

“I am going to believe that. Thank you.”

Again, there was a period of silence.

“We got problems to solve, Grampa.”



“Yes, we do. It seems to me that a good starting place might be to establish what true motive Burt might have for killing off his relatives.”

“Hatred or greed and I’ll bet on greed,” Al said without hesitation.

“But for what? You say the company, and I assume the family fortune, goes to you.”

“I know. It doesn’t make sense. We need to see the entire Will, I think. Dad only showed me the paragraph that dealt with my inheritance.”

“Neither one of us can show up back at your place and ask to see it. Is there a lawyer?”

“There is. He drew up a charitable trust I established for abused kids. Dad never knew about it. I suppose that makes him my lawyer and so I’d have – what is it called . . . attorney client privacy with him.”

“Attorney client privilege, I believe is the term – means the same thing. We must give that some careful thought. In this day of the electronic tracing of everything, we don’t want to give away your location in case that lawyer sees his relationship in some different way. I have an acquaintance back in Oklahoma who is also a lawyer. I am certain we can trust him.”

“I didn’t see a computer at you place.”

“I’m afraid that is not a part of my life. It was, but I chose to travel light when I left Oklahoma. There is an internet place in town if that is what you are seeking.”

“I’m something of a computer slash internet expert. Studied it in school and went to Computer Camp two summers. I can contact my lawyer that way and remain untraceable unless they get the big guys like the CIA or FBI into the act.”

“You can do that? My! I’m impressed.”

“One of the kids I met at camp and I developed a routing program so we could visit naked women sites without leaving a trail back to our IPs. Who’d have thought it might come in useful for other things.”

“Well, I’m glad you used your knowledge and skill for such truly important endeavors.”

Al grinned, sheepishly. Charlie continued.

“Pete Perkins at the Photo Shop has DSL and offered it to me for my use if I wanted it. Perhaps we should just buy our own computer and you can set it up. We can get whatever we need. Money, within reason, will not be a problem. Have to be cash deals, however. Neither of us can risk leaving a credit card trail.”

“There a place to buy computer stuff close by?”

“There is one of those ubiquitous Walmarts at the edge of town.”

“Ubiquitous?”

“Everywhere present.”

“Gotcha. I own some stock in it, but then I guess most people do. We can go take a look and see what they have.”

“Be thinking about ways to access information sources – police reports, district attorney’s statements, newspaper articles, family records, things like that.”

“I know a site that links to other sites that teach you how to do all that stuff. I’ve missed my internet this week.”

After a brief pause he began again – off topic, again.

“Can I ask you a personal question? If it’s too soon in our relationship say so. Just feels like I’ve known you forever, Grampa.”

“You may always ask me anything so long as you allow me the right to decline an answer.”

“That seems fair. How can I state this? It will probably seem odd. Just say it I suppose. I’ve wondered if old . . . er men your age are still interested in naked women and things relate to that.”

Charlie smiled, and chuckled his stomach into a succession of quick quakes.

“As the saying goes, ‘I’m old, son. Not dead.’ That provide enough of an answer?”

“Yes. For now, at least. There may be more along that line after we get to know each other better, if that’s okay.”

“That will be fine. I hope there will be nothing we can’t talk about. It brings me to another point. After all of this gets cleared up – you and I both proved innocent – there will remain to be established the place where you will live – make your home.”

“I hadn’t thought about that, yet. Can I stay with you?”

“That will not be up to me. If you refuse to go back with your mother you may have some say in it, although I believe you are a long way from being ready to make that decision. You’re too close to the problems and the recent events. I suggest a gentle path be followed as you think it through. I’m ancient, you know. You need an arrangement in which you will have a stable person for the long term.”

“In only three years I’ll be eighteen. Don’t tell me you plan to kick the bucket during the next three years.”

“That is certainly not my intention. You and I have some long living genes in our systems. My father and mother were both nearly 100 when they, as you so interestingly phrased it, kicked the bucket.”

“I didn’t intend any disrespect.”

“I’m sure you didn’t. I’ll have to Google that phrase and find out its origin.”

“It probably refers to the incapacitation of the bucket’s purpose – kicked over on its side – and the water – life – inevitably pouring out of it.”

“You know, son, since a good portion of your genes came from me, I’m going to take some amount of credit for your superior intelligence and magnificent vocabulary.”

“And I thank you for that – the genes not the credit taking, although it pleases me that you seem to appreciate me. That’s a first.”

They sat for some time thinking.

“It’s pretty awesome, really,” Al said at last turning his head to look at his grampa.

Charlie cocked his head and sat quietly expecting more.

“What you said. A big part of me is you. I’d never considered that seriously before – mom, dad, grampa, you, your father. Thanks for that, too. It’s like a remarkable built-in bond – a chain – that can never be broken. It’s like that part of you will never die. It’s like a part of you will live on in me and my children and theirs. Without you I couldn’t be. Awesome!”

“It is awesome, for sure.”

Al was ready to move ahead.

“I guess the sooner we get on with things the sooner we will . . . well, get on with things.”

He smiled at his verbal stutter step as he stood and offered his Grampa a hand, saying:

“You know that endless supply thing you described. I think I need to tap into it right now.”

The first hug had been magnificent. The second, now rounded out from the sharing and caring, was even better. Al expected each new one would be superior to the last and it was his intention to put that theory to a test several times every day.

\* \* \*

By supertime the purchases had been made and Al, with Charlie as his ‘gopher’, had the new devices set up and fully operational. They opted for a large, top of the line, laptop, loaded with software and with memory oozing out its USB ports. A laptop could be a quick-to-take-with-them item when and if they needed to move on. There were also a color printer/scanner/fax and several 16 gig flash drives.

With that big job completed, they finished a bucket of fried chicken and container of slaw left over from Charlie’s Sunday noon meal. It was clear that the boy was still hungry.

“Remember the ice cream parlor we passed earlier. Take a ten from the cash box and go pick up a half-gallon of hand packed. You choose the flavor.”

“That sounds great. They sell cakes and cookies, too, as I remember from the display in the window.”

“Then that probably calls for a twenty.”

“The cash box?” Al asked.

Grampa got up and went into the front room. Al followed.

“Here on the floor of the closet is a fireproof safe-box. Most all the money I have is in it. The combination is . . .”

“Are you sure you want to trust me with the combination to a safe that holds all of the money you have in the world.”

Charlie paused and turned back toward the boy.

“Should I not trust you with the combination?”

“Well, no. I’d never breach your trust. I’d never knowingly do anything to hurt you.”

“Enough said, then, Okay?”

“Okay. This relationship is so odd and so great. I am likely going to be awakened momentarily by a train whistle or

a honking semi and realize this was all a sleep time fantasy while I lay curled up, shivering, in the doorway of an abandoned warehouse.”

“When you awaken take me with you. I certainly don’t want to lose you, son.”

Al beamed. He had no words for a reply. He had to wonder why he believed everything the old man said. He had spent his whole life learning to be suspicious of other people, their intentions, their promises, and their sincerity. It took place within his family where he had seemed more like a prop to be shined up and displayed than a son to be loved. It took place with his friends – did they really like him or was it his money and privilege they liked to share? It probably took place with the girls he spent time with although he chose to overlook that possibility. Girls had become a necessity of life. He figured they were God’s ultimate creation. Kissing girls – really kissing girls – had become one of only a half dozen major motivators in his life.

“You open it. I’ll provide the combination.”

Al kneeled and readied his hand on the dial.

“Left ten . . . right seventy-seven . . . left eleven. The lid should open.”

“It did. My god! Look at the bills! I’ve never seen so much money.”

“Take a twenty and enter the withdrawal on the tablet. See it there. See how it works?”

“Okay. Yes. I understand. Withdrawn and new balance. What a balance! Using the attached pen. There. Like that?”

“Just like that.”

Al closed the lid and spun the dial before standing.

“I can’t tell you how much your trust means to me, Grampa.”

“You remember my belief about trust?”

“Yes. You trust people until they demonstrate that they can’t be trusted. I promise you that will never happen with me – the not be trusted part.”

Al headed back through the kitchen toward the door.

“One thing,” Charlie said. “If there is to be an encounter with a girl during this outing, make it’s before the

purchase. I can drink ice cream but I prefer to use a spoon.”

Al smiled a full out grin, turned, and left.

As he closed the door, Charlie pinched himself, a symbolic gesture designed to reinforce his unbelievable delight at suddenly having again what he was so certain had been lost forever – a person to love and enjoy and gently coach toward a happy and successful path through life. It required a second pinch.

That brief reverie brought him back to the facts at hand. They were both knowingly in flight and hiding from the law. In addition, he was harboring an underage runaway and had no intention of turning him in. Aiding and abetting it was called. If Burt were in reality the bad guy – the killer – and not knowing his motivation, then it might be that one or both of their lives were in danger. Still, Green Mountain seemed to be as safe a sanctuary as Charlie could imagine. Discovering Burt’s motive was job one. Proving his guilt was job two – if he were guilty.

They had not agreed on a cover story in case people asked prying questions. It should have been taken care of before Al had been cut loose a few minutes before. It would head the list of priorities upon his return.

Charlie cleaned up the kitchen and returned to the front room taking a seat in his recliner. It was perennially positioned so he could look out the front window at the treetops and the sky and the rolling hills beyond. Even that had taken on new meaning since the grand, young, addition had entered his life. ‘Could that first encounter have been a mere twelve hours ago?’ he asked himself.

“He needs a mattress, if not a bed,” he said aloud as he noted the neatly spread sleeping bag in the corner. “And clothes. How could I have forgotten clothes? We must do that first thing tomorrow.”

Having missed his noon time nap, he had quickly fallen asleep only to be awakened by the boy’s cheery greeting as the back door opened a few minutes later.

“Hey! Got goodies!”

Charlie looked at his watch. A mere twenty minutes had passed. He took that to indicate there had probably been no encounter of the feminine kind. He eased himself out of the chair and walked to the kitchen.

“I got Neapolitan not knowing what you like. I got a little Dutch chocolate cake with cream center and a dozen peanut butter cookies – with peanut chunks. I figured if you like chunks in your peanut butter sandwiches, you’d like chunks in your peanut butter cookies.”

It seemed more centered on Charlie than on Al. That had not been the old man’s intention but he appreciated the gesture and assumed none of it would go to waste.

“Sounds great. Soup bowls in the cupboard. I’ll get the scoop.”

Al sampled a cookie as he began his quest for the bowls.

“I like all three flavors,” Al announced as Charlie began portioning out the ice cream.”

They each enjoyed all three flavors and then Al enjoyed them all again before attacking the cake and more cookies.

Charlie spoke.

“It appeared to me while you were gone that we need to get you a better sleeping surface and some clothes. I’m sorry I can’t offer more privacy but that will just have to be a fact of life for now.”

“The shower will offer all the privacy I need and I have no modesty issues, if those were the things you were concerned about.”

“I guess we are set then. Clothes and a mattress in the morning.”

“I don’t need many clothes. It struck me as wonderfully humorous – ironic I suppose – as I waited around up her in my birthday suit while my only clothes washed and dried. Ironic, in that back home I have two huge closets full of clothes I seldom even look at. Mom tends to drown her sorrows by buying me clothes. At least she has good taste. I suppose in those uncovered moments, and probably for the first time, I came to appreciate what I had.”

“One of the wonders of life’s twists,” Grampa began, “compelling appreciation where none had dwelled before.”

“It’s great the way we can talk,” Al said. “I mean that we can talk about stuff but also that we can just use the words we want to use and not have to dummy up for our audience. At school, some of the kids called me Webster – the dictionary

guy – because of the words I chose to use.”

“It is further interesting that often, intended put downs such as that, can actually be tremendous complements, depending on how one chooses to construe them.”

“Wish I’d have heard that years ago. It might have saved a lot of sad hours for me. I tried to talk with Dad about it when I was nine or so. His grand suggestion was to, ‘Give ‘em hell.’ Not much help, I’m afraid. Not sure I ever asked for his advice again. Maybe that’s how he wanted it. He was so afraid I’d ask him about the birds and the bees that on my eleventh birthday he handed me three books on the topic and sent me to a doctor for ‘the talk’.”

“That doctor seem to know what he was talking about?” Grampa asked with a smile.

“Seems so. I am yet to have the quintessential experiences that will fully confirm it however.”

“You are something else, great grandson. This is the most wonderful thing that could have ever possibly happened for me.”

Al shrugged and smiled.

“Do you really think we are safe from discovery here?” the boy asked not knowing how to react to his Grandfather’s comment.

“It’s the best I know. That reminds me. We need to get our background story established so we can stick to the same line.”

“I may have already hinted at that to some folks.”

“What did you tell them?”

“That you were my grandfather and that I was here spending the summer with you studying art. I hope that was okay.”

“It is fine. I’m curious though. Did you concoct that prior to or after the discovery of our relationship?”

“Before actually – to Marilou. Isn’t that something? Maybe a subconscious wish.”

“It will work. Did you tell her where your home was?”

“Yes. Boulder, Colorado.”

“Why Boulder?”

“It’s where I went to summer camp. I figured if I was grilled about it I’d know enough about the city to fake it fairly



convincingly.”

“Like I said. You are something else, great grandson. Oops! I guess now that will need to be grandson, won’t it?”

They spent the remainder of the evening at the computer. Al gave his Grampa a short course in advanced internet surfing and specifically taught him how to avoid accepting cookies and other things that would allow prying techno-eyes to follow him home.

At one point, he paused at one of his naked women sites.

“You have a problem with my interest in such sites, Grampa?”

“I have no problem with your fully natural and necessary interest in naked women. My problem is that as I understand it, many of the women and girls exhibiting themselves on line are doing so under duress – not of their own choosing – sex slaves I have heard them called. Supporting such enterprises does definitely bother me.”

“I hadn’t thought about it that way. I suppose then that you would prefer I stick to Playboy magazines and the like where we know the women get paid for their voluntary services.”

“What I prefer, Al, is that you make educated and moral decisions about such questions for yourself. I am not your conscious in this matter.”

“You are not making this easy.”

“I didn’t realize there was a clause in our contract that said it was my duty to make life’s important decisions easy for you.”

It was worth a smile between them but neither really construed it as humorous. It had been an important, relationship setting, moment.

(Al smiled on the inside as he caught Grampa taking just one more look before they navigated away from the naked women.)

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Wake Up and Smell the Coffee**

“Wow! That was the best sleep I’ve had in a week, Grampa,” Al said as he stretched himself awake on his sleeping bag.

Grampa had been up for some time, showering, dressing, putting on the coffee.

“Coffee smells great,” Al said.

“You drink?”

“No. I just sniff and enjoy. My turn in the shower?”

“All yours. Tan towel and washcloth are yours. I guess you found the shampoo yesterday. We can get your brand if we need to. I understand boys take their hair care quite seriously these days.”

“Most do I guess. I’m blessed with the wash and wear variety. Always looks good regardless. That’s not bragging. That’s the fact of the matter. Like Mom’s. Hers always looks great and she seldom messes with it. She says it’s the natural wave we have.”

“Pancakes be okay this morning?”

“Sounds great! I’m usually very hungry in the morning.”

“Are we talking six or ten, then?”

“Six should do fine, unless they’re skimpy little wimpy productions.”

“Six inches. No more. No less. I use pancake rings.”

“Never heard of them.”

“My own invention, although I’m sure people in other places have also invented them. How long do you need?”

“Say twenty minutes.”

“Fine. Sausage or bacon?”

“Both would be great!”

Grampa understood that his grocery budget would

need to be doubled – make that tripled. He smiled at the thought – at the privilege of providing for his great grandson. It still caused prickly skin every time he thought about it.

“You’ll need to climb back into yesterday’s duds until we can get to the store, son.”

“I pretty well had that figured out, Grampa. Decided that a nude stroll into a clothier would probably be frowned upon here in the Ozarks.”

“I’m very sure you’re right. Wonderful people here but just a bit prudish when it comes to such things.”

Grampa chuckled and shook his head. He had to wonder how the boy had apparently survived in such a healthy manner, coming from the horrendous upbringing he had described. Perhaps there were sinister remnants under the surface that would eventually tell a different story. He was prepared to wait, watch, and listen. He wouldn’t let himself contemplate the real likelihood that the boy’s stay with him was to be temporary. He was determined to enjoy every second of whatever time they would have together.

Al clearly approved of the breakfast both in word and deed. He topped it off with a bowl of ice cream. Grampa passed on that while enjoying his third cup of coffee.

“You drink a lot of coffee. Is that good for a man your age?”

“I made extra this morning not knowing if you indulged. Hate to waste it.”

“I think you really just love to have an excuse so you can drink more than your usual quota.”

“I suppose that was a gotcha. I do love my coffee.”

“And this morning, mine, too, apparently. Decaf?”

“No. The full power stuff. I like the lift and have convinced myself they taste differently – pretty sure that is my imagination.”

“Do we need to add grocery shopping to our list of to-do stuff for today?” Al asked no intention of disguising his desire to stock the larder with things more to his liking.”

“We do indeed. Make a list of things you like. My cooking skills are fairly primitive but I’m up for learning new tricks.”

“I’m a pretty good cook. We seldom ate together at

home so if I wanted to eat I had to fix it.”

“Okay, then. We will work out a way to share the culinary responsibilities. I’ll boil water and pour drinks. You can . . .”

“I love your sense of humor. I think I have a good one as well although I only ever practiced it with my friends and that was often “X” rated – among us guys.”

“You have some good friends, do you?”

“Have to define ‘good’. I always have kids to hang out with. Everybody likes coming to my place – an indoor/outdoor pool, tennis court out back, weight room, a huge TV, and every electronic game ever invented in my room. I suppose there are a few who come to mostly just hang with me. There are a couple of guys that I can talk with about personal stuff. I’d like to think girls like me for who I am. I wasn’t allowed to evening date so they knew I wasn’t going to spend lots of money on them. I’m told I’m nice looking. That’s hard for me to judge. They say I’m a good kisser. I treat girls right. I mostly keep my hands to myself. Lots of them have told me they like me for that. I don’t have a best friend that’s sitting at home wringing his hands about my current situation, if that is what you were leading up to. I don’t have what you’d call a steady girlfriend.”

It had been a good deal more than Grampa had expected. Al clearly felt at ease revealing the information. He trusted this new man in his life like he had never trusted anyone before. It redefined the positive possibilities of relationships and he was eager to explore it. Sharing feelings and questions and other things about himself with no fear of censure presented an unbelievably appealing – if fully foreign – aspect of life. It was like an automatic bond where full acceptance reigned above all else – well there was love but perhaps they were the same thing. It was a topic he was eager to discuss with Grampa when the time seemed right.

Within the hour, Al had four new outfits. It was Grampa’s routine to wash twice a week so that would keep him in clean clothes. If the stay turned into a more long-term arrangement there could be more. The trip to the grocery provided four brown paper bags of things to stow in the kitchen. Al took charge of that. The shelves looked

significantly different – spicy this, jalapeño that, flaming Texas chili, burritos from hell. Grampa’s stomach burned at their very sight. He could see there would be a lot of eating side by side but not really the sharing of meals. That was fine. He could remember those days before the cast iron of his own stomach had eroded away.

“I understand from how you described things in your home that you seldom sat down to meals together. I hope that will be different here. I’d like for us to spend meal times together.”

“You don’t know how great that sounds, Grampa. I’m allowed to snack, though, right?”

“Of course. And you’ll never hear me admonishing you not to spoil your supper by eating such and such. From what I’ve witnessed so far, I just imagine a seven-course meal at three would not spoil your appetite for supper at six.”

Al grinned.

“About like that, I guess. I hope all the eating helps me grow. I’ve accepted the fact I’m never going to be a giant, but I’d sure like to eventually at least reach five ten or eleven. Dad is – was – five nine. I’ve learned that kids usually exceed their parents in height. You must be six feet, right.”

“Was six one at the pinnacle of my height. Old guys shrink some. I imagine six feet even is a pretty good estimate.”

“Maybe I got some of your height along with your smarts and artistic bent.”

“We could build a rack and stretch you every evening.”

Al smiled and chuckled.

“I understand. I’ll be whatever I’ll be and I should stop being concerned about it.”

“Is that what I said?”

“You are a very sly, old, dude, Grampa. I’ve already learned to listen between the lines – so to speak. You shouldn’t find it difficult to make your suggestions known to me.”

“I hope that when I do make suggestions, you will always take them as information for you to consider and never – well, not usually, anyway – as edicts or shoulds.”

“Point noted, as some new person in my life has been

known to say.”

“It’s time we get serious about our problems, son. You get that computer cranked up and I’ll go down and fetch my paper. We’ll go mattress shopping after lunch.”

When Grampa returned, Al was on a newspaper site searching the obituaries from the past week. He pointed and sniffed as tears dampened his face.

“Dad was buried on Friday. I was sleeping the day away in an empty boxcar during the funeral. I probably wouldn’t have been allowed to attend even if I’d stayed. I’m sure I’d be locked up in some juvenile detention center.”

Grampa approached him from behind his chair and put his hands on the boy’s shoulders. There were no appropriate words to say. He moved his hands in a gentle massage. Al was clearly content to have it continue.

“I can’t remember ever being touched with gentleness like this – well, by girls but I mean family. I suppose that’s pretty sad. It may be one reason why I resist touching girls. Physical contact always meant hurt, you know. I never want to hurt anybody.”

“You have remarkable insight for a young man your age.”

Al shrugged; that time he had no words.

“I found an archive of articles about what they are calling the ‘Closed Gate Murder’. Let’s see. I speed read close to a thousand words a minute. Let me speed through them and get the gist for us, okay?”

“Speed on. My old eyes work well but more at the speed of a gradually emerging water color.”

Al looked up and back into his Grampa’s face offering a smile which he held for a long moment. He had made no effort to dry his tears although they had stopped. After a few minutes, he had the story digest ready. Grampa brought in a kitchen chair and sat beside the boy.

“Dad died at one a.m. I would have already been over the wall and waiting for Caitlyn at the park. Several people saw me. Men. Strangers. One was like maybe a veteran in a wheelchair. Probably a street person. I was so caught up in my anticipation of several hours of kissing that I paid very little attention. I think I would know him again, though. We didn’t

speak and he wheeled off in a hurry when we came upon each other.

“This is hard but it says he died from the very first blow. I suppose that is good. No suffering that way. His jewelry and wallet were taken. The police think that was just a ruse to make it look like a robbery. For some reason, they really seem out to get me in this. They found a Royals hat near the body – it was mine. I lost it one afternoon not long ago when Jason and I were playing, Kill the guy that’s got it.”

“Sounds like a gentle, friendly, little pastime,” Grampa said with a smile.

“Any number can play. One guy gets the football and the other or others try to tackle him. Then he throws the ball to somebody while still on his back, and everybody takes out after the new guy. It’s my favorite game. Perhaps we need to discuss why that might be. Probably connected to my hidden need to be violent. As much emotional as testosterone, I imagine.

“Anyway, my flashlight was also found under the body. Apparently, it had Dad’s blood on it along with his and my fingerprints. He often borrowed it for his walks. I left it hanging on a hook by one of the back doors so I’d always know where it was. Mom and all my friends can testify to that.

“The brick that was used was also mine. It was from Old Main at the Academy. When they tore it down they sold bricks from it to raise money. Each one had a little copper medallion glued to it. Those who paid more than a thousand dollars for them also got their name imprinted on it. So much for generosity!

“The most damning piece of evidence seems to be the scrapings a forensics guy took from under my fingernails later that morning. It seems to have traces of Dad’s blood and skin in it. I can explain that. I told you I tried to fight back that last time. I managed one fairly viscous scratch to his neck. It bled right away. I wrote about the beatings in my diary but hadn’t yet entered that one. So, I suppose there is generic support but not specific support for that one. Nobody knew about the beatings – well, I’m sure Mom did. I was not allowed to speak of them under threat of even more severe punishment. I didn’t want to speak to anybody about them. For some reason, I

was ashamed about it. Our home is really into family name and status. I don't know if she will come to my defense since it would show the family in a bad light. The cops took my diary first thing which made me believe she had been reading it and gave it up. I thought I had it well hidden under a false bottom I had built in a window seat in my room. It's where I kept my playboys and X-rated books. Apparently, she was a snoop. I suspected but had no proof. My friends all say their parents snoop so I just assumed mine did too – hence the false bottom project.

“It also says they found blood on my shirt. I had changed out of it after the fight with Dad and it did have my blood on it. I doubt if there was any from Dad. Well, there could have been, actually. I might have wiped my fingers on it after I scratched him.”

“So, you can explain away all the evidence but you have nothing but your word to substantiate any of it. Still, a good defense lawyer might be able to use it to make a strong case for reasonable doubt. See if you can find anything about your grandfather's death. The papers have been pretty skimpy on laying out the details.”

“Okay. When would that have taken place?”

“On the sixteenth of last month. I had gone back to try and mend fences with Thomas. It had been decades since we had spoken, but I received a birthday card, ostensibly from him, signed, with a KC postmark. It had been my main motivation for making the trip. I really can't verify that the signature is actually his after all these years. I brought it with me – it being the last thing I thought I had received from him.

“I hadn't pre-announced my arrival fearing I might get cold feet and back out. I was seen in Kansas City by several old family friends and the personnel at a diner I used to frequent. I visited it for old time sake. All that is working against my case – giving me opportunity. I suppose the motive is my separating myself from him and the theft he had perpetrated. It may be construed as hatred boiled over into revenge. There can be no suggestion of monetary or other gains involved as far as I can see.

“My monogrammed handkerchief was found near the body. It was soaked in his blood. My belt had been used to



secure his hands behind his back before he was attacked. Both were missing from my motel room but I figured it had been a light fingered domestic and wasn't worth making a fuss. First of all, the killer had to somehow know I was in town. Then he had to gain access to the room. That can only be done with a key card. Very likely he paid an employee to let him in and forget about it. From the incredibly poor maid service I imagine the help was less than high quality."

"When was your birthday?" Al asked.

"On the tenth of last month."

"What motel was it?"

"Sunset or maybe Sunrise. It was one of those get ready to stop, see a mote, and stop at it deals. I hadn't made a reservation."

"And you were there from when to when?"

"Afternoon of the fourteenth through mid-morning of the sixteenth. When I saw the headlines about the murder on the local early morning news, I lit out. I just couldn't deal with it. The murder took place at about one a.m. they said."

"Get this, Grampa! I've been searching for collateral stuff in the news. On the night of the fifteenth the body of a maid at the Sunrise Motel was found in an alley not far from the motel. She had been bludgeoned to death with a paving stone from the back of the rear parking lot at the motel. I think I'm beginning to see a pattern here."

"A pattern indeed. Time of day, murder instrument, and very specific traces of the suspect who was being set up. The maid may well have been killed so she couldn't identify the person who paid her for entry into my room. We have a killer with no conscious. Sound familiar to you?"

"Fits Uncle Burt to a tee."

"But why would Burt be motivated to murder both his father and his grandfather?"

"And maybe, me!" he added wide eyed. "I failed to tell you one thing that I hadn't connected into all of this until right now. When I returned to my room at about six that morning – I had fallen asleep in the park waiting – it had been broken into by way of a window. It's a second-floor room but the window conveniently opens onto the kitchen roof at the back of the house. I say convenient because it allowed an easy

route for me to leave and return unnoticed – window to roof to overhanging oak tree. I didn't have time to take an inventory but on the surface, nothing seemed to have been taken. I figured a burglar had just used it to gain easy entrance to the house so he could rob the valuable stuff in other parts of the house. As things developed, I never got around to asking about that. But, it may have been Burt coming after me – to kill me the way he did Dad. Fortunately, I wasn't there."

"Okay. Let's go with that possibility and expand the essential question. Why would Burt want to kill the three of you?"

"Let me insert another morbid thought, Grampa. You're now thinking the killer, not your son, sent you the card hoping to lure you to KC, right?"

"Right."

"Maybe he planned to get double duty from you – frame you for your son's murder and then murder you when you arrived. He had to let you live and be seen for some while after the murder before he did you in. You may have left just in the nick of time."

"Then the question expands again. Why would Burt want to have all four of us dead? Some twisted attempt to exterminate the King Family line?"

"I wonder if he followed you back to Oklahoma?" Al asked. "If he did, could he have also followed you here?"

"I sincerely doubt that – not that he might not have gone to Oklahoma looking for me, but that he could possibly know where I am now. I traded cars twice on route and took a bus for a portion of the trip. My story back there was that I was going to Texas to visit a sick old friend. Friends saw me heading south on the Interstate the day I left. I'm quite sure there is no way to track me. The only way to know I am here would be to know a whole lot more about me than I believe is available to Burt. Still, we will be cautious. We need to stick together whenever we leave our apartment."

"That will sort of put a damper on dating, Grampa."

"Think about the choice, Son?"

"Yeah. I get the point. Maybe we could double."

He bent over in rails of laughter at the thought. Grampa was not entirely against it.

“We are smart enough to work out some ‘be with girls time’ for you. From the way it sounds, you would shrivel up and blow away within a week without having the fairer sex in your life.”

“It would sure be a shame if my pucker lost its power. As I’m thinking about that now I’m wondering if I’ve been using girls like substitutes for family – people to be physically close to.”

“A possibility. Surely more fun than if you had chosen sumo wrestlers.”

Al smiled and chuckled at the unexpected absurdity. He was learning his Grampa was a master of the absurd.

“I sure do like girls. I’m glad I do. I remember when I was eleven – eleven and a half, I guess – it just seemed like I woke up one morning with this brand new and constant urge to be with girls. I must say it’s been a great four years – just seems to keep getting better.”

“I’m glad you’re so pleased with that aspect of your life.”

Al nodded a most convincing nod and spoke.

“I did some calculating and it appears that all the men in my immediate family line, going back to your father, must have gotten married as teenagers – in order for everybody to have been born and have their first child all within one century. I’m sure not going to be ready to be a father at 18 or 19 so don’t get your hopes up about a great great any time soon.”

“Well thought through on all counts. Things were different when I was young – graduate from high school, get married, have a child, and get on with life. It was just the socially expected way.”

“I guess before I can even consider marriage and such we need to get these problems solved, don’t we?”

“We do. If we only had some insight into Burt’s possible motivation. As we have said it doesn’t seem like it would be the business or the family fortune. I assume in your absence those would go to your mother.”

“That’s right. It’s what Dad told me, at least. He specifically said he didn’t want his brother Burt anywhere near the business. Grandfather – your son, Thomas – had made the same stipulation. He gave control of all the family stuff to Dad and put Burt on some kind of a stipend – like a monthly

allowance I guess you could say.

“That brings up a memory,” Al said. “You know anything about a Century Fund, Grampa?”

“Century Fund? No. In what context, did it come up?”

“At the time, Dad showed me the Will he said that even if the company didn’t survive the bad economic times, by the time I was sixteen I would be able to count on the Century Fund. He never explained and frankly at thirteen I was chomping at the bit to get outside and play ball so I didn’t press it with him.”

“Have you tried researching it?”

“No. Like I said it just popped into my mind.”

“Let’s try a search for something like the King Family Century Fund.”

“Okay. Let’s take a look see here. The King Family Singers, comes up. And an article about the Century Plant written by botanist John Funder. It’s odd how Google does that partial and separated word thing. I don’t see anything here.”

“I imagine your lawyer would have information if it is a family thing. I must say I was never told anything about such a fund.”

“Do you think I should risk contacting Mr. Oliver? That’s the family attorney.”

“I have another idea. Let’s contact my lawyer friend in Oklahoma on one of your mostly secure internet connections and ask him to contact Oliver about it? He may want some special private sort of information to prove the request is legitimate. You got anything that would convince him you are really you?”

“Well, he has Coy in an aquarium in his office. I used to kid him about the fish being the real McCoy. It was lame but I was young and unpracticed in the art of humor. That may be sufficient. His granddaughter’s name is Judith and she likes poodles. Maybe between those two things he’ll believe it’s legitimate.”

“Let’s give it a try. I have my friend’s email in my address book. It’s in the safe. How about you using your young knees to get down and retrieve the book.”

“As well as done.”

“Do you have an email address for Oliver?”

“Yup. I seldom forget things. Sometimes that’s good. Sometimes that’s not so good.”

He handed the small green book to his Grampa. They soon had an email composed and sent.

“I got it routed through my anonymous servers in Australia, Hong Kong, and New Guinea. It would be so funny if instead of our email he gets a triple X rated movie.”

The boy giggled himself into hysterics.

“Triple X. That sounds like more than nude female bodies.”

“Well, yes. What can I say? You probably really don’t like that do you?”

“My previous comments apply I believe. Let’s think a bit about what that Trust might be.”

“That’s it?” Al said. “Let’s think a bit about what that Trust might be? No sermons. No berating of me for my perverted interests. No grounding for being a depraved young man with his mind in the triple X gutter.”

“Do any of those things sound like me, Alex? The interests are normal. The youthful judgment clouded by the passions of the age may have been lax. What has been is in the past. Your father would have disapproved all that severely, would he?”

“Not him as much as Mom. It would have blown her mind. She never understood men’s needs and interests in that area. Sometimes I figured that I must have been adopted. I can’t imagine her. . . well, I just can’t.”

“Do you have more to vent about or can we set that aside and get back to our problem?”

“Back to the problem. I have no idea how to proceed, though.”

“Well, ‘century’ refers to a hundred years, of course. It might have such a reference.”

“And remember he referred to when I was sixteen, perhaps the year it would become available. That would be next year.”

“Counting backwards 100 years, that would take us to 1913,” Grampa said. “It was the era of my grandfather. To my knowledge, he was not a wealthy man. Just the opposite,

in fact.”

“Compounding,” Al offered. “I learned about it in economics. If he invested even a small amount back then, over a hundred years it would have doubled and redoubled about every seven or so years. Let’s do some quick figuring. One dollar becomes two and two becomes four and so on for how many times? How many seven year periods in 100 years – say fourteen.”

He pulled up the calculator on the computer and plunked in the numbers.

“Gee. If your grandfather started the Trust with just \$100 dollars it would be worth something in the range of one and a half million dollars today. If it was \$1,000 it would be over sixteen million.”

“Hurray for compounding!” Grampa said.

Al had a question.

“How do you suppose – if our assumptions are correct – the money is to be divvied up?”

“I have no idea but therein may lie Burt’s motivation. On the surface, at least, it would appear that perhaps the fewer living King men when next year rolls around the more would come his way.”

“Total greed would dictate that all of us need to be dead except him,” Al said extending the concept.”

“Back in that day there was a common clause put into the wording of such trusts – often called the ‘moral purity clause’. Its purpose was to automatically disqualify any person who did not meet acceptable moral standards. Incarceration would certainly take one out of the running. He kills his father and makes me look guilty, taking two of the King men out of the running. He kills your father and blames you and with you in jail takes two more Kings out of the running. That leaves a grand total of Burt.”

“Grampa. You don’t know Uncle Burt but I can tell you if we are right about this and if the evidence he planted against us comes up looking shaky, you and I are in serious danger.”

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## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Peepholes Should Be Mandatory**

The arrangement suggested in the email was that they contact each other on a blog Al knew about. It was becoming a popular way to communicate more or less anonymously. That way no local email or computer address would be offered up as a means for easily locating them.

By noon they were back with a new mattress. The trip up the stairs resembled a humorous scene out of a silent movie. They laughed 'til tears flooded their cheeks. Al opted not to get a bed, not knowing what the immediate future might bring. Grampa concurred. Even a single bed mattress took up enough room that the recliner and desk had to be relocated slightly.

Al tried it out.

"It's like my own little cave down here in the corner, Grampa – two walls, the back of your chair and the end of the roll top desk. Someone could enter the room and never suspect I was here. Or I could smuggle a girl in and you'd never know she was here."

"I just imagine she would bring a more pleasing aroma into the place than you do. I might be able to tell."

"You know I was kidding, right?" Al said.

"Yes. I know. Let's check that blog thing you set up."

"Right away."

Grampa marveled at how, in one smooth motion, the boy moved from flat on his back to standing upright. 'Oh, for the days,' he thought.

Al was soon at the blog searching for Charlie's attorney friend's name.

"Wilson, right?"

"Right. Here it is. You want to read it?"



“I’ll listen.”

“Okay, then. He says: ‘I’ve learned of your predicament in KC. Figured it equated to sick old friend sortie. I will contact Oliver immediately. Can I give him this blog so he can communicate directly with you and the boy? I have an arrangement with a private detective in KC who works for an attorney friend of mine. Perhaps he will be able to help. I won’t contact him without your permission. Hope you’re enjoying the ‘Lone Star State’. Until I hear from you.’ ”

“So, what do I answer?”

“Tell him yes to letting Oliver have the blog address. You don’t see a tech problem there, do you?”

“No. The only problem I see is if for some reason, Oliver decides not to be sympathetic to my cause. With that information, he could monitor what goes on there on the blog.”

“I imagine he will let you know either way. Tell him the PI sounds like a good idea and we will forward a number of items to have him look into. Ask for his email address. Then say something like, ‘there’s no chili like Texas chili’. I’m fairly sure he understands now that I didn’t go to Texas but we will play the game in case anybody on the blog turns out to be a malicious snoop.”

“What’s the thing with chili?”

“He knows it is not my favorite dish. It will let him know I am, in fact, somewhere else, as he clearly suspects.”

Al nodded and continued.

“May I add something else?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“To have Oliver tell my Mom that I’m okay and that I love her.”

“A fine addition. Go for it.”

“Give me a minute.”

Grampa began making a list as Al posted the message.

“Done. Now what?”

“We need to make a list of things for the PI to look into. What are your thoughts?”

“Well, the break-in at my room, for one thing. Maybe prints on the broken glass or sill. At least since I’ve been alive, Burt has never been to our house so there should not be any of his prints anywhere. I’m sure Mom will vouch for that.”

"I'll continue making our notes here on this pad then you can compose a list on the blog."

"Might be better for us to email that to him so it won't spread our stuff around – like you said if there turns out to be a malicious snoop or a foe who reads the blog."

"Good thinking. What else?"

"I think I should list the evidence they have against me and explain how each one came to be – unconnected to Dad's death."

"Yes. Do that. It should help both the attorney and the PI. I will need to do the same. And, I've been thinking about my motel room. As I mentioned, it was not taken care of very well. I'm thinking that if Burt went snooping in there, he might have left prints behind that didn't get cleaned up."

"And, the park people that night I was there," Al said. "I can give exact times and locations and formulate pretty exact descriptions of the people. I was wearing a white T and blue jeans with red sneakers. I doubt if there were many boys there at that time of night, let alone any dressed like a flag."

"Yes. Good. Those folks appear to be your only alibi for the time of the assault."

"What about my Dad's jewelry and wallet?"

"I doubt if Burt would risk trying to pawn them," Grampa said, thinking out loud. "Was the jewelry valuable?"

"He wore a wedding band with a diamond cluster that was worth about \$50,000 and a personalized platinum Rolex. Why do you ask?"

"You characterized Burt as greedy. Wouldn't you therefore doubt that he would throw such valuable things away, even to protect himself?"

"I see where you're going. You are right. He would keep them for sure. So, if they can be found at his place then he will be implicated. That's good detective work, Holmes."

"Why thank you, Dr. Watson."

They enjoyed the exchange of a smile.

"If you didn't tell anybody ahead of time, including your son, Thomas, that you were coming to Kansas City, how could anybody have known that you would be there? And, how did Burt locate you at the motel?"

"I've wondered about those things as well. The first day

in Kansas City I made contact with three old friends. I made no secret of where I was staying. Burt had to somehow find out through them – a mutual acquaintance, perhaps. We can have the PI contact them. I'm glad you brought it up."

"This is so great! Well not the terrible parts. I mean us here together doing this. It makes my skin prickle."

"I must agree. That part of it all is wonderful."

"Do you believe in love at first sight, Grampa?"

"Not the next thing I had expected to flow from your mouth but I am getting used to having the unexpected come careening toward me out of the blue."

Al grinned. Grampa attempted an answer – well, a response, at least.

"It depends, I suppose. I can tell you for sure that most parents love their new born child that very first moment they see it. I'm also sure that in my youth there were numerous times when I fell in lust if not love upon first sight of a beautiful girl. Do you see the difference?"

"Yes. Interesting. I really don't think lust applies to the case I'm referring to, however."

He chuckled through an impish grin. Grampa looked amused, if a bit puzzled, and waited.

"I was thinking back on when I first saw you sitting there on your canvas stool in that little gassy area painting. There was something about you that was just so . . . fascinating . . . attractive . . . loveable, I guess. Your quiet manner and voice and the way you seemed to really want to engage me in conversation and how you clearly paid attention to me and what I said – as if it really mattered. Your eyes. That first time you really looked at me over the top of your glasses. Your voice was quietly firm but I could tell that you really cared about me. I was overwhelmed with warm feelings and suddenly I knew things were going to be okay for me. I didn't know how, but I knew."

"I see. Well whatever happened for you there certainly cut to the chase, didn't it?"

"I'll say. I suppose I was desperate for somebody to attach to. Being all alone in the World had been terrifying that previous week. There wasn't a moment that I wasn't scared to death. It may have made me less cautious and demanding

about a new relationship than I would have been otherwise.”

“Those are probably solid observations. Does that mean my value suddenly decreased?”

“Oh. No. I didn’t mean that. I do love you with all my heart. Maybe what I should have been thinking was that my vulnerability allowed me to see you for what you are all the more rapidly. I didn’t take time to doubt you or search for the possible dangers or downsides”

“You may just have a future as a spin doctor for politician’s, son.”

“Well, I just mean that our relationship seems to be working out pretty well. I’m not going to want to leave you if that becomes the eventual decision.”

“Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it. We have this wonder-filled time together right now and let’s both enjoy and appreciate it.”

“I suppose that’s how we need to proceed. Okay.”

Grampa tore the page containing the list from his yellow pad and handed it to Al.

“See what you can put together from these bits and pieces.”

“I’ll write it up in Word and print it out for you to go over. I get the idea reading stuff on the screen is difficult for you.”

“Observant. I can read it fairly easily when it’s presented in at least a 14-point font but few things other than headlines seem to come that large on the web.”

“I’ll get right on it. We can get it off and then have lunch.”

“About lunch. What if this noon we sample the menu at my favorite little café?”

“Hillbilly?”

“No, actually, a place called The Fosters. The father and mother cook and their five daughters wait tables.”

“Daughters! That sounds good! Any my age?”

“The three youngest are 14, 15, and 16 I believe.”

“You chose that place because of me. Thanks.”

“What? You don’t think I enjoy being in the presence of attractive young ladies.”

Al smiled but made no comment, fully convinced it had all been arranged for his benefit. He briefly fantasized about

substituting meaningful kisses for tips. It faded with a quick, private, smile.

“How about getting that message written up so we can get it off immediately. I have a feeling it may take precedence over ogling pretty girls.”

It was met with a nod and a smile. Al turned back to the computer and set to work. Five minutes later his epistle was ready for Grampa to peruse. (His note was ready for the old dude to read, also!)

Grampa suggested several small changes and it was sent. As Al slipped into a shirt and shoes he offered some thoughts.

“As I understand it, love involves deep down caring and commitment for the long term, where lust is just pure unadulterated desire for sexual fulfillment. There must be some middle ground in between those but I don’t know the term. Of course, I don’t love the girls I date – I’m smart enough to understand that. Also, I like to be with them for reasons other than sex – that’s clear since I’ve been with lots of girls but never had it. The relationship I’m speaking about does involve kissing and holding each other close and the occasional rapidly pounding heart, hot crotch, and heavy breathing but it also involves having good conversations about things that are important – growing up stuff, world affairs, the future. It has to do with getting to know each other and trying to understand each other. What’s the term I’m looking for and don’t say puppy love. That conjures up a disgusting image for me.”

“I fully understand the concept. I, too, am at a loss for a term. Perhaps this makes an opportunity for you to create one.”

“Well, it’s certainly more on the lust side of the continuum than on the love side, but it also has an intellectual, fact finding, relationship building side to it. Lots of kids get that all confused. Maybe, ‘intel lust ish’. I can hear it now as I say to a girl, ‘I’m in intel lust ish with you!’”

He giggled himself into hysterics as he pulled on his socks.

“And, without previously defining the term for her, there just might be an open palm blow to your face,” Grampa added.

“A slap. I get it. I’ll keep thinking.”

“Actually, the concept you embody in that term is probably very accurate – for those whose goals with a girl stop short of jumping into bed with her.”

“That’s sure what most guys seem to want. I really enjoy getting to know how girls think about things and I’ve found it is often very different from guys. It’s like a necessary balance. Maybe I’m perverted, wanting to wait – well it’s not so much wanting as it is thinking that will be best.”

“Probably not perverted. Most young people would probably consider it old fashioned, however, believing that sexual activity should be part of one very special relationship rather than as a recreational sport, as so many view it today.”

“That’s an interesting contrast – probably fits my thoughts pretty accurately. These are great new shoes by the way. Thanks again for all the duds.”

It appeared the conversation was finished and Al had moved on. He was clearly ready for lunch and an hour or so of intel lust ish -ing Foster Lasses from close up.

The food was served family style. It was delicious and plentiful and the girls were pretty and attentive. Grampa noted to himself that their table received far and away better service than any other. Apparently, he still had what it took! He chuckled at the thought but still allowed himself a moment in which to feel smug.

The girls, as a gaggle, invited Al to Carolyn’s birthday party. She was his age and he found her very attractive. She was not the prettiest of the five – that honor clearly went to the oldest – but she was nice looking and found ways to do the best with what she had. And what she had, in addition to a nice figure, was wonderful, long, black, hair, a natural, rosy complexion, an immediately attractive smile, and the cutest nose he remembered ever seeing. She was just a bit shorter than Al and he liked that. He realized it reflected his guy vanity but he could live with that. There would be a dozen in all, six and six, boys and girls. No dates. Just friends.

He accepted the invitation before checking with his Grampa.

“I guess I made a unilateral decision, there. I should have checked with you – for the safety considerations we

spoke of earlier. I can call it off you think that would be best.”

“Not at all. I think this is great. I will walk with you to and from, but I promise I will stay out of sight and no one will know.”

\* \* \*

The party was apparently wonderful. Al jabbered about it most of the way home.

“I have never really felt like that in a group of kids before. It was like I was just one of them – all equal in every way. Until tonight I couldn’t know for sure, but I see that back-home I was always treated – how can it be said – artificially, I guess will do. Tonight, everybody was honest and upfront. When I had trouble learning a new dance step, they laughed. I loved that! My friends would have never done that. Like above everything else they had to keep on my good side in case I could do something special for them. It may have been the greatest night of my life, Grampa. Thanks for letting me go.”

Grampa’s eyes glistened.

“Now, about that something special you owe me for letting you go . . .”

After just a moment Al understood the intended humor and broke an ear-to-ear grin. Grampa’s wit had been a wonderful addition to his life. He put his arm around the old man’s waist and they chuckled on down the hill.

Grampa had a question – serious that time.

“Is there any way you could dredge up a picture of Burt on the internet. I’d feel better if I had a face to go with the name.”

“I’ll give it a try. He belongs to a country club. I can access their newsletter. It might have one. I think I can draw a pretty good likeness. That might be the best bet.”

“How could I have overlooked the obvious? Yes. That’s a fine idea.”

Half an hour later the portrait was finished, full color in pastels. Al showed it to Grampa.

“It’s a very good likeness I think. He’s about five ten and weighs maybe 175 – not pudgy but not skinny. I don’t know how he got this scar but I imagine it was from one of his fights as a teenager.”

The next morning there was news on the blog site. Al related it as Grampa settled into his recliner.

“The PI’s name is Dex. He is already on the case. Has a pal in the police department and can get info a lot faster than waiting for papers and documents on the web. He and a detective will go to the house and search for Burt’s fingerprints around the window and on the doorknob and such. Doesn’t say when. He’ll stake out the park for the wheelchair guy. I’ve remembered a few more details about him and I’ll send them off. He had a small American flag glued to the back side of his seat and the rubber on his wheels had a white circle like the old white wall tires, not the usual solid black. He had a tall, flexible, flag extension on the right rear – most are on the left rear I believe for safety sake. The flag was a long, narrow, triangle, made out of rigid yellow plastic of some kind. The chair wasn’t motorized – the hand powered kind – so I imagine he would have pretty good arm and upper body development although I can’t say I saw that. I didn’t get a good look at his face but I’d say not more than thirty-five. He was white.”

“That’s all good data. You are a good observer. That’s always a plus for an artist. Does the PI mention anything about the investigation at my motel?”

“Yes. Unfortunately, since, as you expected, the dead maid’s pass keycard was used only to open your room after she died, they have you on the short list of people of interest in her death. The security system keeps a record of key use – time, date, room. Dex got his police buddy to seal the room until they can follow the leads I sent earlier. He got Burt’s fingerprints from his short military career. Apparently, he was kicked out before he finished boot camp. A bad apple. His thinking was not to take the prints directly from Burt so as to not lead him to think that he’s a suspect.”

“Sounds like he knows his job.”

“It does. I’m going to send the additional info now. You have anything to add?”

“Nothing now. I’m going to try for forty winks here in my chair. Didn’t sleep well last night. I assume you can keep occupied.”

“Never a problem when I have the web at my fingertips. There’s so much out there to learn about.”



Twenty minutes later Grampa was awake and refreshed.

“I got info here from my lawyer”, Al said when he realized Grampa’s eyes were open. He’s eager to help me. That’s a relief. Says I can email him directly at a private address now that we have a client attorney relationship. I asked him about the Century Trust Fund. Haven’t heard back yet. He said mom sends her love and says to be careful – that’s what she always says to me whenever I leave the house. It feels more important than I expected it would.”

“That is wonderful, Al. It seems that we are making progress. Now I guess we wait.”

And wait they did. Dex sent daily updates. They only heard from Al’s attorney occasionally. He clarified the nature of the Century Trust Fund. It was mostly as they had figured. He didn’t say what it was worth but did confirm that it was to be divided equally among all unencumbered, living, male, blood, decedents on December 31st of the 100th year after it had been established. That would be the upcoming December – a year earlier than they had estimated. As things stood at that moment those would include Charlie, Burt, and Al reduced by Charlie’s son, Thomas, and Al’s father, Joel, during the past several weeks.

“I assume that ‘unencumbered’ thing means not in jail or such,” Al said.

Grampa nodded and went on.

“If, as we suspect, Burt is the bad guy in all of this his goal seems to be to increase his share from twenty, to one hundred percent. He’s already raised his position to 33 percent.”

“So, he needs to have both of us convicted of the murders so he gets ‘encumbered’ right into the money. I’m sure that’s not the right word.”

“But it cuts to the chase for sure.”

Grampa’s manner suddenly became fully serious.

“What, Grampa?”

“It’s not a pleasant thought but if Burt suspects the evidence against us is falling apart and that he has become a suspect, that puts us in grave danger.”

“Grave as in six feet under, you mean.”

Grampa nodded.

"If we're clearly not going to be convicted then, from his perspective, we need to be dead! Better mention that to both Dex and your Attorney, NOW!"

"I'm on it. They should do their best to keep Burt out of the investigation info loop."

In that moment, life became engulfed in an ominous, dark, shroud.

"I still have every reason to believe we are safe here on Green Mountain," Grampa said. "I can't imagine how Burt could know of my relationship to this place. Still, we must up our level of vigilance and make ourselves less available."

"Up it to Code Red, I'd say," Al added clearly disturbed by the thought. "You have a gun?"

"No and I have no intention of getting one. Guns kill people regardless of the self-serving popular saying to the contrary."

Al nodded and let it go. It had been mostly information gathering and not intended as a suggestion. It did, however, reflect the sobering new turn life had just taken.

They tried to maintain a comfortable life style and that included time on the green painting and time at the creek where Grampa sketched and Al enjoyed time in the water and working on his tan – Carolyn had mentioned she liked boys with tans.

Al spent time with his new friends and had some private time with Carolyn. He kept few secrets from his Grampa who listened with interest and, as was his style, commented only upon request.

Several weeks passed and life for the two settled into a string of more or less comfortable yet unnerving days. They were happy together and grew closer and more important to each other. That, however, was laced with the terrible uncertainty regarding their safety.

At Grampa's request, Dex sent daily information regarding Burt's whereabouts. Grampa thought so long as he stayed in Kansas City they were safe. He didn't seem like the type who would trust any of his evil deeds to anyone else. His apparent past behavior seemed to confirm that. From time to time there were days when he could not be located and the

two of them pulled back from public view and holed up in the their rooms over the photo shop. On such days, Al spent anxious hours at the front window scanning the crowd below for his uncle's face. His absence had never been more than one day and each time when he surfaced again, they breathed a mutual sigh of relief.

"This is the 35th day we've been together," Al announced as he sat down for breakfast still toweling his hair dry.

"I noted that myself as I looked over the calendar this morning. Seems like I've known you all your life."

"I know. It's like I grew up knowing you. I suspect my life would have been much different if you had been a part of it. Maybe I shouldn't have said that. It sounded like I was accusing you of abandoning me or something. I didn't mean it that way."

"We both know that neither of us would intentionally say anything to hurt the other. Forget it. I would like to think there is substantial truth in what you said."

They finished breakfast.

"There was something in our email this morning I didn't want to lay on you until after breakfast and our good-start-to-the-day-time together here at the table."

"Oh. Do I get to hear now?"

"Dex says Burt has not been accounted for during the past 36 hours. He did the fake FedEx delivery man act at Burt's front door and couldn't get a rise late Monday afternoon. His suggestion is that we lay low and be super vigilant."

"Does he have any explanation for his disappearance?"

"He says information about the case got leaked to the press. The newspaper article suggests that the evidence against both of us has become too flimsy to take either of us to trial. It says they are looking for a relative who has rapidly become the focus of the investigation."

"Oops! That can't be good since Burt surely knows he is the only relative left out there – other than your mother."

"Dex says he and my attorney have something up their sleeves but didn't elaborate. He said he might be out of pocket for a while but would still try and check in at least once a day. Apparently, Burt has a cabin in the hills just north of

Springfield. I imagine Dex has gone to check it out. The police want Burt for questioning although it doesn't appear that a warrant has been issued for his arrest. They found his prints all over my room but Dex says even though Mom says he was never in the house the fact remains he could have entered without her knowledge some other time. Apparently, no prints on the broken glass. I didn't figure there would be. Not even bungling old Burt would be dumb enough to break a window with the ends of his fingers."

They did up the dishes and returned to the computer to check for further information.

"An email from my attorney," Al said. "He says Burt checked a book out of the library about our King family history. He wonders if it might mention your time at the artist camp down here. I've never seen the book, have you?"

"I didn't even know it existed. See if you can find out who wrote it. Maybe we can contact that person about its contents. I assume there was just the one copy to be checked out."

"I'm already on it. The name of the book is simply, The King Family of Kansas City. It was probably privately published so it may be difficult to trace."

"You're probably right there. The library website should have information about such a publication – date, publisher, author, and so on. See if you can access the lending data base."

"Good thinking."

"My old grey matter still works well on occasion."

Al rolled his gaze back and up into his Grampa's face and smiled. It said everything that needed to be said about the comment.

A few minutes later Al had information.

"Published eighteen years ago. I guess I'm not in it, then. Self-published by the author – somebody named Jennifer Roebuck. That ring a bell?"

"Yes, it does. Jenny. She was my wife's best friend. She moved to Seattle years ago. She had always had an interest in genealogy and had done books on her family and those of several friends. She used to joke about how boring mine would be since generation after generation we King men

did exactly the same thing as the King men who came before us. I really didn't think she had sufficient interest to pursue it."

"How does it feel to be so wrong?"

Another look. Another smile. Grampa ruffled the boy's hair.

"Here's some good news just in. They located the wheelchair guy and he remembered me and confirmed the time."

"That's great, Al. What a relief."

Grampa took a seat in his recliner. After a few minutes of deep thought, he had things to say. As he began speaking, Al turned in his chair at the computer to face him.

"We could get the local authorities into the act here. The problem is, if we again become suspects for whatever turn of event might cause that, they would have to pick us up. If the warrants for our arrests haven't yet been officially withdrawn from the law enforcement network – whatever it's called – then we might both be subject to immediate, if temporary, incarceration. I imagine that would keep us safe but I'd like to avoid it if possible. Still, it's about the only outside protection that's available for us. I'm thinking out loud. I don't expect you to pose a solution."

"I know. I'm not keen on being in the pokey either. I understand the delousing process is no picnic and don't even get me started on what I've heard about the showers."

"This is a small town. I doubt if there would be either of those things to be concerned about."

"We could look up private detectives in the yellow pages," Al suggested. "Having one of them close by could at least provide some protection."

"Not a bad idea. It provides another possible option for us to keep in mind."

Al perused the phone book.

"Closest seem to be in Fayetteville or Harrison. Don't know the geography."

"About equal distances away," Grampa said. "Are there several listed?"

"Eight in all – both books."

"See if Dex knows anybody down here."

"I'm on it. Like he said, though, he may not be

available to provide immediate responses like he has up to now.”

“We’ll not know until we – meaning you – give it a try,” Grampa said.

The email was sent. They waited for a reply – and waited and waited.

“For sure it’s not coming immediately,” Al said at last. “I guess we’re on our own.”

There was a heavy knock at the door. Al’s face flushed. Grampa’s heart skipped a beat. For the first time, they both felt helpless. Perhaps they could just ignore it. There was a second knock, louder and sustained longer than the first. Where was that peep hole when they needed it?

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### Milly?

The knocking didn't go away so Grampa went to the door. Placing his foot firmly on the floor six inches from the door so it couldn't be thrust into the room when he opened it, he turned the latch and slowly pulled it toward him.

"I was pretty sure you were home," came the voice of Pete Perkins the owner of the Photo Shop downstairs.

Grampa quickly moved his foot and swung the door open. The man entered.

"Now, Charlie, you know I'm not one to meddle but you are not exactly a regular sort of tenant. Don't get me wrong I love having you here but just in case all is not well in your life I thought you should know that a man just left the store inquiring about your paintings and wanting to know where he could find you. I didn't let on that I knew just in case that 'irregular' thing meant he might mean trouble for you. I told him you just dropped in periodically to bring in new paintings and collect the money from your sales."

"Thank you, Pete. There is an irregularity and soon I will be able to clear it up for you. In the mean time I appreciate the safe haven you have both offered and now protected."

Al had been at Charlie's shoulder throughout the exchange. He left to get the picture of Burt.

"Did the man look like this?" Al asked.

"The spittin' image. I guess he engaged you to do a portrait of him. Sorry if I made a mountain out of a molehill. Just something about the man that seemed creepy."

"He seemed that way to me, too," Al said pleased with his uninformative response. "I'll run him down later."

"It's best we keep this all just between us, Pete," Charlie said. "Like I said, I should be able to clear it all up in



the very near future.”

“He bought three of your paintings so you can deduct another seventy-five dollars from your rent check.”

“At least the man has good taste,” Charlie said chuckling.

Pete understood it was intended to be humorous.

“Well, I’ll be on my way then. Just wanted you to know.”

He turned to Al.

“Is this old geezer treating you alright, son?”

“The best I’ve ever been ‘geezered’, thank you. It’s a great place up here for two bachelors. I want to thank you, too.”

Pete turned and descended the steps. Grampa left the door open and continued to peer outside looking for any suspicious person who might have been following him.

“I don’t see any bad guy out there. I do wish Pete would have phoned rather than coming up. That way there would be no chance Burt could have followed him to us.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. You think he did?”

“I have no way of knowing but my signature on the paintings confirms for him that I am around. Pete’s Photo Shop is the only connection Burt has to me. I’d bet he’s not far away. It seems that I am the one who he suspects is here in Green Mountain – not you. We need to move you elsewhere for your protection.”

“I’d rather stay with you.”

“I appreciate that but we can’t make this easy for him. I have made one good friend here – a retired Unitarian minister. Let me call him. He lives alone in a house at the edge of town – up on top of the hill. I can tell him I am ill and need a place for you to stay for a few days. Even if he doesn’t believe it, he will accept it and you.”

The call was made and arrangements firmed up. Al would arrive about midnight. The man didn’t even question that. They packed Al’s backpack with the necessities and made ready for the move. As was their habit, they turned out the lights at ten. In case Burt had, in fact, located him and had gathered information about his habits from the neighbors, Grampa wanted things to appear normal.

Grampa would accompany Al as far as the alley behind his friend's house. Al would enter through the back door. They would keep in contact by email – Grampa on the computer and Al on his amazing cell phone.

Midnight arrived. The plan was for Grampa to slowly make his way down the stairs with Al, crouched between Grampa and the building. Al would crawl down backwards on his hands knees hoping to make it appear that only Grampa was leaving. From the base of the stairs there were deep shadows up and down the allies. They would be able to stay out of sight virtually all the way to the top of the hill. Al wore the dark hoody and black sweat pants in which he had arrived. Grampa wore black jeans and a dark blue sweater – the only dark top he owned.

They moved cautiously and made the journey in about twenty minutes. Grampa had no reason to think they had been followed. Grampa watched the boy enter and saw the door close behind him. He turned and, continuing in his cautious manner, made his way back the same way they had come.

He entered his kitchen relieved that Al was safe but anxious about the situation as a whole. It turned out he had good reason.

When he flipped on the lights, there sat Bruce at the kitchen table a hand gun pointed in his direction.

“Andrew King, I assume,” he said.

“Mother told me never to give out my name to strangers.”

“A smart Alec, I see. That will only cause you pain, so cut the crap. Let me see your driver's license.”

Charlie handed it over.

“So, Grandfather, you ready to die?”

“No. Not if you are giving me a choice in the matter.”

“Like I said a smart mouth will only get you in more trouble.”

“Hmm! More trouble than you killing me. That makes little sense.”

“You're an odd old duck.”

“Been called much worse, Bruce.”

“How about dead then? How about being called dead?”

You won't live to tell anybody about whatever you think you've found out about the murders."

"Oh, but I already have. I've emailed numerous folks including the Kansas City Police Department. In fact, if I don't check in with them every four hours, they will know I am in some sort of trouble and contact the local authorities here in Green Mountain to look in on me."

Burt weighed the situation not at all sure he could trust what the old man had said. Still, he really couldn't ignore it in case it was true.

"Why would you tell me about that when, by just ignoring it, the cops would move in and try to save you?"

"Because, I'd like to try and talk some sense into you, Bruce. You are my grandson you know."

Bruce went to the window and peeked out through a crack between the curtains.

"When are you supposed to check in next?"

"One a.m. Why that's just about now."

"Show me your computer."

"In the front room."

They made their way to the computer desk.

"What's their email?"

"CandAdets2@gmail.com"

"What do you tell them?"

"Just that everything is fine. Then I usually say something humorous to pass the time of day – short and sweet. I have a question to answer about a recipe they sent me from the squad room."

"Recipe? I don't get it."

"We were talking about bachelor cooking and one of them sent me a recipe they said was easy and delicious. I tried it. Now I need to tell them what I thought of it. They will expect a response or become suspicious."

"Okay. But I'll be right here reading every word. If it ain't okay you won't send it, understand?"

"I always understand the person holding the gun, Bruce."

"Write the message."

Grampa wrote: Dex. All is well here. I loved the chili recipe. I give it a big lone star – maybe even two out of three.

Andrew King.

“That looks harmless enough. You can send it, then get away from the computer.”

Charlie complied and they took seats at the table in the kitchen.

“I got stuff to say to you before you have your fatal accident.”

“Fatal accident? That sounds so final, Bruce.”

“Believe me it will be. I figure a fall from the landing outside your door fifteen feet down to the cobble stone alley below should do you in. If not I can finish you off with a rock to the head and it will just seem like part of the fall.”

“I’m interested in how you located me.”

“There’s a book about the King family. It said you came here as a kid. I checked out Oklahoma first. Found you’d left. Figured this was a good bet if you was bent on hiding – the artist in you and all.”

“I see. Clever, I suppose. I assume you’re the one who sent me the birthday card and invited me to visit my son.”

“That’s right. I figured you’d contact Mark Wilson, your old friend when you came. I got close to his secretary and, well, you can figure the rest.”

“I can. You said you had things to say to me. How can that be? We don’t even know each other. Until a few days ago I didn’t even know you existed.”

“I never got my due from this family. I’m a King just like all you other King men. I’ve been treated like scum my whole life.”

“From what I have recently learned about you I believe you are scum, Bruce. I’m sorry that’s how life has turned out for you.”

Bruce reached across the table and struck the old man with the barrel of his gun. It caused a superficial gash on his temple, yet still bled profusely. Charlie held a napkin against his head as he tried to clear his brain from the blow.

“So, why kill me. Like I said, we’ve never had any contact. What possible wrong could I have committed against you?”

“Ain’t that. It’s that there is this trust fund some great great something-or-other grandfather set up. It’s the only

financial thing I've ever been included in that's worth anything."

"Could that be because you are, as you termed it, scum?"

It was call for a second blow to his head.

"Just listen. It's a great deal of money to be split up among all the living relatives who are not in jail or incompetent. I deserve it all. I tried to spare your life by framing you for your son's murder, but the cops don't seem to be buying that."

"I understand there is a young boy relative, also," Grampa said. "You intend to do him in as well?"

"If I need to. I framed him for his father's murder. That seems to still be going well for me. He ran away. It was like confessing to the murder, you know. May already be dead for all I know. That would only help my cause."

"This trust fund must be sizeable if you are willing to kill off all the other male heirs to get your hands on it."

"Almost two mil – more money than I ever dreamed of having."

"So, let's see, you place a \$500,000 value on a person's life."

"What?"

"You seem bent on killing four of us in order to receive two million. Divide two million by four and you get \$500,000 I believe."

"Oh. I guess so then. Better than being killed during a mugging for only twenty bucks."

"That's one rather twisted way to look at it I suppose. Of course, the killer gets the death penalty regardless – 20 or 500,000."

"I won't be caught. I've planned everything too well."

"Oh yes. You will be caught. Your fingerprints were found on the window sill and broken glass in the boy's room where you broke in and took the brick you used to kill his father. They were also found all over my motel room and on the shoes and hand bag of the motel maid you killed. By now a warrant has been issued for your arrest. When your home is searched I'm sure a Rolex watch and diamond wedding band will be found – the ones you took off the boy's father when you

murdered him.”

Bruce turned red in the face. He looked around and brushed at his suddenly perspiring upper lip.

“Well, if I’m not going to get the money, nobody is going to get it. I’ll see to you tonight and then spend whatever time it takes tracking down the boy.”

It told Charlie that Bruce, in fact, did not know Al was with him.

There was a knock on the door.

“Shall I answer it?” Grampa asked. “It’s probably Milly, my girlfriend. She often pays me late night calls if you get my drift. She waitresses – late shift this week.”

“Tell her to go away. Say you have a headache or something.”

“If I don’t open the door she’ll know something is very wrong. I’m a friendly person even when I have a headache. She knows that I’d invite her in for tea before asking her to leave.”

“Get rid of her. No tea. No nothin’.”

Charlie made a suggestion.

“You can stand behind the door. I’ll only open it a crack. I’ll tell her I have a bad cold and don’t want to infect her. Will that be okay?”

Bruce looked around again moving to the front window and then back to the kitchen. He saw few alternatives. He figured the old man had played it straight in the email so he would trust him for this as well. After all, he was the one who had the gun and the gun had a full clip. More and more he seemed to have less and less to lose if he killed the old man.

He nodded and motioned the old man toward the door. He took Charlie’s suggestion and positioned himself so when the door opened it would conceal him. That also meant, however, that he could not see who was on the landing.

“Make sure she don’t set a foot inside or she’ll get it, too.”

Grampa eased the door open, actually having no idea who might be there.

“Milly! I’m sorry, dear, but I’m coming down with this awful cold and I’m afraid if you come in tonight I might give it to you. You understand, don’t you?”

Immediately a pair of strong arms reached in and pulled Grampa through the door onto the landing. The door was pushed open pinning Bruce against the wall. The sheriff and a deputy entered and disarmed Bruce.

Al entered and planted the hug of all hugs on his Grampa. A man unknown to either Grampa or Al entered from the darkened front room. He carried something in his right hand – in the low illumination they couldn't make out what it was. It might have been a gun.

"Dex, is that you?" the sheriff asked fumbling for and flicking on the light switch.

"Dexter P. Applebaum at your service, gents."

He handed the gadget in his right hand to the sheriff.

"A tape recording of Bruce's confession to the murders of Andrew's son and Alexander's father, and his intent to kill both Andrew and Alexander. Hard to get better evidence than an uncoerced confession in the bad guy's own voice."

"I'd say we have him," the sheriff said accepting the small recorder.

"I really didn't expect you to show up on cue, like you did, Sheriff," Dex said. "How did you manage that?"

Al answered for the sheriff.

"Grampa sent me an email. My cell phone beeps every time one arrives. We made up an address about Charlie and Al as detectives – CandAdets. His ends in 1 and mine in 2. In the email to me he greeted Dex, not me, and talked about delicious chili and the lone star."

"And how in the world did that tell you anything?"

"It's like a secret message. Dex told me it was about our problems. Whenever Grampa says he likes chili something is wrong – he hates the stuff. The lone star referred to Texas and although that is more difficult to explain it made perfect sense to me. I contacted the sheriff. He said you had checked in with him earlier in the day – well, yesterday, now. I told him to just go along with whatever absurdity Grampa delivered if he opened the door."

The sheriff continued the story.

"When Andrew opened the door, he saw me standing there. He began spinning the yarn about somebody named Milly. He repeatedly moved his eyes to his left giving me the

clue as to where trouble had positioned itself. My deputy pulled Andrew outside to safety and I crushed Bruce behind the door.”

Grampa turned to the private detective and extended his hand.

“Dex. We are glad to meet you face to face. You don’t look anything like your emails by the way.”

Al smiled up into the sheriff’s face.

“See. I said absurd, remember.”

The boy turned to Dex.

“How long have you been up here?”

“I came in just after you two left. I’d been watching the place from across the alley since sundown. I felt very sure I understood what was going on with you and your Grampa sneaking out to a place of safety. I remained in the front room closet, door ajar. When Bruce entered I just waited. I must admit I figured both of you had left for the night and I wasn’t sure how I should proceed. Then when Charlie returned and the dialog began, I knew we had him. I was just about ready to call the sheriff when ‘Milly’ knocked. That’s some quick-thinking grandfather you have son.”

“It’s great grandfather and I am well aware of his quick thinking. He has consistently delivered great advice to me on the spur of the moment – on occasions when he had no idea what off the wall topic I was about to spring on him.”

The Sheriff turned to Charlie.

“I will need to get a statement from you verifying what Bruce admitted to. In the morning at the station will be fine.”

“I think right now would be best. This recently designated ‘quick old brain’ of mine just might have forgotten the entire episode by morning.”

It was cause for chuckles all around.

That done, the sheriff and his deputy left with Bruce in cuffs.

“This surely calls for cocoa,” Al said. “You like cocoa, Dex?”

“My second favorite thing.”

(No one asked!)

“I have a message from your mother, Alexander. It’s a three-parter: She hopes you will return home to live with her,



and promises that she will work with you to build a wonderful life now that you are both free from your abusive father. She says you can even attend public school if you want to.”

Al turned to Grampa.

“What shall I do? I don’t want to leave you but it sounds like mom needs me.”

“That is a decision I can’t make for you. Give yourself some time to think it through.”

Al nodded and proceeded to make the cocoa.

They sat and drank. Al sat in silence. Dex and Grampa made small talk. Presently Al had things to say.

“I’ve had enough time to think. Here’s what I’d really like, but like you said, Grampa, I can’t make decisions for anybody else. I’d like for Grampa and me to spend summers here in Green Mountain – say ten weeks or so. The rest of the year I’d like Grampa to come and live with mom and me in Kansas City. How about it?”

Grampa reached across the table and took Al’s hands in his.

“I have never had a finer invitation in my entire life, but I would offer these amendments to your suggestion. I maintain my home here. You come and spend summers with me – and any other time you can be pried away from your mother. I would be honored to come and spend holidays with you folks – Thanksgiving through New Year’s is one time that comes to mind. Not a whole lot going on here at that time of year.”

“I can accept that although I’d really like to have you around all the time.”

“You will. I’ll always be as close as [CandAdets2@gmail.com](mailto:CandAdets2@gmail.com).”

“And we can talk on the phone,” Al added. “I’ll call you every night.”

“Well now, I don’t know if Milly will like for us to be interrupted like that every night,” Grampa said with a smile while repeatedly raising his eyebrows.

“There isn’t any Milly,” Al said. “You just made her up out of thin air to fool Burt.”

The boy’s brow furrowed and he studied his Grampa’s face. “Is there a Milly?”

Grampa’s eyes danced. That was his full and final

answer.

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STORY THREE

# **John Doe**

**A teen in search of himself.**

By

**Tom Gnagey**

///

# MY DIARY

## ***ENTRY 1 – The beginning: What I know for sure about myself.***

I suppose when you start a diary you should tell something about yourself and why you decided to keep it. One of my friends says guys keep journals rather than diaries. I looked up the meanings and since I found that a journal is a kind of a diary I decided to go with the main word – diary. I'm not much of one to do things in a certain way just because other people do it that way. How can I find out who I am if I just copy what other people do or say or believe? It gets me in trouble sometimes and some of the kids don't like me because of it, but I say it's their loss not to have me in their life. I try hard to be a good person and I believe I am.

[That certainly was not how I figured I would begin this. Oh, well. It's me, I guess!]

There are lots of things about me that are different, not run of the mill, out of the ordinary I suppose. Again, I see those things as good. Lots of folks don't. They help define me as me – different from everybody else – unique. I like to think of myself as unique. I like to think of every person as unique and I take time to figure out what that is about everybody I come in contact with.

Back to those unique things. First, my name is Johnny Doe – really. My birth certificate actually reads 'Baby John Doe'. That means nobody knew my name when I was found

in the waiting room of a small hospital a few hours after I was born. My parents – well, they are foster parents, really (the third set I've had in my fifteen years of life), Ray and Ellen Potter – say I can legally change that to some other name if I want to. So far, I haven't seen any reason to – it's short so it fits easily on the lines of all the forms I fill out and takes very little time to add at the top of my school papers. Everybody can pronounce it. Plus, when people ask me my name and I say John Doe, they do a double take. They ask, "Really?" I say, "Yup!" And they never forget my name.

I have a good sense of humor – at least I think I do. I see humor in lots of places other people don't, which has sometimes meant giggling myself onto the back porch at meal times when I laugh at things my parents don't appreciate. Again, I figure that's just their loss.

I'm not bad looking according to most reviews I've received – average height, darkish blondish hair, blue eyes, slender build, fairly strong, and I can hold my own in a foot race or wrestling match. I have a couple of close guy friends, I find it easy to talk with girls, and I have a best friend – Bernadette. (She's a girl but not a girlfriend if you get my drift.) I call her Bernie. Her mom hates that. Bernie likes it. Guess who wins! Our birthdays are in the same month – January – mine early and hers late. I kid her about being older – and therefore, wiser – than she is. She takes it in good humor.

I have lived with Mr. and Mrs. Potter for eight years so it's like my real home. They are lot older than my friend's parents. I let myself believe that's why they haven't adopted me – because they are so old. That's really no big deal, but I'd be untruthful if I said I didn't think about being adopted as a good thing.

So, I'm a fifteen-year-old guy with blond hair and blue eyes who takes pride in thinking for himself, enjoys the humorous things about life and people, does his best be a good and honest person, and – oh, yes – has no idea who his original parents are/were (never sure how to say that). That is really what this diary is going to be about – the search for my beginnings.

## **ENTRY 2 – Stuff that may or may not be true about me**

Within the first entry I put things I knew for sure about myself. Here I'm going to list things that I suspect or assume about me and my past.

I have been blessed with a good portion of smarts – I make mostly A's and could make all A's if I decided to. Learning has always come very easily for me. That leads me to believe that my parents – or at least one of them – was a brilliant person. Sometimes I fantasize that one or the other of them was a scientist or a doctor or a college professor. Of course, I understand that lots of smart people never achieve such levels of public success. Take Mrs. Myers at the bookstore. She is hugely smart but she is very satisfied to own a bookstore. She's read just about everything. There are virtually no questions she can't answer at least to some degree and can always point me toward books that hold the complete answers – well, except for those questions that apparently don't have any substantiated answers like how did water form on Earth and what caused the destruction of the dinosaurs and could it be that once there were two moons orbiting the earth and when the little one crashed into the larger one did it make many of the craters on the present moon's surface. (I think about way out things like that a lot. You'll come to see that in these pages, I'm sure.)

And then there's Grampa Hank – not really my grandpa, or anybody else's I guess since he was never married. He's really old and has lived here in Cedarville all his life. He ran the Blue and White Grocery store for sixty years so you can see he's really old. If I ever have a question about this town or its history, Grampa Hank will have the answer. He can trace almost everybody's family trees back to 1900, all by memory. He can name all the men who went off to war from here and which ones did and didn't return. He knows most of the kids who went off to college, too, and knows where they are today and what they are doing. He can also tell you the price of a loaf of bread in any year since 1934, the year he started working at the store as a stock boy. (It was seven cents a loaf back then, in case you're wondering.)



Well, all that was just to make my point that although I can reasonably assume that I had really smart parents, that's not necessarily going to be much help in discovering who they are/were. I mean I can't just look for professors and doctors and such. A better clue to trace down I think is related to the fact that my skin always looks well-tanned – like a Native American or some Latinos. At the same time, I have this blondish hair and these blue eyes – neither a trait of either of those tanned skinned groups. They are more likely traits that are of Scandinavian (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland) or even Germanic origin. As I understand it, either, one of my parents comes from one kind of stock and the other from the other kind, or at least one of my parents carried both kinds of genes (light and dark). That doesn't really suggest any answers but it rules out some possibilities, I suppose (all of my genes being either one or the other, for instance, or Oriental or southeast Asian or Martian – that would be a hoot!).

I love cheese. Dad jokes that makes me Swiss. I tell him that since I love pizza more, I must be Italian. When I say 'Dad' I mean Mr. Potter, my foster father. I've called them Mom and Dad for most of the time I've known them. It makes it easier not having to explain things to other people and it feels really good to me. Finally, I'm with a family that I know isn't going to just pass me off to some other foster home when they get tired of me. We really love each other. I suppose that's why I've never been much interested in looking into my 'real' parentage. I liked the family I was with before I came to the Potter's. They had five other fosters. With them, though, I felt like I always had to be perfect so they wouldn't pass me off. I hope you can understand that. But, with Mom and Dad I know they'll love me and keep me even if I'm not perfect (a very good thing for somebody who is always doing dumb things while trying to do great things!).

Dad says making mistakes is the very best way to learn about being a competent human being – if you learn not to repeat the mistake and take time to think through what to do instead the next time! He is a very wise man. I think there is a difference between being wise and smart. Not that Dad's dumb by any means. He is a fantastic mechanic and can build anything out of metal. But, he's not much into school

learning kind of things – that's more Mom's area, although I'm already way ahead of her in most of my subjects. They both seem to take great pride in that. So, do I, I suppose. Partly because they do, maybe. I'm really happy with myself in almost every way. I do what I believe is right and never let the other guys persuade me to go along with them against my beliefs. That really ticks them off sometimes but since it is during those times that they generally get into big trouble you'd think they'd put 2 and 2 together and begin listening to me. I've learned that some kids – especially guys, I think – have a hard time looking way down the road to see what is likely to happen. I credit Dad with helping me be able to always look at the probable consequences of what I'm about to do and make good decisions based on it. He'll say, "What would happen to people's peace and happiness if everybody in town or in the world acted that way?" or "How would it feel if somebody did that, or said that, to you?" Like I said, a really wise man.

I've gotten off track a bit but is all about me and how I got to be who I am so I suppose it's Okay to include it.

One more thing. I've been thinking that it was probably my mother who dropped me off at the hospital. It would seem strange to people to see a man carrying an infant around a hospital, but not a woman – well, mostly I've decided. I wonder if she was on her own or if my father was waiting for her outside in the car. Of course, I have to wonder how they came to give me up, that way. I used to ask it like this: "Why didn't they want me?" Those are two very different questions and I believe the first is the only one that will be of any help in my quest to find out where I came from. (My English teacher would want me to say, 'from where I came', but I bet you don't care at all!) By using the word 'how' it makes me think about what things may have been going on in their lives at the time – things that might have made them feel they would never be able to take good care of me. If that's the case – that they knew they couldn't feed me or protect me or give me the other things a kid needs – I guess I need to thank them. Even with all the changes in foster families, I have been very well cared for. I've been fed and clothed and educated and never mistreated. Now, I also know I'm loved.

I also have to wonder if they – my original parents – ever loved me. I've heard that a parent automatically loves its baby even before it is born. I wonder if my parents loved me that way. I choose to believe they did and even sometimes stretch that into thinking they still do love me. I may never know, but my search for all the answers has begun – it is now 2 Entries old.

### **ENTRY 3 – Physical Clues**

So, I have some physical clues. They make no sense yet but I have confidence I will be able to put the pieces together eventually. Bernie will be good help. We've solved several local mysteries together during the past few years.

The first clue is what I was wrapped in when I was found in the hospital – a towel from the Flamingo Motel. The place still exists at the east edge of town. It's a run down, rent by the week, sort of place now. I don't know if that's how it was fifteen years ago. I intend to find out. I keep that towel in a box under my bed with the rest of the clues.

The second clue is the diaper I was wearing when I was found. It is actually a linen napkin with the initials LG in one corner. It may be more difficult to figure out. The initials could be anybody with those initials and, believe it or not, there are no LG's in Cedarville – at least not now. Mom says it's high quality linen so it was expensive. That may be a good clue in itself.

The third clue – clues, really – are the two huge safety pins used to fasten my diaper at the hips. They are four inches long and have plastic caps, I suppose you call them – heads maybe, where the pin fits into it so it doesn't stick anybody. One cap is pink and one is blue. They are clearly not really made for diapers because diapers haven't used pins since the 1960's I'm told. Back in those days they were cloth and had to be pinned at the sides and covered in a plastic or rubber pants – like undershorts that fit really tight around the waist and legs to keep theyou know what from leaking you know where. So, the pins are probably unrelated to the function for which they

were used in my case. (My English teacher would like the way I ended that sentence – 'for which they were used'.)

The fourth set of clues are two little, red, cloth, sacks with draw strings to close them at the top. The strings have tiny little tassels on the ends. They were secured to my feet like little socks to keep my tiny toes warm. They were clearly made to hold something – probably some things – very little things – washers, tacks, screws, who knows what. The red color and tassels make me think they might have held a gift of some kind. What sort of gift comes in a little bag? Since I was born just after Christmas, they could have some relation to that holiday.

That's the whole history that came along with me – a towel taken from a motel, a quality initialed napkin, two oversized safety pins, and two little red sacks. It's not much but it's what I have. I unfolded the towel a few minutes ago, and have it spread out on my bed. It seems pretty small. I can't imagine how a baby could have been wrapped up in it but, then, newborn babies are really small – I've seen a couple of them. Their entire hands are barely larger than my thumbs. The napkin might be about the right size. The safety pins are way too big but I can see how they could be made to work if they were all my mother had at hand. The sacks look too big as well – about eight-inches, top to bottom and six inches wide. I suppose if they were tied around my lower legs they would have served the purpose of keeping my toes all toasty warm – especially since they were also inside the towel.

I have only let a few people see them since Mom gave them to me on my 8th birthday – the first one I had here in this home. Mom and Dad have seen them of course. Bernie has seen them and I once let Kyle take a look – mostly to prove to him that I really was dressed in them when I was found.

Kyle, by the way, is my best guy friend. He's really into sports and video games – I'm not, so when we're together we mostly just talk and dream together about the future. He's pretty smart, too, but doesn't really apply himself. He's always in trouble at home for not doing his school work or something like that. I love school. He hates school. It may seem odd that we are friends but we seem to have a lot in common inside our heads if that makes any sense. We've written a

couple of stories together. That's been a lot of fun. We started writing a new constitution for the United States last year but found out it was a lot more complicated than we thought it would be so it's currently sitting unfinished in the bottom drawer of my desk.

With Kyle, we share ideas and often argue about how things are or should be – always friendly but usually louder than a simple discussion. With Bernie, it's more her listening to me ramble on about stuff that nobody else will listen to. We both like chocolate milk shakes and when we can gather up enough money we sometimes share one at Sam's Soda Shop on Main Street. Lots of the adults in town assume we are a couple, but like I said, we're not.

Cedarville is a small place. I guess there are about eight streets that run north and south and another ten that cross them, east to west. There is an old, two-lane, highway – 71 – that runs through town – that's Main Street. It makes for about 80 blocks of streets, 420 houses and 1,210 people (if you read the sign coming into town from the west) or 1,201 (if you read the sign coming from the east). Jake, the town's handyman, has trouble keeping letters and numbers in the right order so I assume he just got a little confused when he painted them the last time. That's okay. We all love Jake. He makes wonderful kites for the little kids in the spring. I know just about everybody in town and I'm sure everybody knows me. If I get into trouble across town, my parents always know about it before I get home. No secrets in this place. In a way that's okay – it keeps us kids on the ball I think. (Most of my friends would not agree with me on that, but like I said, I believe what I believe and they can believe what they want to.)

#### **ENTRY 4 – Data Collection Begins**

I figured that since I first come into evidence at the hospital that would be the logical place to begin my search. One problem: which hospital? Since the circumstances of my birth were unknown, the county judge made out a birth certificate that just had the date, the county and the state.

Mom and Dad don't know. The closest hospital is in Rossville, four miles east on route 71. I decided to make my first inquiry of Grampa Hank. (When there is meaningful conversation involved in all this, I'll try to reconstruct it here in these pages.)

"Good to see you, Johnny. It's been a while," Grampa said as I made my way up the walk toward his front porch where he was sitting in his rocker.

"Yeah. Sorry about that. No good excuse. It's good to see you, too, by the way."

"This purely social or did I detect a sense of purpose in your stride just now."

"You're good. There is a purpose for my visit."

I sat on the steps, my back against the railing, turned so I could look up at him.

"I've decided to begin looking into who I am – I mean where I came from – mother, father, things like that. I thought it would be a good starting point to contact the hospital where I was found, but I don't know which hospital that was. Thought you might have a thought about that."

"A thought about a thought. Who but Johnny Doe would ask for a thought about a thought? You, did however, come to the right place. I retired from the Blue and White a dozen years ago – the same year that Doc. Boyle's hospital closed here in Cedarville."

"I didn't know there was ever a hospital here," I said sitting up straighter, ready to listen.

"It stood up on Boyle hill for almost 70 years. You are looking at the first baby to have been born in it."

"Up where our school stands, now?" I asked to make sure I understood.

"Same spot. Doc gave the property to the school board."

"So, are you saying that was the hospital where I was left or found or both, I guess?"

"That's right – two days before the place closed down."

"Then, that makes us like bookends, doesn't it?" I said.

He shook his head and frowned clearly not understanding my reference.

"I meant you were the first and I was probably the last – bookends on each end of the baby population."

"I see. Yes. I suppose so. In fact, although you weren't technically born there, you were the last newborn that Nurse Alice cared for."

"Nurse Alice?"

"She was Doc Boyle's nurse for decades. When he died a few years back he left everything to her."

"How big a hospital was it?"

"Small. It only had six patient rooms – plenty for Cedarville."

"I never met Doc."

"No, but you know nurse Alice."

"I do?"

"Allie Brooks?"

"Really, I didn't even know she was a nurse. She is really old."

"Watch your tongue, young man. She and I graduated in the same class."

His wonderful smile told me he was just putting on an act about being upset. I razzed him a bit.

"You mean they really had schools back then?"

He took a playful swipe at me with the folded newspaper that had been laying in his lap. We had a chuckle.

"I'd suggest that Allie is the place you need to start. She's the only one left with actual firsthand knowledge of what happened that morning."

I stood up and prepared to leave.

"Thanks, Grampa. I promise to come back just to talk sometime. I really do like our talks."

"And so do I. Good luck on your exciting quest."

Allie lived across town so I paced myself at a medium trot and was soon at her front door. She lived in a small house that looked to be no more than three rooms from the outside. I knocked. The door opened.

"Good morning, Allie, er, Nurse Alice, as I've just learned you've been most of your life."

"Well, as I live and breathe if it isn't my sweet little Baby John Doe."

"Thanks for remembering me because that's really why I'm here – sort of at the suggestion of Grampa Hank."

"Come in. I got milk and cookies or is that too childish

for a young man of your age?"

"I'm planning to never be too old for milk and cookies, ma'am."

We sat in her small living room filled with nick-knacks and things from her past. There were lots of black and white photographs of people – her family I assumed.

"So?" she began. It was clearly a question to get things going.

"I have decided it is time for me to find out about my past – parents and such. I just learned you were the one who found me at the hospital. Can you tell me about that?"

She sighed and smiled and folded her hands in her lap.

"I was walking down the hall early that morning – the sun hadn't even come up yet – when I heard what sounded like a baby crying. I was confused because we had no babies in the hospital. In fact, nobody was there because we were preparing to close the place on Saturday. I retraced my tracks and immediately located you. You had been placed between two big pillows on a gurney – that's a table on wheels that we moved patients around on."

"I know about gurney. Please go on."

"I could tell whoever put the baby there had taken great care to make sure it was safe – the pillows on each side. It – well, you – had apparently just started crying. Your arms were moving and your legs were kicking and your lungs were calling out as if not to be ignored. I knew immediately you were brand new. I picked you up and took you into Doc's office. I laid you on his exam table and he gave you a once over. I went to prepare a bottle of formula for you. By the time I got back he had you unwrapped, out of your wet diaper, washed up and dried off. I got a diaper and a baby jacket and within ten minutes of finding you, you were all quite presentable. I picked you up and teased at your lips with the nipple on the bottle. It always amazes me how a baby knows just what to do and you began sucking. It was sort of funny. When you first tasted the milk your eyes popped open as if to say, 'What a wonderful surprise!' You had beautiful blue eyes then, like you do today. You were still red as an apple and wrinkled from being born. Doc figured you were no more than six or eight hours old."



“So, what happened to me – if the hospital was closing?”

“I took you home with me that first night. Doc called Social Services and they came by the next day to pick you up so you could have a real home to live in. Judge Black issued a generic birth certificate and later on the state issued an official one. Have you seen them?”

“Yes, I have. They are in my special box of things. Thank you, by the way for saving the things I was dressed in. They have been very important to me and now I believe they will be my best clues as to who I am.”

“Are you sure you really want to go through with this? What if you can't find out who your parents were? What if you do find out and they turn out to be terrible people? What if you actually find them and they tell you they don't want you around? Are you prepared for all that?”

“I think I am. I have my parents, Ray and Ellen Potter. That won't change. I'm just looking to complete my story. There are several interesting questions I'd like to find answers to.

“Such as?”

“Such as, how I came by this blond hair, blue eyes, and well-tanned skin. It's like a mystery I need to solve.”

“Well, I have no clue as to who your biological parents may be. I can surmise several things though. They cared deeply for you because you had been well taken care of and they took you to the very best possible place available – a medical facility. They had bundled you up to keep you warm against the January cold. I can only imagine the contradictory feelings they must have had that early morning.”

“Contradictory feelings?”

“How precious they knew you were and at the same time knowing, for whatever reason, they had to give you up.”

“Yeah. I suppose. I hadn't ever thought about it like that. Thank you, for that. But that's all you have?”

“I'm afraid so. Oh, there was one other thing. There was a string tied around your wrist and it had a lock of blond hair tied to it. Doc kept it in the file in case it was ever needed to verify parentage – DNA you understand.”

“Where are those files now?”

“The county judge took possession of them.”

“Judge Black?”

“That’s right.”

“I wonder which parent’s hair it was.”

“It smelled of lavender so I believe it was definitely your mother’s.”

“A blond mother. That probably means I got this dark skin from my father.”

“You do realize that your parents may not have been married and if that was the case your father may not have even known you were on the way.”

“I know that. Dad had talked with me about all that. The fact is, however, I did have to have had a father in order to be born.”

She just smiled. I stood. She picked up several cookies and handed them to me, pointing to my jacket pocket. I thanked her and went off to share my new information with Bernie.

## **ENTRY #5 – Napkins and fine dining**

I felt somewhat more positive about my parents after the talk with Allie – Nurse Alice. I went directly to Bernie’s house. She was in the kitchen helping do up the noon dishes. I took a dish towel and began drying, hoping her mother would take that as a signal she wasn’t needed and would leave. She did and she did. I filled Bernie in on what I’d found out so far.

“I didn’t know there used to be a hospital here in town,” she said.

“Me either. The records from there are now kept at the County Judge’s office.”

“You going to ask to see them?”

“Not now. Maybe later. I got first had information from Nurse Alice. I think it’s time to start following the leads my clues may provide.”

“By clues you mean the box of stuff under your bed?”

“Right. I think I need to go back to Grampa’s and ask him about any connections he might be able to make for us.”

“Can I come along?”

“That's why I stopped by. You always think of things I don't. We're a team, remember?”

It took us about ten minutes to finish the dishes, put them away in the cupboards, and do serious damage to what was left of a chocolate cake from the day before.

“I'm going out with Johnny!” she called to her mother as we left.

“Have fun!”

That was always her comment when we left together. It was good she trusted me. My Mom always said, “Be careful.” Kyle's said, “Stay out of trouble.” Funny what parents say.

We were quickly there. Bernie could keep up a good trot right beside me. Grampa was in the back-yard stacking wood for his fireplace – it was how he heated his little house. It had been a warmer than usual November and December so it hadn't taken as much as usual. He used to go into the timber and cut his own wood, but during the past few winters he had it delivered by the pickup load. It looked like a new load had just been dumped off. Bernie and I pitched in. Grampa had his ways and we did our best to stack it according to his directions.

“I went and saw Nurse Alice. She was really helpful like you said she'd be. Now I have a couple of other questions if you have time.”

He raised his arms and looked around.

“My kingdom, here, doesn't really take up all that much of my time. Of course, I have time.”

“The linen napkin that was used as a diaper for me when I was found at the hospital had the initials or the monogram 'LG' in one corner. That mean anything to you?”

“Let's see. LG. Hmm. There was a Larry Graham but he died when I was little boy so probably not him. For a while there was a second grocery store in town – Lou's Groceries. Don't know why he'd have had linen napkins though. Oh. Sure! Lord Gaylord's Restaurant. It closed a few years back. It was in what's now the empty building next to the empty building that used to be the bank.”

Bernie and I looked at each other and smiled. We did know what he was talking about, however.

“Was it operating when Johnny was born?” Bernie asked.

Grandpa thought out loud for a few moments.

“It closed down shortly after the super highway was finished south of town. Once it opened there was hardly any traffic on old 71 anymore. Without traffic, there weren't hungry travelers and without them a restaurant couldn't make it. That would have been – he counted on his fingers – fifteen years ago, so yes and no to your question, Bernie. It was operating and it was not operating since it closed at the end of that year.”

“So, it was probably still open in early January, when Johnny was born?”

“That would be a good assumption, I think.”

“What else can you tell us about Gaylords?”

“It was about as classy a place as this area had seen – tablecloths, candles on the tables, soft lights, waiters instead of waitresses – no offense to your gender, Bernie. They served little loafs of warm bread – all you wanted – and every meal began with soup and ended with cheese cake.”

“And the tablecloths and napkins – did they happen to be linen?” Bernie asked.

Again, Grampa thought for a moment.

“Yes. They were linen and I can answer your next question before you ask it. The napkins had the initials LG in one corner. They were large napkins as I recall.”

“Great information. Thanks,” I said. “Now, how about someplace that used or sold over-sized safety pins with plastic, colored, caps?”

“I must say that doesn't ring any bells. How big?”

I showed him, spreading my fingers apart to about the correct distance.

He shook his head.

“Okay, then. What about a place that might have used little red, cloth bags with pull strings at the top. About this big.”

Again, I demonstrated.

He scratched his head.

“Red, you say? The hardware store used to use light tan cloth bags like that for washers and screws and such but never colored that I know of. You could ask Billy at the store.

He's been there for decades. He'd remember.”

“Okay. What can you tell us about the Flamingo Motel? Has it always been a rent by the week place?”

“No. Back in its day it was a pretty nice place. Like the restaurant, though, when the highway opened up, we didn't get many overnight guests here from old 71 anymore. It was about at that time that she started renting to short timers by the week.”

“She? Short timers?” Bernie asked, indicating two questions.

“Jane Starr. You know her. She still owns the place. Short timers are folks who just need a place to stay around here for a few days or weeks or so. Lots of them are undesirables if you ask me. They mostly stay to themselves. Wouldn't doubt if the authorities were on the lookout for some of them.”

“Do you think Jane would talk with me? I know who she is but apparently, like her guests, she doesn't mix much with us town's people.”

“Sure, she'll talk with you. Tell her Harold the love of her life sent you.”

“Harold?”

“Hank is short for Harold, and before you ask, Bernie, yes Jane and I dated a few times back when.”

“A few times?”

“Okay. A few years. We were in our forties and way to set in our ways to get hitched so we cut it off. I guess I cut it off. She married a guy a few years later but he ran out on her along with her bank account. Nice lady. Too bad.”

We finished stacking the wood and I took a supply into his house for him. He thanked us. We thanked him. We moved on to the motel. It was nearing five o'clock and the sun was about to set. We needed to make it snappy.

## **ENTRY # 6 - Now we're getting somewhere**

I felt like we had made progress – locating the likely source of the napkin. I had a hunch that since it used waiters, it was probably my father who had worked there. They were

probably really poor so wouldn't have been paying to eat there. I had always fantasized that they were really young – in their early twenties or less. An older couple would have put me up for adoption or acted in a more mature way about it I figured.

Jane flashed a smile as she opened the door after my knock. She looked to be mostly Native American in features and in skin color. Her face was home to a billion wrinkles – they looked like lace I thought and I liked her appearance. She was really thin. Her hair was long and uncombed – almost pure white and looked like it hadn't been washed for some time.

“I don't rent to kids,” She said.

“That's not why we're here,” I said. “We wondered if you'd have a few minutes to talk with us about the old days.”

I thought that was a stroke of genius. All old people like to talk about the old days.

“You from here in town, ain't you?” she said after looking us over as if we were a couple of ponies she was thinking of buying. I expected her to pry open my mouth and count my teeth.

“Yes. This is Bernadette and I'm Johnny. The Potters are my foster parents. I am trying to track down who my biological parents are/were and one of the clues I have to go on concerns the Flamingo Motel.”

She raised her eyebrows. I took it as indicating interest. Later, I'd find out Bernie took it as an indicator of skepticism – as if she didn't believe the reason I gave was my true motivation. It was probably a combination of both.

“Come on in out of the cold. Only got two chairs.”

I motioned Jane and Bernie to sit down. I stood behind Bernie and continued.

“When I was found, as a day-old infant, I was wrapped in a towel from this motel – it said so in huge letters. That would have been sixteen years ago on the 2nd of January – the one coming up. I understand you owned this place back then, too.”

Jane nodded.

“I lose lots of towels. Folks just steal them and the wash cloths. It's like a game for some, I guess. So, I don't

know how I can help you on that.”

“Just hoping something might ring a bell – like a young woman who looked pregnant one day and not pregnant the next day. She might have been with a young man. She had blond hair that smelled of lavender and he was most likely Native American or Latino. They might have lived here for weeks or months, even. He might have been employed at the Lord Gaylord Restaurant as a waiter.”

“You seem to have lots of information for not knowing nothing about them.”

“We're just beginning our investigation. All I have is bits and pieces. The people of the town have been very helpful. That reminds me, Harold, the love of your life, told us to say hi for him.”

Jane's face brightened and her eyes teared up a bit.

“Old Hank. He always was a scamp. He told you to tell me that did he?”

“Yes ma'am. I didn't mean to make you sad over it.”

“Not sad, just bein' a female. Bernie understands, right?”

She looked at Bernie. Bernie smiled and nodded. Darned if Bernie's eyes hadn't teared up as well. I will never understand the female of this species. (But that's another long, long story.)

“Harold and I were good friends a long time ago. Should have hog tied him before he got away. So, he's helping you, is he?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

She paused a few moments and then began to talk.

“I do remember a couple like that. Don't remember names. Most folks who come through here don't use their real names anyway so I see no reason to try and remember. They was here for a long time – maybe two or three months. I gave them a special rate – they was young and clearly poor and way too young to be on their own. They drove a beat up old van – paint peeled down to the metal. They seemed happy and very much in love. I think they both had jobs but if I knew where I don't remember. They stayed to themselves. Paid by the week in cash. He always brought the money to me so I really didn't see much of her. She was pregnant for sure –

very pregnant. Not sure there's anything else stored away in this old white head.”

“You have any idea where they were from – license plate state, maybe?” Bernie asked.

“Good question, Bernie,” I said.

Jane looked up at me.

“You got a good gal there. Take good care of her.”

I figured it wasn't worth trying to explain about the two of us so just nodded. Jane continued.

“I do remember that it was Oklahoma. I remember that because I was born and raised in Oklahoma. I'm Cherokee, myself. Left the reservation when I was sixteen. Bummed around for years before settling in this area.”

“We sure thank you for your time and the information. If you think of anything else, I'd really appreciate it if you'd give me a call at the Potters.”

“If I recall anything . . .”

Bernie stood and we left. Again, it had been a very revealing meeting and again, I came away feeling very good. At Main and Mill we parted ways – about another block home for both of us.

It appeared the two of them – the couple I am assuming were my parents – were in love and happy together. That's how it should be between parents. They worked so they weren't expecting some government program to take care of them. I respected them for that. I needed to find out where they had worked – well, I suspected the man had worked at Gaylord's Restaurant. That left finding out where she worked. Mrs. Myers at the bookstore might be able to help. She had several books about the history of Cedarville. The City Clerk's office might have records about who owned the restaurant.

But, all that will have to wait until tomorrow – Monday – the official beginning of our Christmas Vacation from school. This year it would be three weeks long – well, two weeks in this year and the first week in next year. My birthday was often the first day back to school after vacation and that was always a bummer. Not this time, however.

At supper this evening, I shared my findings with Mom and Dad. They had lots of questions – like usual – and were really interested in everything I had learned. Now that I have



this all caught up on these pages, it's lights out and to sleep. We're meeting at the bookstore at seven – it doesn't open til nine but Mrs. Myers is always there early – it's when I usually arrive. She knows I don't have much money for books so she lets me read some and write short reviews for potential buyers to read. I know it's really one-sided in my favor but I also help out, sweeping, running errands, straightening the books on the shelves and such. Mrs. Myers and I are really very good friends. I'd say she's in her mid-fifties – gray hair, a few wrinkles on her neck, reading glasses, and she wears dresses like Mom does.

### **ENTRY #7 – Books and Safety Pins**

Bernie and I arrived at the back door of the bookstore just as Mr. Myers pulled up in her van. She seemed happy to see us. I carried some things inside for her from her car – briefcase, lunch pail, and, believe it or not, a stack of books. I caught her up on our search – what we had learned and what we still had to discover.

“First,” I began, “There's just some general stuff you may know about because you've lived here so long.”

“So long! You make it sound like I was one of the founding fathers.”

I flashed her a smile. I had learned as a little boy that usually calmed things down when I'd made an insensitive remark.

“I meant some of it may be girl stuff.”

She turned to Bernie.

“So, now he's divided the world up into boy stuff and girl stuff. You let him get by with that, Bernadette?”

“With Johnny, I've learned it's best to pick your fights and that's not high on my list of concerns.”

Mrs. Myers smiled. We all knew it had been in fun. I liked that about her. She always tried to keep things light and pleasant. I continued as if none of that had taken place.

There are two things left from how I was dressed when Nurse Alice found me – two oversized safety pins and two little

red cloth bags with drawstrings. One of the pins has a pink cap and one a blue cap. Any ideas?"

"Several in fact. There used to be a baby store here in town called the Baby Blanket. Instead of leaving sacks open or stapling them shut, they inserted a large safety pin across the once folded top of the sacks. If the product you bought was for a boy they used a blue pin – pink for girls."

"Now who's dividing the world into boy stuff and girl stuff," I said just to make a point.

Mrs. Myers shrugged and grinned.

"Was that store open around the time I was born – sixteen years ago, on the second of January."

"I'm sure it was. I bought baby things there for my niece and she's thirteen."

"You remember any of the people who worked there?"

"Well, Mildred Black owned the place."

"The Mildred Black over on Elm Street?"

"Same one. But in answer to your question, no I don't really remember her employees. I'm sure she'd be happy to talk with you. I can call ahead if you want me to."

"Yes. That would be helpful. We could drop in later this morning."

"There is one unique thing about that store. All the salespeople were young women who wore padding underneath their clothes to make look like they were pregnant. The store mostly just sold infant's things."

My heart started beating fast. I looked at Bernie but began speaking to Mrs. Myers.

"It might be that my mother worked there. Since she was really pregnant she wouldn't have needed any padding."

"Interesting. I'm sure Mildred will remember."

"What about the little red sack. I should have brought one along."

"A red, cloth, drawstring-sack you say. I think I have an idea about that as well. Johnny, you know where I keep the newspapers upstairs."

"Yes. I've used them for school reports, remember."

She nodded.

"Well, go find a couple of them with dates a week or so prior to the Christmas just before you were born."

It took me almost ten minutes to sort through the stacks, even though they were very well organized. Stacks of newspapers are really heavy, by the way. I took them downstairs. The 'girls' had tea brewing. I'm not much of a tea person. I placed them on a table near her desk.

"What we looking for?" I asked.

"The advertisements. See if there is a color printed weekend end advertisement section."

"Yeah. Here. And I know what you are looking for. Right here on the front page for the old five and ten cents store. 'Christmas Chocolates for the Lady in your Life,' it reads. They look like quarter sized chocolates wrapped in gold foil and packaged in little red, cloth, bags, with drawstrings.

I held it up so they could see it. Bernie spoke.

"That's exactly the same as the bags you have. It tells us the 'what' but not the 'how' or the 'why'."

"How my parents got them and why they used them instead of booties or socks from the infants' store, you mean?"

"Right. Maybe Mildred will be able to shed some light on that."

"Seems I'm batting 1000," Mrs. Myers said crossing her arms and putting on a smug look."

"Maybe. There's one more thing, though," I said. Do you remember Lord Gaylord's Restaurant?"

"Yes, I do. My late husband and I ate there often."

"I understand it closed up about thirteen or fourteen years ago."

"That seems about right."

"You know who owned it and if that person is still around?"

"It was owned by a man from Rossville. His name was Gaylord. I have no idea about where he is. He was no spring chicken at the time. Why Gaylord's?"

"I have the idea my father worked there as a waiter."

"You're right. They had waiters – young, handsome. That I do remember."

"You might have been served by my father."

"It appears that we may have been. Just no way to know."

We thanked her for her help and walked toward the back door when she called out.

“You know, Charles Walker was a manager or an accountant or something there at the restaurant. Now he works in the City Treasurer's office on Main Street. He just might know something.”

That buoyed up my spirits a bit. We were off to see Mildred. Then we'd look up Mr. Walker.

### **ENTRY #8 – Thank goodness for her ripped dress**

Fresh snow had fallen overnight – not a lot but just enough to give the foot of dirty snow a pure white blanket on top. It was like Mother Nature had given the world a bath – everything looked so clean and spotless. We stopped to make snow angles and giggle like we were seven year olds again. We brushed each other off before arriving at Mildred's house. It was two stories and way too big for one old lady, I thought. Bernie reminded me it had been her family home and she had three sisters and four brothers.

I knocked. Her face peeked out from behind the curtain that covered the oval window in the door. She seemed really happy to see us. She had sandwiches and hot cider for us. I have never seen such tiny sandwiches in my life – two slices of bread with a smattering of ham salad in between, cut into four pieces with the crusts removed. I figured she'd forgotten about how much her brothers could eat. We sat on a settee (a small couch with fancy, shiny upholstery).

“Now, what can I do for you? Mrs. Myers said you had some questions for me.”

“Well, now that I'm about to turn sixteen, I've decided I want to track down who my biological parents are/were. Two of the clues I have are the big safety pins I understand you used to close packages at your infant wear store.”

“The Baby Blanket,” she said with a look of pride. “It never made me much money once the highway closed but I loved that place. What about the pins?”

"It's not really about the pins at this point but about one of your employees. Probably only worked for you for a couple of months. She would have been pregnant so wouldn't have needed the padding I understand your clerks wore. It would have been fifteen years ago. I know that's a long time to remember employees."

She nodded and smiled and sat down her cider.

"Emily, was her name. She had beautiful blond hair and the bluest eyes I'd ever seen. She was a sweet thing. She was a good worker. She and her husband were on their way to New York State. They ran out of money here so they stayed a while to refill their pocketbooks."

"Did she have a last name?"

"Parker. She had kept her maiden name. Her husband's last name was odd. I can't recall it off the top of my head. I never really spoke to him. I guess he was always working to earn money. They stayed at the motel – I imagine Jane might have some information for you."

"We've already spoken with her and she was very helpful. Do you know if they left before her baby was born?"

"I really can't say. Emily was usually very dependable, you know, but in the end, she just didn't show up for work one day and I never heard from her again. It wasn't like her. I called Jane because I was worried, you know – being pregnant and all. She said it was the same thing down there – skipped out in the middle of the night. Their rent was paid through the end of the week but they left on a Wednesday night."

"Do you remember anything special about that last day she came to work?" Bernie asked.

"Well, let's see. That has been so long ago."

"A life time for one of us here," I said, hoping to make a joke.

It got a chuckle but not nearly the response I thought it deserved. At any rate, I enjoyed it.

"I do remember that her dress, and it was one of only two that she had, ripped that last morning when she was changing into the outfits all my salespeople wore. Before she left that evening I helped her pin it back together. We joked about not knowing whether her baby was going to be a girl or

a boy so I offered one pink and one blue safety pin to pull her dress together.”

“I guess that tells us how she came by the pins for my diapers. Just need to find out about the red sacks, I guess.”

“Red sacks?” she asked.

Bernie took over the answer. Girls do that. It's like they think they can explain things better than guys. Maybe they can. Bernie is pretty good at it so I seldom let it bother me.

“Johnny had little red candy sacks fastened to his feet like socks.”

“Oh, yes. I'd forgotten about them – the coin candy from the Five and Dime store. Only available at Christmas time. Petty creative to use them for socks. Goodness, I'd have given her socks if she'd have just asked. She was honest as the day is long. She never would have just taken them and they were so poor I'm sure they wouldn't have considered buying such things.”

“We really don't have a good lead on the sacks, but Mrs. Myers thinks Charles Walker may know some things about the man I believe is my father. He worked at Gaylord's Restaurant as a waiter, I think.”

“Well, good luck. Let me know if I can be of any more help.”

## **ENTRY #9 – Lone Eagle**

The city offices were only open on Thursdays and Fridays so we went to Mr. Walker's house. He lived up the hill near the school so it took us some time to get there. Neither of us really knew the man. He sat in a rear pew at church – came late and left early. My Dad knew him – they were about the same age.

I knocked. No answer. I knocked again.

It was a large two story house. Bernie suggested we try the back door. That was often where the kitchens were in old houses. There was a back porch with three steps. We climbed them and, again, I knocked. We heard steps inside. The door opened.

“Mr. Walker. I'm . . .

“Johnny Potter and you, young lady, are Bernadette Banks.”

“Very good. We had no idea you kept track of us.”

“Actually, it's a wonder I recognized you from the front. I mostly just see the back of your heads at Church.”

We chuckled. He joined in. He seemed quite nice.

“Actually, although the Potters are my foster parents, my last name is Doe.”

“That's right. I knew that. No offense was intended.”

“That's okay. I'd be happy to be a Potter. I have a question or two for you about Lord Gaylord's.”

He invited us in and we stood in the kitchen.

“That was a few years back – mostly before your time. Shoot!”

“Fifteen years ago, there was a young man working there as a waiter. I don't know his name but I suspect he was my father. I'm told he was tall and thin with long black hair and well-tanned skin.”

“Jerry, I'll bet. The best waiter I ever had. Everybody loved Jerry. Really smart and quick.”

“I understand he had an odd last name.”

“He must be the one, then. Around here, it doesn't get much odder than LoneEagle. He spelled it like one word with a capital E on Eagle.”

“Native American?”

“Yes. From Oklahoma. He and his wife were on their way to New York State and stopped off here for several months when they ran low on money. He was really young.”

“You know his age?”

“Seventeen. I remember that because he was too young to serve wine to customers. I almost turned him down when he applied because of it. Sure glad I didn't. He was a sweetheart. So was his wife – his really pregnant wife. Oh, I guess that makes sense, doesn't it? So, you think he might be your dad?”

“The evidence is certainly pointing in that direction. When I was found, I was wearing one of Gaylord's linen napkins as a diaper – the LG in the corner.”

“I see. When napkins or tablecloths became soiled or

worn, I'd put them in a box by the back door and the employees could take them home if they wanted to. I'm glad that one found such a useful second life."

"Well, thanks a lot, Mr. Walker."

"I'd like it if you'd both call me Chuck – now that we know each other face to face, so to speak."

"Well, then, thanks a lot, Chuck. There's still a couple of loose ends I have to tie up, but with what you've told us most all the questions seem to have been answered."

"Any of those loose ends things I can help with?"

"I doubt it. I was wearing little red cloth sacks with draw strings for socks. It isn't essential to my story, but I'd like to figure out how they had come into the possession of my parents."

"What if I could tie that up for you, too?"

"Really? That would be awesome! How? What? I'll stop babbling so you can speak."

"All of that happened around Christmas. I'm sort of a softy at heart, but don't spread that around. Those kids were poor as church mice, as the saying goes. I was afraid they wouldn't have any Christmas presents. I knew Jerry would never take money if I offered it to him – he never allowed handouts – so I picked up two sacks of what we called 'coin candy' at the dime store. I gave them to him after we closed on Christmas Eve – that was always a big night at the restaurant. I remember he was quite appreciative and apologized for not having anything for me. I helped him past that and scooted him on his way."

"What a nice thing to have done for him – them. Thank you for doing that. Did he ever talk about the baby they were having?"

"He seldom said anything about his private life. One night when it was just him and me closing – chairs on tables, floor mopping, linens to the laundry bags – he did open up just a bit. That's when I learned they were heading to New York. His wife's grandmother and grandfather lived there and they were both quite ill. They were going to take care of them. The plan was he would get a job and she would stay home with them. I was worried, I'll tell you. A couple of seventeen-year-old kids setting off cross country in a van held together with



bailing wire and duct tape. They were so in love, though, I figured if anything would get them through it, it would be that.”

“And Jerry just didn't show up for work on the third of January?”

“Yes. That's right. How did you know that?”

“I was born on the second of January and they left the Motel in the middle of the night – right after I was born, I guess. Seems like she had me, they bundled me up really well, dropped me off at the hospital, and left town. There's a lot of mixed emotions in all this. I'll need some time to sort it all out.”

### **ENTRY #10 – There is nothing like a family**

I spent a lot of time the next week just thinking things through. I really could understand how a couple of teenagers wouldn't have been able to provide for a baby. They were poor, uneducated, and on their way to spend perhaps years taking care of sick relatives. By all reports they loved each other a great deal. That made me believe they had loved me, also. Probably loved me so much they knew they would not be able to give me a good and secure life so they did what they figured was the best thing and left me at the hospital – what safer and more thoughtful place could there be to leave a new born baby? I had never known them so I couldn't really miss them. I wonder if that works in reverse. I choose to believe that they do miss me.

I talked about it with Mom and Dad. They were a great help. Through it all I came to feel even closer to them – the Potters. They were always there for me. They weren't well off by any means but I had what I needed and some extra things that I just wanted. I felt secure. I felt loved. I came to appreciate my place in life and felt very fortunate to be a part of my family and my little town.

By Christmas Eve I had it all pretty well sorted out. I had accepted my situation and believed my biological parents had made the best decision for me. Through it all I had come

away with pictures of them in my mind – that was something I had never had before – and names, Emily Parker and Jerry LoneEagle. There was something very macho about my father having been named LoneEagle. I would spend time learning about the Native Americans of Oklahoma. (Perhaps, I'd even learn how to do a Rain Dance!)

As was our tradition, we had Christmas presents after supper on Christmas Eve. There were never lots of presents but that's not what it was about. It was about caring about each other and being a family. I made Dad a pipe holder out of wood, inlaid with flat-sanded colored stones from the cliff above the school. I made Mom a book of stories I have written – she always enjoys them. There were only eleven stories but I bound them in a loose-leaf binder so others could be added. I know they both will love their presents. I have no idea what they are doing for me. Sometimes it's a present. Sometimes it's taking me someplace. Often, it's clothes. I never know and I never give hints not knowing how much they may have to spend that year.

We gathered in the living room and pulled chairs near the tree. Dad plugged in the lights and Mom started some Christmas music on the CD player. I usually got mine first.

“This year, let's let Mom get her gifts first,” Dad suggested.

That was fine with me. I was older now and it seemed only right Mom should get her turn at being first. Dad got her a blouse. She loved my gift just like I knew she would. Dad went second at Mom's suggestion. Mom got him a shirt and he loved my present. I got the idea something was up but couldn't put my finger on it. It was partly the way they kept looking at each other. Partly the change in routine. Partly how little time they took opening their gifts as if they were rushing for some reason. I had noticed there was just one package for me. That was fine. Mom handed it to me.

It was an oversized book about Oklahoma Indians. It was filled with beautiful color paintings and photographs. The text presented a complete history right up to the present. It was probably the most expensive gift I'd ever received. I loved it and could tell they understood that. The opening of the last present usually signaled the time for cookies and eggnog.

Mom left the room to fix the treats. Dad and I began looking at my new book. He said Mrs. Myers had put a rush on it to get it here in time.

Presently, Mom returned with a pitcher and a plate stacked high with cookies. She poured. We sipped and snacked and made conversation – the kind you have when you're together but really have nothing specific to talk about. Dad spoke.

“There is something that may interest you between pages 15 and 16 in your new book,” he said winking at Mom.

I knew something was up. What was going on? Why 15 and 16? My birthday, maybe.

I opened the book to those pages. There was a long, sealed, white envelope. I opened it carefully wondering if it might be money or concert tickets. Really, I had no idea. It was a typewritten document of some sort. Long story short, it was adoption papers. Mom and Dad had already signed them. Two blank lines remained – one for my signature and one for Judge Black's.

I sat there holding the paper. Tears began streaming down my face. I imagine the same was happening for Mom and Dad but I couldn't see them clearly through my own.

Mom sniffled and spoke.

“You know we have loved you since the day you first came through our front door. We knew we wanted you to be our official son for most of the time you've been with us. But we decided it should be a decision that included you and that you needed to be old enough to give the matter an appropriate sort of thought. Now that you are about to turn 16 and now that you have worked through your connection with your biological parents, we feel you are ready to help the family take this big step – if it is what you really want.”

“Is it ever what I want! I won't even try to thank you because there aren't words. Yes. Of course, I want to adopt you.”

They chuckled out loud at my apparent mis-statement. It really wasn't a mis-statement as far as I was concerned. It was a two-way deal – a two way forever deal and I was overjoyed to think our relationship was about to move one wonderful notch beyond the love I had always known in their

home – in our home.

“Where's a pen?” I asked.

“Actually, you need to sign it in front of the Judge – tomorrow morning at seven a.m.”

I turned sober and looked them in their eyes.

“You understand this means I will have to give up something tremendously important to me.”

They looked at each other, puzzled.

“I'm giving up the awesome last name of LoneEagle to become a Potter.”

We had a good laugh.

“Look at your signature line, son,” Dad said. “It has a place for a middle name – something you've never had. Any idea what you might like that to be?”

“Do I ever! I'll begin practicing my new signature this very evening – Johnny LoneEagle Potter. How will I ever fit all that on those short little name lines on forms?”

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## **STORY FOUR: Justin and the Janitor**

**Their meeting leads to difficult circumstances.**

**By Tom Gnagey**

Charlie was becoming more or less comfortable in his new job as janitor at the high school in Crawfordsville. He had arrived in the small community in June after leaving his position as a civil engineer with a well-established firm in the city. Most forty-year-old men would be looking to move up on the occupational scale, but Charlie was in a period of retreat – mental, social, and geographical.

Three years before, his wife had succumbed after a lingering illness. Just two years before, he had lost his teenage son in a car accident. Charlie had been driving, which, in his mind multiplied the tragedy and added many layers of undeserved guilt. There was also unresolved rage associated with it – the driver had carelessly failed to stop at an intersection. It was not the life he had planned – alone and sad. He was counting on Crawfordsville to provide whatever it was he needed to begin the healing and get on with his life. That was probably an unrealistic expectation and part of him understood that. Still, he had grown up in small towns and believed they would be filled with good people. If nothing else, it distanced him from the city and protected him from ever seeking out the person who caused the accident and administering the vigilante justice that often seemed so right late at night.

The town, the job and the small house at the edge of the village all came about in fully unplanned ways. One Sunday morning, as he had been looking through the paper in

his very comfortable city apartment, he was drawn to the classified section on a whim. Atop the column labeled 'Out of State Employment' sat an ad that attracted his attention. It had been for the job at the high school, which had eventually become his. From that, in quick order, followed the resignation, the move and the new house – one of only two available for rent in the community. He opted for the smaller of the two.

He had started the first of August becoming a quick study under the patient and thorough tutelage of the retiring janitor. It had come to be mid-October and Charlie felt well settled into his new life. He kept a to-do list of things he wanted to fix or change around the house. He worked in the lawn – grass mowing, leaf raking and such. He did his best to keep busy, believing that would distract his mind from the several sad experiences that seemed determined not to be put to rest. The distraction was far from complete.

He enjoyed having kids around. His home had always been filled with his son's friends and he was the sort with whom teens seemed able to immediately relate in positive ways. It was undoubtedly one reason the position had seemed attractive to him, although it had never entered his consciousness in those terms. Financially, he was doing well, his entire budget becoming less than a quarter of what his apartment rent alone had been in the city. He had figured he would need to depend on his considerable savings during what he had characterized as his transition period – the period between his old life and whatever his new life would eventually become. That had not been necessary.

His office was a corner in the boiler room in the basement. It contained a huge, aging, coal fired furnace, which provided heat to the boiler, which made the steam, which heated the old two story building during the cold months. The pleasant side was that his little area was warm in the winter and cool in the summer. The less pleasant side was that it was quite isolated from the flow of the young people. Charlie invented reasons to be in the halls upstairs during period changes and was gradually becoming acquainted with the students – well, those who had time for things other than their animated conversations about who had

done what to whom and why so and so had broken up with so and so, and so on.

That morning, after he had unlocked all the outside doors to the building, and adjusted the thermostat on the furnace to maintain an appropriate temperature for the seasonally cooling weather, and deposited samples of bituminous and anthracite coal in the science teacher's room – things he had promised her the week before – he poured himself a mug of coffee and sat back in the tattered recliner that he had inherited with the 'office'. It had become his 7:30 routine.

There was a knock on the old metal door that led to the playground out back. Only he ever used the door so it came as a surprise. It was not locked so he called out.

"Come in. Not locked. Wipe your feet on the mat."

The door edged open slowly revealing a boy – perhaps fifteen. Charlie did not remember having seen him before. He stood to greet the lad.

"I don't see a mat, Sir."

"There is none. My little joke. Apparently a very little joke from your reaction. Come in. What can I do for you?"

"It's going to seem pretty stupid, I suppose."

"I've always figured stupid was in the eye of the beholder."

The boy clearly didn't understand and Charlie felt that to pursue it would be unproductive.

"Sometimes I just say dumb things. Forget it. Come on in."

The boy closed the door and took several tentative steps toward Charlie who extended his hand. The boy seemed uncomfortable with the gesture so Charlie withdrew it.

"I'm Charlie, by the way. Sorry, but I don't remember seeing you in the halls."

"Just transferred in. I'm . . . Justin."

How interesting, Charlie thought. The lad had to stop and think what his name was. He waited patiently for the boy to reveal whatever 'stupidity' he was going to reveal.

"I broke my belt."

"I must say I have never before heard that as an opening remark."



The boy looked at his feet clearly not sure what to make of the man's comment.

"So, what about your belt?"

"I'm Justin."

Charlie wondered if such a disjointed conversation had ever before been undertaken in the English language.

"Good to meet you, Justin. Hope you like it here."

The boy removed his belt and offered it to Charlie.

"I see. The buckle has worn through the leather. I'll just bet I can fix that if you're not too picky about how it looks."

"I'm not picky. Thanks."

Charlie moved to his work table. Justin followed and watched, having very little – well, nothing – to say. Charlie talked his way through the process.

"We'll cut it here just below the rip. Fold it over around the back side of the buckle – nice heavy buckle by the way. Then we'll use this heavy-duty stapler and fasten it all back together. I think we'll need to make a new hole out toward the end so it will fit. Seems to be room. I don't have a punch or awl but I imagine we can use a hammer and nail."

The belt was soon fixed. Justin threaded it back through the loops on his jeans. As he cinched it up through the new hole and felt the perfect fit, the faintest hint of a smile formed at the edges of his lips. He nodded and looked into Charlie's face for the first time.

"The kids said you could fix anything. How much I owe you?"

"A smile every time we meet."

The boy furrowed his brow. Much about this man and what he said was proving to be difficult for him to understand. Charlie hurried on to clear up the confusion.

"I never charge for helping others. I've noticed that you have appeared quite serious ever since you entered the room. I just meant I hope you can find reasons to smile today. And, to remind you, when we pass in the halls, I hope you will show me your smile."

"You are very strange – no offense, sir."

He looked like he wanted to offer more of an explanation but couldn't produce it.

"You have me pegged, Justin. I am indeed strange in

many ways. Probably harmless, but a bit out of the ordinary, at least.”

“Well, I better go. Stuff.”

The boy turned and headed for the back door.

“That other door up front there leads to the inside stairs to the first floor. Be warmer if you stay inside.”

“Okay.”

He responded as if it had been an order. That had not been Charlie’s intent.

At the door Justin turned back into the room.

“Thank you, Charles.”

He left.

‘Charles?’ he thought to himself. Only his grandmother had ever called him Charles.

At three fifteen the final bell of the day rang. Charlie sprayed the underside of a wide mop with cleaning oil and made his way up the stairs to the second floor. He began the hall mopping up there because late in the day that area cleared out first. The first floor remained busy until near five with basketball practice in the gym and after-school clubs meeting here and there. At the end of the hall he spied Justin working on the combination to his new locker – apparently without success. Charlie worked his mopping in the boy’s direction.

“Probably not the handiest locker to get to in this building, is it?” he asked hoping to initiate at least a short conversation.

“You’re right about that. Late registration and all.”

It had been two, almost sentences in a row. Charlie smiled to himself.

“Have a good day?” he asked the boy, stopping to lean on the mop indicating time for a short exchange.

“Okay, I guess.”

“That combination being obstinate, is it?” Charlie asked.

“Obstinate?”

“Difficult. Uncooperative.”

“Yes, sir. Very obstinate!”

“It may not have been used in some time. I’d be happy to see if I can help, if you want.”

“Okay. Yeah. Thanks.”

“You have the combination written down?”

Justin produced the printed card he had been given at the office. Charlie went through the, this-way-and-that-way routine. It opened.

“Beginner’s luck,” Charlie said, not wanting his quick success to be any sort of put down to the young man.

“I’ve never been good with combinations. The numbers get screwed around inside my head.”

“I can understand that. I’m the same way with phone numbers. Maybe I can help. Let’s see, those numbers are 9, 4, 31. How about this: The nine baseball players scored four runs on August thirty-first.”

“I don’t get it?”

Charlie took the padlock in hand and moved it so the boy could watch him work the combination.

“The 9 (he moved the dial to nine) baseball players, scored 4 (he moved the dial back to four) runs, on August 31st (he moved the dial right to thirty-one).”

“That’s pretty clever. Let me try that.”

He began, but moved the dial to the left rather than the right.

“Another suggestion if you will allow it. I see you are right handed. Just remember to begin by moving the top of the dial all the way to the right until you come to nine.”

The boy tried again. It worked. He tried a second time. It worked. He allowed a smile and tried it again. It worked a third time.

“Thanks. That’s really great. You won’t tell anybody, will you?”

“Tell anybody, what?”

The boy’s brow furrowed but then immediately cleared as he came to understand that the strange comment had signaled it was to be their secret.

“Another one of your odd ways of saying things. Thanks again. I hate having to carry all my books and stuff around in my back pack all day. That’s two things I owe you smiles for.”

“I thought you said you were bad with numbers.”

“I keep good track of my debts. I’m no freeloader.”

“I never doubted that.”

“Can I ask you something?” Justin asked less tentative than he had been.

“Certainly. Anything, any time.”

“You know any part time jobs here in town? There ain’t much extra money at home.”

“Quite honestly, I don’t, but I’ll keep an ear and eye out.”

“Thanks. Well, I need to get going. Thanks again for the baseball thing.”

“You’re welcome. Hope to see you tomorrow.”

The boy looked puzzled at Charlie’s comment, but neither of them pursued it.

\* \* \*

Charlie hated going to bed. It was partly because he missed his wife. It was when they had been close and tender and had caught each other up on their activities and dreams. He had no one anymore either to tell things to or to hear things from. Mostly, however, it was the nightmares – varying in content from one to another, but consistent in their terrifying images, emotions and direction. When awake, Charlie was a kind, gentle, and helpful person. When he was asleep, at least since the accident, he far too often exhibited a revenge filled, sadistic, hateful spirit. He despised that night-time version. It only visited his dream life occasionally, but the fear that it might return each night caused sweaty palms, agitation, and a fist-clinched struggle to keep his eyes open into the wee hours of the morning.

It had been an underage teenage driver who had caused the accident that had taken his son from him. In his nocturnal, hate driven illusions, Charlie experienced himself tracking down the lad and administering the most excruciating, tortuous punishments imaginable. His heart gladdened to the young man’s cries of agony and expressions of terror. He always awoke before the dreams found a conclusion, so there was never a sense of completion or finality, only the horrifying and frightening remnants of mans’ darkest possibilities.

The night, just passed, had been consumed by such a dream. He awoke from it soaking wet and trembling. He paced and pounded on the sides of his head as if to punish the thoughts and drive them away forever. He needed a

shower and lingered in the rushing water as if that might also speed his demons on their way.

\* \* \*

He was at the school early. Preparing the building for the young people that he genuinely liked somehow eased things for him after such a night. Seven-thirty rolled around and Charlie poured his usual mug of coffee and took a seat in his usual spot. There was a knock at the back door. Although unexpected, he was quite sure he knew who it was. He took a chance.

“Come in, Justin,” he called out.

The door opened and Justin peeked inside.

“How did you know it was me? Don’t see any windows.”

He entered and closed the door.

“You are my only 7:30 A.M. back door visitor.”

Justin nodded, indicating it had been a good answer – one that had apparently not been delivered in Charlie’s odd way of speaking.

“Anything special on your mind or is this just a social visit – which would be fine?”

“Just wondering if you had any leads on a job?”

“I do, in fact. This weekend I’m going to be re-tarring the roof over the gym on the west end of the building and I’ve been told I can hire somebody to assist me. It’s filthy work but it pays pretty well. Not steady work but it may be better than nothing – until something regular comes up. What do you say?”

“I don’t have any old clothes.”

“I’m sure I can find some for you in the lost and found – shirt, jeans and shoes.”

“Really? Okay, then. What time?”

“I like to begin early – seven.”

“Where? Here?”

“Yes. Here at a little before seven. You’re not allergic to tar or liquid plastic products, are you?”

“Not that I know of. Can that be serious?”

“Probably nothing worse than turning your skin red and making it itch.”

“I can live with that. How soon will I get paid?”

There was an obvious urgency implied in his question.

"I can arrange to get you cash as soon as the job's done. The school will cut you a check at the end of the month and you can pay me back, then. Is that a deal?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Why, what?"

"You don't know anything about me. For all you know I could be the worst worker on the planet. Maybe I'm a serial killer and I like to push men off rooftops. You sure as . . . heck don't have any reason to believe I'll actually pay you back. Why you doin' this for me?"

"My parents taught me to trust people until they showed me I couldn't trust them. So far, you've given me no reason not to trust you, have you?"

"No. You really are a odd duck, you know?"

"I believe we established that during our first meeting."

Again, there was a quick to come and go, almost smile, that rose and faded on the boy's face.

"Clothes?" Justin asked.

"I'll have them here for you Saturday morning. I'll guarantee you'll be filthy by the time we're finished. I assume you have a place to clean up."

Justin flashed a look at Charles that indicated both fear and anger. Charles neither understood nor was he completely surprised. He knew there was something out of the ordinary brewing under the boy's aloof personal style. He chose not to follow the trail at that time. It did prompt him to look into the young man's life a bit further, but for the moment let the topic drop.

"Your parents work here in town, do they?"

"It's just me and mom. She's not well. She gets a check every month. We get by okay."

It sounded contrived – pat – well practiced, even – stored away to be dispensed at times just like that.

"I'm sorry to hear she is ill. It's good she has you."

Charlie was afraid any follow-up questions might push him away and he didn't want that.

"Saturday morning – that's tomorrow – at about 6:45 then, okay?"

"Yes sir. I'll be here. And I'll get paid that afternoon,

right?”

“Right.”

It had been obvious that Justin had been eyeing the last donut on the paper plate on Charlie’s work table.

“Do me a favor?” Charlie asked as Justin hefted his backpack to his shoulder.

“What?”

It hadn’t been, ‘sure’, or ‘of course’, it had been ‘what’. It signaled a very cautious if not suspicious youngster. Charlie noted it but didn’t comment.

“I have that donut left over – one more than I can force down. How about you take it? I’ve never known a guy your age who couldn’t down a donut. I hate to throw out perfectly good food.”

Charlie lifted the plate in Justin’s direction. He stepped forward and picked it up, nodding.

“Thanks.”

He turned to leave by the inside door, pausing before opening it into the stair well. He finished the donut in three massive bites and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand before moving on. The boy was hungry – perhaps, famished. Things came into focus for Charlie. He needed the money so he could eat. That check his mother received, if there were a check, clearly wasn’t reaching until the end of the month.

During the day, Charlie went to the office to rummage through the lost and found. He had to wonder how boys could have lost six pair of jeans while at school. It brought a smile. While there, he inquired about Justin’s address under the pretense of needing to get his mother’s approval in order for him to assist with the roof. The secretary was happy to oblige and handed it over on a slip of paper.

Charlie left with three pairs of jeans and two generic, gray hoodies, thinking better than taking a shirt the other students might recognize. He was concerned about the boy on several fronts. The address the school had on file was five blocks north of Charlie’s usual route home – he was a walker. He decided to check it out and was soon there – soon there staring at a vacant lot beside the large, old Methodist church. His picture of the boy was filling in. He continued on home.

That evening he washed and dried the clothes he had

procured from the school, folding them and placing them in two plastic grocery bags for the morning. A bit later, while working at the sink, he looked out the window that faced the large back yard. A grove of trees separated it at the far end from the lot that faced the next street north. He caught a fleeting glance of a figure moving among the trees. Kids often played back there but this seemed larger than the typical young visitor. He checked it out on several occasions as he continued fixing himself something to eat. That night it would be a ham sandwich, left over from the ham of the previous weekend, and supplemented with potato salad rescued from the kitchen at school cafeteria – Maude, the cook, often dropped off leftovers before she left for the day. Whether that was a tactic to put some meat on his bones or something more hopefully personal, he didn't know. Charlie came from lean stock and was nowhere near ready for a romantic relationship so she would lose on either count.

The more he thought about the figure in the woods the more he became convinced it was Justin checking out his house. The reason for that was not at all clear, but then few things about Justin were clear. On a whim, Charlie fixed two plates, placing one on the table on the patio behind the house. He added a glass of milk. With some flair, he turned toward the grove, waved the figure toward him with his full arm and pointed to the table. He turned and went back inside. From time to time he glanced outside but the food remained untouched. He turned off the kitchen lights and was soon showering and preparing for bed.

He made one last trip to the window in the darkened kitchen before turning in. The plate was gone. Charlie smiled into the darkness, happy some person's hunger was being satisfied but troubled about his growing belief it was Justin – a young man in some sort of trouble.

Was there a sick mother? If not, was the boy on his own? If, so, why? How had that come about? Was he in trouble with the law? If he were a runaway, why had he chosen to be in school? To be with kids? Education. To save the janitor's donuts from growing old and stale? (He really was an odd duck!)

What did he really know? Justin may or may not have



been his name – the question arising from the hesitation with which he announced it at the time of their first meeting. The address he had given was false – not a smart move in a small town suggesting cities had perhaps been more his experience. Perhaps he was not planning to stay around for long. He was in need of both food and money. His personal approach seemed tentative – perhaps just a reaction to his new, uncertain, circumstances. Charlie was not concerned for the boy's safety there in the small town. Nor was he particularly concerned about his comfort – teen-age boys could be comfortable anywhere they could sit down. As autumn turned into winter, that would necessarily change. It appeared he was choosing not to steal what he needed – a plus for the lad, but how long could that last as his situation became more and more desperate? He was willing to work and apparently proud that he was not a free-loader and took care of his debts. He seemed to want to cultivate a relationship with Charlie – perhaps just with any man and Charlie was the one handy. Had he lost the dependable adults in his life?

Sleep did not come easily that night. He hoped the day of working together would produce some useful revelations.

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There was not so much as a crumb left on the patio table. It could have been raccoons but they were not known for putting the paper plate and plastic spoon in the trash can. Justin arrived at the school on the dot at 6:45.

“Looks like it will be a good day for roof work,” Charlie said, making conversation as the boy donned the least stylish of the clothes in the sacks.

“Why so many clothes?”

“I just thought you might be able to use a few extras and they aren't doing anybody any good stuffed into the lost and found boxes in the office. I figured you'd be doing them a favor by wearing them.”

He sniffed at the sweatshirt.

“You washed these, didn't you?”

“Guilty. I figured a guy wouldn't want to climb into clothes some unknown kid just shed.”

It was becoming a regular response to Charlie's way of talking – a furrowed brow immediately replaced by the hint of

a smile as the meaning became clear. He looked at the man and nodded, holding his gaze for some time. Charlie was coming to understand that was the boy's way of indicating his appreciation without having to say it. Why that was, intrigued Charlie, but he would not pursue it.

"You okay with heights?" Charlie asked.

"Like mountains?"

"No, I was thinking more like gym roofs."

"Oh. I see. No problem. Used to hang out on the roof of our apartment building back in the city."

It was obvious from the look that suddenly overtook his face that he had not intended to reveal any of that. Again, Charlie just plodded on.

"Good. It's flat. We'll mostly be working in the center."

An assortment of the brushes and brooms they would need were already loaded into a wheelbarrow out back. A second was empty.

"You can put as many of those five gallon cans of the tar into that wheelbarrow as will fit and take them over to the gym. We will need all twenty, eventually. First, though, we need to have some sustenance."

"Sustenance?"

"Food. We're going to be working hard. Can't begin on an empty stomach."

They returned inside where Charlie pointed to two white sacks on the counter.

"I can't pay you for this."

"It comes with the job. Did I forget to mention that? The hourly wage plus three meals."

Again, the nod. He ate like he hadn't since, well, since ever. On several occasions, Justin seemed to start to say something but retreated before anything materialized. Breakfast was mostly a silent time. Charlie explained the work for the day.

"First, we'll take a water hose to the roof to remove the layer of dirt and dust. By the time we finish that, it should be dry back where we started. Then we pour out the tar and spread it on with the brooms keeping it to an even depth of about a quarter of an inch. We need to make sure cracks get filled and the go back over them once they have sucked up

whatever tar they seem thirsty for.”

“I can do that,” Justin said, the comment being fully unexpected by Charlie.

With breakfast finished and the supplies delivered – it took six trips with the wheelbarrow to move all the tar – they arranged the extension ladder. Charlie climbed up onto the roof carrying a long rope, which they first used to hoist the huge coil of hose. There was a faucet up there and an hour later the old tar had been brightened considerably as the years of grime were washed away.

“It’s like you said,” Justin said, pointing.

“Like what that I said?”

“It’s already dry back at the front where we started.”

It was Charlie’s turn to nod.

“Now the real work begins. We need to hoist all those cans up here.”

Without hesitation Justin descended the ladder and tied the handle of the first can to the rope. Within a half hour they were all up on the roof.

“Have you opened tar buckets before?”

“No, sir.”

Charlie took out a screw driver and demonstrated how to flip up the many metal flaps that encircled the lid. After the third flap, Justin reached for the screw driver and continued the process.

“We’ll pour out about half a can at a time – in a straight line about twenty feet long. Then we’ll use the brooms to spread it. Use a swirling motion so every little nook and cranny gets covered.”

By noon, a good third of the roof was coated. By noon, Charlie was ready for a break.

“Time for lunch and working out the kinks in my aging back,” Charlie offered.

He looked to where the ladder had originally rested against the roof. It was not there. That sent a chill crawling up his spine. Justin saw his quandary.

“While you were rolling up the hose I moved the ladder to the rear end. Otherwise it would have stood where we had already tarred. We wouldn’t have been able to get to it.”

“Good thinking, young man. Good thinking. I knew I

brought you up here for some reason.”

The first clearly detectable genuine smile surfaced on the boy's face. They descended the ladder and returned to the boiler room to clean their hands with turpentine and the turpentine from their hands with soap and water.

“How about Sammy's Chicken for lunch,” Charlie asked. “It's only a couple of blocks away.”

“That sounds fine, sir.”

“I am of the opinion that if I had said, how about Billy's Broccoli in Hot Sauce you would have also said that sounded fine.”

There was another smile.

As they sat at Sammy's, each enjoying a Hen House Special (Charlie figured the hens involved probably didn't see it as being all that special), Charlie made his first attempts at a gentle inquiry into the boy's situation.

I didn't know if you liked mustard or just butter on your ham sandwiches so I went with butter – that's my preference.”

Justin moved uneasily and averted his eyes giving no indication that he understood the comment.

“I suppose it's funny. I like mustard in the potato salad but not on sandwiches.”

“How'd you know it was me?”

“An educated guess, I suppose. I went to visit your mother yesterday afternoon.”

Justin flashed a clearly puzzled – disturbed – look into Charlie's face.

“So, I guess you know, then.”

“I seem to know very little, actually. I'm not going to pry but I'm always around to listen when you have things to talk about.”

Justin sighed. It was more an expression of relief than a prelude to informational conversation. At least the general nature of the situation was out in the open.

The boy finished his meal well ahead of Charlie and slurped to the bottom of his soda.

“It's been a while since I had a teenager around so I forget how much you guys can eat. Here's a ten. Go get yourself something else.”

Justin was hesitant but eyed the bill that Charlie had

slipped across the table.

“I’ll feel bad if you leave here hungry. I’ve been working you pretty hard this morning.”

Justin picked up the money and slipped out of the booth. He returned with a second Hen House Special and two desserts. He placed the change and one chocolate pudding on the table in front of Charlie.

“Thanks. Did I ever tell you that you’re a odd man.”

By that point it was becoming something of a joke between them and Charlie chuckled. Justin managed to follow suit. He returned to his seat.

“Thanks for the pudding. Chocolate is my downfall. I’d eat chocolate covered chicken if they made it.”

Another smile. A bit more silence. Justin looked across the table.

“I’m okay, Charles. Really I am. You shouldn’t be concerned.”

Right, Charlie thought. Famished, broke, no address, and one set of clothes. You’re doing just great, kid – but, he didn’t say any of that, of course.

“Okay. I’ll say only one more thing on the matter. It would be plain stupid for you to let yourself be cold or hungry when you know about a place that can take care of both of those things – my place.”

Justin nodded without eye contact. They sat in silence for a few minutes. Then Charlie continued making small talk.

“I lived in a city for most of my adult life. Hated it myself. So many people. Too much traffic. Too dirty. Never really felt safe. I’m glad I’m here. It was one of my better decisions.”

“So, why are you here? You don’t talk like any janitor I ever met before.”

“I lost my family a number of years ago, and decided I needed to make a new start.”

It was true and to the point. He would add details if queried. None of the usual questions followed about the make-up of that family or what specifically happened to them. Charlie thought that was strange. It did seem to put a clear end to the boy’s willingness to talk.

By one o’clock, they were back on the roof and by five

were stowing the empty cans in the dumpster behind the school. Back in the boiler room Charlie handed Justin an envelope containing his pay. The boy didn't open it but slipped it into his shirt pocket.

"I'll get it all back to you when I get the check."

"I know you will."

"Well, I better get going," Justin said after an awkward, silent moment.

"I still owe you a final meal for the day – part of the deal, remember."

"I'm filthy – like you said we'd be. Can't go out looking like this."

"Same for me. I see three options. You go back to 'your place' and clean up then meet me someplace to eat, or, you can shower in the boy's locker room before we leave here, or come to my place where you can shower and change and we can decide where to go."

"How about your place? This old empty building gives me the Willies."

"Okay, then. Get your sacks and we'll be on our way."

"I really don't get it – why you're being so nice to me. I'm really not that nice a person."

It had seemed to have been offered as an intentional glimpse into himself – a warning even – as if a test of some kind thrown at the man. Charlie ignored the comment as he locked the door and the two of them moved off across the practice field toward his house a few blocks away.

Justin showered first so while Charlie took his turn cleaning up, the boy had a chance to look around the house. In the living room he noted the family picture – Charlie, presumably his wife, and his son at about ten he figured. There really wasn't much out of the ordinary to see in there. There was a sofa, a recliner, a coffee table and lamps. A large braided rug covered a large portion of the wooden floor. A fire place took up half of one wall. It had book cases on each side of it. There were lots of books. He gave them the once over but didn't linger there. It was as if books were books and that was that. The large front window had thick blue draw drapes hanging along each side, which, for some reason he felt the need to close.

The kitchen was small with a table and two chairs in addition to the usual kitchen trappings. He looked out the back window across the patio toward the woods, which had become his home. He remembered the sandwich and potato salad and how very hungry he had been. He was tempted to open the refrigerator and cabinets but didn't. He peeked into the bedrooms – one empty – but didn't enter either. My, how that bed looked inviting. He couldn't even count up the weeks since he had last slept on one.

He, too had lost his family – his mother when he was eleven and his father just several years before. After his mother died his father had begun drinking and it had become Justin's lot to take care of him – seeing that he stayed sober for work, managing the money, paying the bills. It was not the life a young teenager was meant to live.

His mother's death had brought him great sadness. His father's death had instilled the greatest sort of soul devouring anger in his young being. In order to survive he had managed to just turn himself off – not reacting in anyway at all for fear the rage and resentment would overflow and call attention to his needy side. He had cared for himself and his father, so he could certainly care for himself alone. That was really more of a lingering, frightening, question that gnawed at him, than it was a certain belief.

One evening when he was thirteen, his father had drunk himself into an unconscious stupor. He breathing became shallow and his heart raced. Justin was frantic. He dragged his father to the car, managed him into the back seat, and began driving him to the emergency room. He had no experience behind the wheel but felt certain he could manage it. He couldn't.

He ran a red light and was hit in the side – in the rear where his father lay. His father had been killed. With his attention entirely focused on managing the vehicle, Justin had not seen the light and to that day swore it was green. The hatred toward the other driver – the driver that had killed his helpless father – had steadily grown within him and as young men will do, he dwelled on how to get his revenge against that person. He clipped newspaper articles and took notes from newscasts so he would have the information he needed when

the time seemed right.

He lived on the money he got from selling the car and things around the apartment – jewelry, furnishings, everything down to the last light bulb.

A few months before, one of his neighbors had apparently turned him in to child services, thinking something suspicious was going on. The woman had made the mistake of telling Justin what she had done and the boy left within the hour, taking only the several hundred dollars he had been able to save and the clothes he was wearing.

Charlie entered the living room.

“Well, I feel better. How about you, Justin?”

“Yes, sir. Much better. Couldn’t get my fingernails really clean. I hate that.”

“I understand. It’ll work its way out in a few days.”

“Girls don’t like dirty fingernails – my mom told me that.”

It didn’t seem to call for a response so Charlie moved on.

“Do you like Chinese food? There’s a good buffet at the north edge of town.”

“Yes, sir. You name it, I like it – Chinese, Sammy’s Chicken, even Billy’s Broccoli with hot sauce.”

His attempt at making a joke succeed and Charlie laughed out loud – partly at the unexpected offering and partly at the humor itself.

At dinner, Charlie felt the need to get on to the obvious problems at hand.

“We need to talk about things, you know.”

“Things?”

“You being fully unsupervised, having no place to live and no way to support yourself, for beginners.”

“So?”

“So, the law doesn’t allow such things.”

“The law sucks, then. I can take care of myself.”

“You probably can, if your goal in life is to live like Tarzan in the woods.”

“I’m in school. That should count for something.”

“It does. It really does. I’ve had to wonder why? Not many runaways I’ve known have made sure they continued their education.”



“It’s my business.”

That seemed to close the door on that topic.

“How long do you plan to live this way?”

“Until I get something done.”

“And I assume you’re not willing to talk about what that something is.”

“You’re right.”

“Okay. Assuming you get that done, whatever it is, then what kind of a life do you want after that?”

“Probably won’t be up to me.”

“You must admit that is a very odd answer.”

Justin shrugged, licking his fingers after devouring his third egg roll.

“Child services, you know.”

“Oh, I see.”

Justin looked directly into Charlie’s eyes.

“You going to turn me in?”

“I was hoping you would.”

Justin flashed an angry look into Charlie’s face with no comment.

Charlie allowed silence to overtake the moment. Again, he found himself in the position of not wanting to push the boy away, but feeling that clearly something needed to be done.

“Here’s an idea,” Charlie offered at last.

Justin was clearly ready to listen and he looked across the table, waiting.

“I have a spare bedroom.”

“It’s empty. I looked inside.”

“Did you also look in the basement?”

“No. Didn’t know there was a basement. Why?”

“There’s a mattress down there and a bed frame. Several other pieces of furniture. We could fix you a temporary spot until you get things sorted out.”

“That wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“Oh?”

Justin responded with a shrug, which conveyed no useful information.

“What if it comes down to a choice between my spare room and child services?”

“You blackmailing me, Charles?”

“More like a protective threat, I’d like to think.”

“Just words.”

“Words that offer you an alternative.”

“Alternative?”

“Child services tonight or Child services put off until sometime in the future.”

Justin returned to flooding his sweet and sour pork with sweet and sour sauce.

“You shouldn’t like me, Charles.”

“Why not?”

“I’m a evil person.”

“I’ve certainly never seen that side of you.”

“I’ve never showed it to you.”

“So, then, there is a good side to you, also.”

The comment was met with silence, a squirm and a shrug.

“Here is what we are going to do,” Charlie began, sounding far more parent-like than anything Justin had heard from him before.

It got Justin’s attention.

“When we leave here we will return to my place and bring the mattress up to the spare bedroom. We won’t fancy it up with sheets and such. Just a mattress. If you want more I’ll show you where to find it. You will stay with me for the rest of the weekend. We’ll talk about things and see if you can’t find some useful direction – solution to whatever problems your situation are presenting you. Then, come Monday, I’ll do whatever I decide needs to be done.”

Justin neither agreed nor disagreed.

“Can I go back for thirds?”

“Certainly. I’ve had my eye on some of the, chocolate raspberry soft-serve ice cream, myself.”

When they were finished, Charlie made his way to the register and paid the check. Justin lingered behind, sucking in every last drop of his drink. Charlie went outside and got in his car. He waited. Presently Justin opened the passenger door and slipped inside, buckling up.

“I can just run away, you know,” he said staring straight ahead while Charlie started the car.

“You could.”

Ten minutes later, with no more conversation, they arrived at the house. Together they managed the mattress up the narrow stairs and onto the floor of the spare room. In the hall, Charlie pointed to a built-in cabinet.

“Sheets and pillowcase up there. Towels and washcloths down there. I usually do a crossword puzzle before turning in for the night. I’ll be in the living room. Happy to talk if you want to.”

Justin chose to enter the stark bedroom and close the door. Charlie stuck to his routine. At ten he entered his bedroom, leaving his door ajar – although not fully understanding why. Something drew him to his lock box. He placed it on the bed and opened it. Inside, among the usual things, was a large, brown envelope. He removed it and emptied the contents onto the comforter. It contained clippings and other information – police reports, and such – about the accident. He hadn’t looked at it since assembling it several years before. He figured it was a good idea to keep the material but a bad idea to dwell on it.

He sorted through the sheets. Several things jumped out at him – several things he either had never really known or had chosen to forget. The young villain in his life was named Justin. He had procured a picture of him – still sporting the boyish features of a thirteen-year-old. Unpleasant feelings of unease began welling up inside him. It was the face that occupied his dreams. It was that face, several years older, that occupied the bedroom next door. He looked at the summary of the police report and was reminded why the boy had been driving – to get his drunken father to the emergency room. He had run a red light. It was suddenly clear. In that instant both he and Charlie had lost the most important loved one in their lives.

Charlie’s nighttime dream began springing to life there in the land of the awake. His temples throbbed and his breathing became rapid and uneven. Unspeakable visions of torture and pain began to commandeer his thoughts. The horrendous images fanned the flames of his darkest emotions. He opened the lower dresser drawer and laid out his paraphernalia – a revolver to subdue the boy, a rope to secure him spread eagle to the bed, a cat of nine-tails to flog him,

alcohol to pour into the open wounds. He would wait until the boy was asleep.

He had to give the boy credit for tracking him down, and that was the only reasonable conclusion to be made of it all. Why else would that particular boy show up in that particular town and work his way into that particular man's life? Charlie had known from the start that the belt leather had been intentionally cut and not worn through as had been Justin's contention. The relationship had begun with a clever lie and it was being maintained. He had worked himself into the man's house at night on the weekend without anybody else knowing of it. It wouldn't have been reasonable to try to kill Charles at school or even up on the gym roof. In Charlie's mind there was no way the lad's motivation could be anything but malevolent. It was a state of affairs that in his own selfish portrayal of the event Charlie had really never considered – that the boy would hold anything against him. Suddenly it became his undeniable reality. The time was at hand. The time he had so looked forward to in his dreams and the time he had so feared when awake.

He experienced a very brief twinge of sadness. He had grown to like the boy – the self-admitted evil boy. Enough of that!

\* \* \*

In the room next door, the young man lay on his back still fully dressed. He removed a switchblade from his pants' pocket and flipped it open. He ran his fingers along the side of its keen blade the way he had so many times before.

It had been a long, difficult journey both physically and mentally for Justin. First, he had to locate the man who had killed his father. Then, at just the right moment, he had to evade a probable foster placement. Eventually, that meant following Charles out of the city – out of the state – to Crawfordsville.

He wondered if it would be easier to get away with murder in the city or in a small town. It didn't really matter. He held no expectation that once it was done he would get away with it. He couldn't believe how gullible the man had been. There Charlie was, pretending to be a good guy – that terrible man that had killed his father. He smiled at the thought: two

evil people presenting themselves to each other as good guys.

It had been easier than he figured it would be – once he arrived in the little town. He had enrolled himself in school using his real birth certificate. It was where he could be close to the man and learn his habits. By the time they would learn he had never attended the school he listed as the place from which to obtain his records, his plan would have been completed. The school secretary had bought the story that his mother was bed ridden, but would come in as soon as she felt up to it. What jerks everybody was – gullible, stupid, jerks.

Justin experienced a brief moment of sadness, recalling how genuinely helpful and even nice and generous the man's actions had been toward him. Under other circumstances things could have been different – maybe. He didn't dare allow such thoughts.

The time had nearly arrived. He'd wait until Charles – it had been Charles in all the newspaper reports – was asleep. He would then enter his bedroom and slit his throat just the way he had imagined it hundreds of times in the past. He would look into the man's face as he gulped his last, desperate breath. Charles would understand if only for his final, terror-filled moment. He hadn't thought beyond the act. The man's death was the final step in his plan. It went no further. His vision of his own life went no further. Excitement – grand anticipation – grew within him.

His adolescent impatience drove Justin to move first. He opened his door and made his way quietly the ten feet down the hall to the other bedroom door. He saw it was not fully closed. How fortunate, he thought. That meant less chance the man would hear it open. It also indicated Charlie trusted him – the fool.

Charlie was laying on his back on top of the comforter, also fully dressed. When he detected the movement of the door he closed his eyes just enough so he would appear to be asleep there in the dark. He held the gun in his right hand, close up against his leg, out of sight, away from the door. He would have to improvise away from his original plan. Even though he could only guess about Justin's intention at that moment, he felt that with the gun he was fully in control of the situation. Perhaps, he had come in needing to talk – perhaps

to do something far worse. Either way, Charlie's response would be the same.

He really did a number on me, Charlie thought to himself. He played the innocent, uncertain, bumbling, needy teen to a tee. That took both intelligence and careful planning. On the negative side, Charlie could not conceive of himself as a cold-blooded killer and having to come to live with that horrendous reality would be fully distressing – perhaps ultimately distressing if he found he could not cope with it. On the positive side – or the least negative side – the boy would be freed from his great sorrow and tremendous guilt. There would be no uncertain, scary future for him to navigate. That, was of course, the flimsiest rationalization in the history of human thought and part of Charlie recognized that. It disregarded the boy's positive potential that would never have a chance to be realized. Charlie had to accept it – it was all he had.

A single-minded journey toward revenge, dependably sucks all innate, positive, human qualities out of a man, leaving no felt need to consider their absence. He hated that boy – suddenly this boy. It was just that plain and simple. Hate demanded revenge. It always had and it always would. It was how the human species was put together: an eye for an eye, don't spare the rod, don't get mad get even. Logically, in the end, that philosophy would surely destroy the human species. Logic held no power at that point.

Justin was soon beside the bed. He hesitated. That came as a complete surprise to him. His plan had always been for a quick, decisive, move. Perhaps it was to allow just one more minute to savor the act that was about to bring his lengthy quest to its long-anticipated conclusion.

Charlie lay still, wondering why he had not yet raised his gun and taken control of the situation. He felt his heart pounding within his chest. He felt his cheeks becoming moist and his lower lip beginning to quiver. He opened his eyes. The full moon through the window provided just enough light to dimly define both of their faces. Tears were met by tears. Quivering lips were met by quivering lips.

"I hate you and I'm here to kill you, Charles. You killed my father."

Justin quickly moved his knife against the man's throat.

"I hate you and I'm here to kill you, Justin. You killed my son."

Charles slowly raised his gun and pointed it at the boy's chest.

"I can slit your throat before you can shoot me."

"I can shoot you before I die."

The moment of silence that ensued shouted of uncertainty. Neither took their gaze from the other's eyes. It was not their eyes, of course, they were examining. It was the very essence, the soul, the undisguised nature of the person that dwelled inside. It was a quick extension from what they knew to be true into what could or might be true.

"Why you crying?" Justin asked.

"Beats me. Why you crying?"

A shrug. A single, heaving, sob.

"I hate this, Charlie."

"I hate this, too, Justin."

More silence. More tears. More quivering.

"So?" Justin said.

"Yeah. So?" Charlie responded.

It was Justin's turn. Charlie waited.

"I could count to three and we could both make our move. Then it would finally all be over for both of us."

"You could count to three and we could both withdraw our weapons."

"Why?"

"To expand our horizons."

"There you go with your odd talk, again."

"One horizon we both seem to have already mastered is hate. We might take some time and explore love."

"I know about love. Mom, dad. It only leads to terrible things when they die."

"I suppose you're right. Maybe we both suffer from shortsightedness."

Justin's face posed the question.

"Shortsighted in that we have both let our love stop with our first set of loved ones."

"Huh?"

He withdrew the knife an inch or so. Charles lowered

the gun, just a bit.

“I am suddenly thinking that we both suffer from the same malady – disorder.”

“I know the word, malady.”

“Somehow it seems that we both got the dumb idea that we can only experience love with those we have already loved – my wife and son and your mother and father. Just maybe there is a whole world of folks out here still to love and be loved.”

“It is so, damn, hard, Charlie.”

The boy’s tears clouded his vision and he wiped at his eyes with the back of his left hand. The knife was withdrawn several more inches.

“It sure is damn hard. I’ve had half a life time to prepare for it and I messed it all up. I can only imagine how impossible it must seem to a young man of your age and more limited experience.”

Charlie tossed the gun toward the foot of the bed.

“I don’t know what to do, Charlie.”

“I don’t know what to do, either, Justin. But there is something I do know.”

“What’s that?”

“Underneath all this, we are two pretty smart guys. I’m betting that together we can figure it out.”

“You think?”

“I think.”

Justin paused for a long moment, then methodically closed his knife and tossed it to lay beside the gun. He took a step backward.

The boy had one more important question – poorly formulated, perhaps, but in every sense sincere. He figured he already knew the answer.

“Do you think hate can turn into love in just a matter of minutes, Charlie?”

Charlie stood up and extended his arms. They drew each other close, shedding the dregs of hate there in the darkness and allowing the first bright rays of love to stream between their hearts.

One’s future is always uncertain. There are several things that will usually work to assure a bright one. The most



basic of those things is always love, and that would soon begin to work its incredible magic, transforming – forever – the lives of Justin and the Janitor. What a grand way to begin a new family.